



Andrew Sneddon, John Privilege (eds), ‘The Supernatural in Ulster Scots Literature and Folklore Reader,’ Centre for Irish-Scottish Studies, University of Ulster.

INTRODUCTION

Funded by MAGUS/Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the aim of ‘The Supernatural in Ulster Scots Literature and Folklore Project’ was to produce this open-access, online resource, ‘The Supernatural in Ulster Scots Folklore and Literature Reader’. The project was led by Dr Andrew Sneddon and the editing completed by Dr Sneddon and Dr John Privilege of the University of Ulster. Dr Privilege and Dr Sneddon were assisted in the research stage of the project by David Gray, while Rowan Morrey was responsible for web design and implementation.

The Supernatural Reader provides a selection of Ulster Scots literary, historical and folklore sources, from c.1672 until c.1920, relating to various aspects of the supernatural. It demonstrates that in Ulster Scots culture, both rural and urban, there was a range of sincerely held, supernatural beliefs, similar in many ways to those held elsewhere in Ireland. More importantly, the Supernatural Reader facilitates access to resources for community groups, members of the general public, as well as educational (schools, universities, colleges) and governmental institutions, for use in their specific areas of study or educational and outreach programmes. The sources included (contemporary poetry, prose, memoirs, songs, newspapers reports, legal records, and pamphlets) were selected on the basis that they were new to most users, or hard to locate or access. The material has been annotated and thematically arranged in six main sections: witchcraft, fairies, the evil-eye, magical practitioners, ghosts, and the

general supernatural (including banshees, omens and fortune-telling).¹ Each section includes clearly marked sub-sections and a short introduction giving some background to the topic.

Editorial decisions, as to what constitutes Ulster Scots, have been made as straight-forward as possible: if the material is written by someone from an Ulster Scots background or ancestry, or relates to an Ulster Scots community, in the target period, it has been included, as have sources written by, or relating to, Presbyterians; a large proportion of whom were of Scottish descent. This does not mean that the works selected are exclusively Presbyterian, and the sources are written in Ulster Scots and English. As much as the maintenance of sense allows, grammar, punctuation and spelling have been kept as in the original. Some early modern contractions have been silently expanded: for example, the abbreviation ‘ye’ has been written as ‘the’. In relation to older, early modern material, dates are given in the form related in the primary sources and as such are based on the old style calendar. However, the year has been taken to begin on 1 January and not 25 March as was the custom before 1752.

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¹ The Reader excludes material relating to the religious supernatural, and thus topics such as miracles, divine or faith healing, angels, and saints.

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This section provides literary and folklore material, as well as legal documents, court reports, and pamphlet accounts which attest to a strong, popular belief in Ulster Scots culture in witches and witchcraft, from the late 1600s to the late 1800s. Witchcraft, or harming by magical means, was made a felony or serious crime in Ireland in 1586 by a law that was repealed in 1821.

We encounter two fairly distinct ‘witch’ figures in the *Supernatural Reader*. First of all, we see the malefic, demonic witch that plagued the lives of early modern people of all social orders, and whom judiciaries across Europe put to death in their tens of thousands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In popular culture however witchcraft remained a perceived threat well into the nineteenth century, long after the era of the witchcraft trials.² Secondly, we encounter the butter-stealing witch who stole milk directly from cows by turning themselves into hares or by transferring the “goodness” of their neighbours’ milk to their own, thus preventing it from being churned into butter. Belief in butter-stealing witches was firmly associated with Gaelic-Irish culture in the early modern period,³ but by the nineteenth-century it had crossed the denominational divide into Protestant popular culture.

Rev. James Shaw and his wife, 1672 [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

In 1672, the neighbours of Rev. James Shaw, Scottish-born Presbyterian minister of Carnmoney, Co. Antrim, suspected that he and his wife had been killed by the ‘sorcery of some witches in the parish’, who were never identified. His servant, George Russell, was later reprimanded by Antrim Presbytery, acting in its capacity as a church court punishing moral offences, for the conjuration of evil spirits (see minutes below).

² See, Owen Davies and Willem De Blecourt, *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe* (Manchester, 2004): 81-100; Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester, 1999).

³ For witchcraft in early modern Ireland, see: Ronald Hutton, ‘Witch-hunting in Celtic Societies’ in, *Past and Present*, 212/1 (2011): 43-71; Andrew Sneddon, ‘Witchcraft Belief and Trials in Early Modern Ireland’ in, *Irish Economic and Social History*, 39 (2012): 1-25; E. C. Lapoint, in ‘Irish Immunity to Witch-hunting, 1534-1711’ in, *Eire-Ireland*, xxvii (1992): 76-92; Raymond Gillespie ‘Women and Crime in Seventeenth Century Ireland’ in, Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O’ Dowd (eds), *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991); Mary McAuliffe, ‘Gender, History and Witchcraft in Early Modern Ireland: A Re-reading of the Florence Newton Trial’ in, Mary Ann Gialenella Valiulis (ed.), *Gender and Power in Irish history* (Dublin, 2009): 39-58.

W.D. Killen (ed), *A True Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (1623-1670) by the Rev Patrick Adair (Belfast, 1866).*⁴

(p. 299) ‘Mr James Shaw, a zealous worthy preacher, was laid by, through sickness, this strange afflicting trouble coming on his family after the death of his wife. There had been great ground of jealousy that she, in her childbed, had been wronged by sorcery of some witches in the parish. After her death, a considerable time, some spirit or spirits troubled the house by casting stones down at the chimney, appearing to the servants, and especially having got one of them, a young man, to keep appointed times and places, wherein it appeared in divers shapes and spake audibly to him. The people of the parish watched the house while Mr Shaw at this time lay sick in bed; and, indeed, he did not wholly recover, but within a while died, it was thought, not without the art of sorcery; though otherwise he was not only valetudinary, but broken (p.300) with melancholy’.

Minutes of the Antrim Presbytery Meeting, 3 September 1672, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D1759/1A/12, p. 54.

‘Carmony: Mr James Shaw having recommended to this meeting one George Russell a servant of his who had conferred with that spirit that troubled Mr James Shaw as that the bretherene might speak to the s[ai]d George. He being cited ... confessed his conversing and conferring with that spirit which appeared to him and his keeping trist with it and conjuring it by drawing circles and other circumstances att the demand and direct[tio]ne of the s[ai]d spirit. The bretherene finding in the [?] carriage of the boy much ignorance and a bold confidence and finding the hazard he was in by the s[ai]d spirit, they laboured to make him sensible off his sinfull carriage [,] warned him off [sic] his danger and recommended to him the studye knowledge and to pray and discharged him [not] to converse any such way in tyme coming with the said spirit under what pretence so ever, which he promised and the bretheren did resolve to deal further with him afterward to bring him to more sense of his sine and danger.’

Murder of suspected witch in Antrim Town, 1698 [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

In Antrim town in May 1698, the inaction of local agents of law enforcement led to the murder of an old woman by a mob who believed she had bewitched a nine-year-old girl.⁵ The below extract from Daniel Higgs’ pamphlet about the case is the only known *published*

⁴ Patrick Adair was remembering the year 1672.

⁵ See, Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (forthcoming, Palgrave Macmillan).

treatise dedicated solely to an Irish witchcraft trial. A copy may be found in Glasgow University Library.

Daniel Higgs, *The Wonderfull and True Relation of the Bewitching a Young Girle in Ireland* (Glasgow[?], 1699), pp 6-8.

‘But now to come to this true relation which my eyes did see all along and many Hundreds did see which they can atest to this day say *Atheists* what they will I was not blinded in it. At *Antrim* in Ireland a little girle in the ninthe year of hir age, for beauty, education, or birth inferior to none where she lived, having innocently put into hir mouth a Sorrel leaf, which was given her by a Witch that begged at the door, to whom she had first give a piece of bread, and then some beer, it was scarce swallowed by her, when she began to be tortured in her bowels, to tremble all over, and then to be convulst, and in tine [time?], to swon away & fall as one dead. Severall doctors being cal[l]ed (for at the forsaid place wher[e] these things happened in May 1698, it is customary to practise physic)⁶ tho’ they for manie Days experimented with the remedie usual in this Case; the Child found no respite, but was still afflicted with very frequent and most terrible *Paroxisms*; whereupon, as the custom of the Country is, they consult the minister of the place,⁷ but they had scarce laid their hands on her when the child was transformed by the *Daemon* into such shape as a man that hath not beheld it with his eyes, would hardly be brought to imagine. It began to first to rowl itself about, and nixt to vomit *Horse Dung, Needles, Pins, Hairs, Feathers*, bottoms of *Thread*, Pieces of glass, Window nails draven out of a Cart or Coach wheels, an iron knife above a span long, Eggs and Fish shells. In the mean while, hir parants and those of the neighbourhodd, observe that whensoever the Witch came near the house, or so much as turned her eye towards it, even at the distance of two hundred paces, the poor Child was in much greater torment than befor[e], in so much as she could by no means be easie of her fit, or shew one sign of life until she was a very great distance from Her. This Witch was soon [damaged] apprehended, and confest, both this [damaged] other the like Feats, for when [damaged] strangled and burnt,⁸ being desired by the Minister who assisted Her in Her last Agony, and at that Moment on which depends Eternity; when the Executioner had not fitted the Rope to her Neck, that she would dissolve the spell, and ease the Child, she said it was not in her Power because the *Ember-Weeks* were past since she had bewitched Her; adding, that should she undo the

⁶ To work as a general practitioner or doctor.

⁷ Rev. William Adair, minister of Antrim Presbyterian Church.

⁸ This was the Scottish style of execution of convicted witches.

Villainies she had perpetrated, the child would not so quickly recover, for two other Witches, whom she named, had also given her mortal Infections, from the Effects she could not without Difficulty, and much time, be delivered.’

The prosecution and trial of the ‘Islandmagee Witches’, Co. Antrim, 1711

In the rural peninsula of Islandmagee, Co. Antrim, between September 1710 and February 1711, Mrs Ann Haltridge, the elderly widow of local Presbyterian minister, the Rev. John Haltridge, was staying in the house of her son, James. At various times during her stay, beds were stripped by unseen hands and bed-clothes rearranged in the shape of a corpse; stones were hurled at windows, household objects disappeared before re-appearing days later, and a demonic apparition foretold Ann’s death. Finally, on 21 February 1711, Ann died of inexplicable stabbing pains in her back. Almost immediately the small, Presbyterian-Scots community of Islandmagee attributed the incident to witchcraft, albeit of an undetermined source. Six days after Ann was buried, Mary Dunbar arrived in Islandmagee from Castlereagh, Co. Antrim. Shortly after her arrival, supernatural disturbances began to shake the Haltridge household once more and Dunbar, a good-looking, educated gentlewoman of eighteen, claimed she had been bewitched by eight women from Islandmagee and the surrounding areas, namely: Janet Carson, Janet Sellor (nee Liston), her daughter, Elizabeth Sellor, Catherine McCalmond, Janet Mean or Main, Janet Latimer, Janet Millar and Margaret Mitchell. The ‘Islandmagee Witches’ were tried on 31 March 1711 at Co. Antrim Assizes at Carrickfergus in a trial that lasted eight hours. The women were sentenced to a year’s imprisonment and four appearances in the pillory on market day, the standard punishment laid out in the 1586 Irish witchcraft statute for a first offence where murder had not been committed.⁹ Below are a number of the witness testimonies or depositions given to magistrates concerning the case of the ‘Islandmagee Witches’, along with the only known contemporary newspaper report, and a mid-nineteenth-century folklore account.

‘Depositions in the Case of the Island Magee Witches 1710 [1711]’ in, R.M. Young (ed.), *Historical Notices of old Belfast ...* (Belfast, 1896).¹⁰

(p.162) ‘The examination of W[illia]m Fenton, of Island Magee, 3D of March, 1710,

⁹ See Andrew Sneddon, *Possessed by the Devil: the Real History of the Islandmagee Witches ...* (Dublin, 2013).

¹⁰ The original documents from which these transcripts were produced are currently housed in Trinity College, Dublin, Ms 883/2, papers of William and Samuel Molyneux, 1662-1745: Examinations and Depositions taken in the Co. Antrim Respecting Witches’.

Who, being duly Sworn and Examined, Saith that for sometime past the House of James Haltridge, of Island Magee aforesaid, hath been haunted with Evil Spirits (as he is credibly Informed), and that Mary Dunbar, being now in the Said house, is in great Disorder, and very much tormented both day and night by Witches; And by the description the said Mary Dunbar gave this Ex[aminant]- and others of the Witches, they did verily believe that Jannet Liston and Eliz[abeth]. Cellar were persons Guilty of the Same, upon which, on Friday Last, they Sent for the Said persons, and when the said Jannet Liston and Eliz. Cellar came into the Roome where the Said Mary Dunbar was. Shee the Said Mary fell into a violent fitt of Pains, and Said that as Soon as she Saw them she was Stung to the heart, and declared that the Said Jannet and Elizabeth were Devils, and continually with Several other women about her bed troubling her, and further Saith that there were a great many more of other women present when the Said Mary Challenged the Said Jannet and Elizabeth, whom she never Saw in her Lifetime before her trouble aforesaid.’

(p.161) ‘The Examination of Mary Dunbar, taken 12th March, 1710,

Who, being duly Sworn and Examined, Saith that during these Severall weeks she has been in a most grievous and violent manner tormented and afflicted with Witches; that Several whom she never had known, or to her knowledge seen before, did frequently appear to her (tho' invisible to her keepers and attenders), who make her fall very often into fainting and tormenting fitts, take the Power of Tongue from her, and afflicts her to that Degree that she often thinks she is pierced to the heart, and that her breasts are cut off; that she heard the Said women (when about her) name one another, and that called one Jannet Listen, another Eliz. Cellor, another Kate McCamont, another Jannet Carson, another Jannet Mean, another Latimore, and another Mrs. Anne, and the Said Jannet Liston, Eliz. Cellar, Kate McCamont, and Jannet Carson being brought to her, att their first appearance she knew them to be four of her Tormentors, and that after they were taken into Custody the aforesaid Latimore and Mean did very much Torment her, especially when Mr. Sinclare, the Dissenting Minister,¹¹ was praying with and for her, and told her they would hinder her of hearing his prayers; but if she would do as they would have her, she soon would be well, and that Jannet Latimore and Jannet Mean being brought to her, she likewise knew them to be other two of her Tormentors, and that since the confinement of the said Jannet Liston, Eliz. Cellar, Kate McCamont, Jannet Carson, Jannet Mean, and Jannet Latimor, none of them has troubled her, neither has been so

¹¹ Rev. Robert Sinclair was Presbyterian minister of Islandmagee, Co. Antrim.

much tormented as when they were at Liberty, and that there do now only two appear to her (viz'-), the aforesaid Mrs. Ann, as they called her, and another woman, blind of an eye, who told her when Mr. Robb,¹² the curate, was going to pray with and for her, that she should be little the better for his prayers, for they would hinder her from hearing them, which they accordingly did.'

(p.161) 'The Examination of John Smith, of Lairne, in the S[ai]d County, taken at Carrickfergus, 21 March, 1710,

Who, being duly Sworn and Examined, Saith that Mrs. Mary Dunbar, who has for this Long time been in a most unusual manner tormented and afflicted (as shee Saith, and as by all that see her do verily believe) by witches and Witchcraft, having since the Confinement of Jannet Listen, Janett Meane, and Jane Miller, whom she affirms to be her Tormentors, declared that she was troubled only with one young woman, whom the aforesaid women, when about her and tormenting her, did call Mrs. Ann, but that the said young woman told her that she should never be discovered by her name as the rest were, shee, the Said Mary Dunbar, having given Exact marks and Description of one Margret Mitchell, whom she, this Ex[aminan]t doth verily believe, the Said Mary never had seen before the Said Marg[are]t Mitchell was brought to her, and that the Said Mary assured this Ex[aminan]t and others that the Said Marg[are]t was the young woman that did Torment and afflict her. And that she never saw her before but when she was tormenting her; and that after the Said Marget was set at Liberty, the Said Mary fell into a most violent fit, in which the Said Ex[aminan]t heard her say — "For Christ Sake, Let me alone, and I won't discover you." And after being Recovered out of the Said Fitt, was asked to whom she spoke. The Said Mary told them that the Said [are]t Mitchell was then afflicting her, and told her she would have this Ex[aminan]t James Blithe's Picture made & roast it like a Lark, and that they should not Catch her, for she wou'd turn herself into a Hare, and further Saith that the Said Mary did remit Several Pins, buttons, and horse Hair, and further Said not.'

¹² Rev. David Robb was Church of Ireland curate of St. John's parish, Islandmagee, in diocese of Down and Connor.

The Fly Post; or the Post-master, Saturday 14 March 1711.

‘Dublin. We hear, That 8 witches were Try’d at the Assizes of Carrickfergus, for bewitching a young gentlewoman, were found guilty, and are to be imprisoned for a Year and a Day, and 4 Times Pilloried.’

*Ordnance Survey Memoirs, Patrick McWilliams and Angélique Day, QUB Institute of Irish Studies, Belfast 1990 (O/S Memoirs): Parishes of County Antrim III, vol. 10, Parish of Islandmagee, James Boyle, April 1840.*¹³

(pp. 40-41) ‘In no part of Ireland are the people more generally and inveterately superstitious than here. Most of the better educated class implicitly believe in witchcraft, fairies, brownies and enchantments, and there are few who are not perfectly convinced of the guilt of the unfortunate individuals convicted of witchcraft alleged to have been committed here in 1711. The utmost attention is paid to dreams and to omens. Many have seen the devil in the shape of a pig or a black dog. The house in which the witchcraft alluded to was enacted (situated in Kilcoanmore) is still considered as haunted, and though inhabited, many, even men, will not pass it alone at night ... it is only necessary to refer to the belief in the guilt of the accused by nineteen-twentieths of the population to form an idea of their superstition.’

Witchcraft in Scotland [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Belfast Newsletter, 10 November 1829, Executions at Paisley.

In the Newsletter of the 2nd inst. we noticed the execution of two men in Paisley for house-breaking. Although for more than a century past executions have been very rare in the town, yet ancient records tell us that in former times many melancholy occurrences of that kind had taken place there, through ignorance and superstition – We select the following from the Paisley Advertiser:-

From the declaration of W. Sutherland contained in the Appendix to Woodrow’s History, Vol. 1 it appears that the individual was necessitated to officiate at the execution of a witch in this town in the year, 1661.

¹³ The Ordnance Survey Memoirs are parish accounts collated in the 1830s to accompany the new 6 inch Ordnance Survey Maps. The project was abandoned before completion and consequently the Memoirs only cover parishes in the North of Ireland.

In the year following, the parish of Innerkip was overrun with a breed of witches and their pranks became so notorious that a commission was issued (7th May 1662) to certain noblemen and gentlemen of the country to try Mary Lamond, Katrine Scot, Janet Hyndman, Margret Leitch, Margret Rankine, Jean king and Margaret Duff for “the horrid crime of witchcraft, by committing malefices or entering into pactionous with the divell, renouncing their baptisme or otherwayes, &c.” Most of these infatuated creatures pled guilty to the crimes of which they were charged and were convicted on their own confessions and doomed to death.

Where they suffered does not appear but as these courts for the trial of witchcraft were usually held in Paisley, it is likely they were, according to the received mode of dispatching condemned witches and sorcerers “worryit, (that is strangled) at a stake and brint [burnt]” on the Gallow-Green.

The jail about that time was seldom without a witch or warlock tenant and as there was not then so much jail philanthropy abroad as in our day, many of these poor and aged wretches died in the loathsome cells where they were confined, some literally devoured by vermin, others the victims of disease or brutal usage. A witch dying in prison here gives occasion for this curious entry in the Records of the town Council.

“1667, Oct. 17. ... the Baillies and Council having taken to their consideration in the incivility and indiscreit carriage of Mr. Hugh Montgomerie, Sheriff Depute of Renfrew, in permitting the corpse of Jane Finnie, ane suspect witch imprisoned be him in their jail and deceased therein, to be unburied these fyve days bygone or thereby, and refusing absolutely to cause bury her notwithstanding both his duty and their requiring of him so that they are necessitated to cause bury her, have therefore determined that shall be deprived of certain favours he has from them, especially that his sons shall have no liberty from henceforth to sit in any of the Tounes seats in the churches and for these reasons have ordained their offices to hold them out of both their seats”.

Though there is some uncertainty regarding the precise numbers or the place of execution of the Innerkip witches, none exists regarding those who suffered for bewitching Sir George Maxwell, of Pollock, and by devilish sorceries tormenting him until he died.

Accordingly on the 20th Feb. 1677, we find that four witches and a warlock were burnt at the Gallowgreen of Paisley for this horrid crime. This case has been amply enough detailed in various publications and we will not dwell longer on it than merely to mention the names of the unfortunate creatures whose lives were sacrificed on the gloomy altar of popular superstition. They were Janet Mathie, Bessie Weir, Margaret Jackson, John Stewart, Marjory Craig and Annabel Stewart. “Annabel, the maid witch among them, about the age of 14, albeit penitent and confessing, yet throw pitty was throw order of the secret council reprivd from burning”. Of this execution, Mr. Robert Law, minister of Kilpatrick, in his memorials, furnishes us with these details:-

“The four witches and warlock foresaid that were burnt at Paisley on the 20th February (for the young one was reprivd for a tyme because of her age) dyed obduredly except the man who appeared penitent, whose mother Janet Mathie, was first hanged without any confession of her guilt and effigies both of wax and clay being put in a napkin and dashed in pieces, were thrown in the fire with her.¹⁴ Her son and daughter confessed that when the devil first appeared to them in her house, that she (their mother) called him a gentleman to them and a good man that would not hear the Lord’s name mentioned, for fear it should be taken in vain. There was also one Bessie Weir hanged up, the last of the four (one that had been taken before in Ireland and was condemned to the fyre for malefice before and when the hangman there was about to cast her to the gallows, the devil takes her away from them out of their sight; her dittay was sent over here to Scotland) who, at this tyme when she was cast off the gallows there appears a raven and approaches the hangman within an ell [sic] of him and flyes away again. All the people observed it and cried out at the sight of it!”

We now come to the famous Bargarran case, in which some four and twenty individuals, male and female, were implicated. One of these, Jean Fulton, an aged woman, appears to have died in jail and another, John Reid, a smith in Inchinnan, succeeded in strangling himself in the prison of Renfrew and a third, Alexander Anderson, also died in prison. On the 10th of June 1697, three men and four women were burned on the Gallowgreen for bewitching Christian Shaw and being habit and repute witches. The men were John Lindsay in Barloch, alias Bishop James Lindsa, alias Curate; both of these had been delatit witches in 1687 but got off through their ingenuity; and another man whose name has escaped memory.

¹⁴ It was believed that the efficacy of image magic such as this was nullified by fire.

The women executed were Margaret Lang, Katherine Campbell, Agnes Naismith and Margaret Fulton. It appears the dress of the Sheriff of Renfrewshire was remarkably gay. On his visit to Christian Shaw, he is described as wearing brown coloured clothes, red plush breeches with black stripes flowered muslin cravat and an embroidered sword belt.¹⁵

Explanations for lack of witchcraft prosecutions in Irish Protestant courts,

1718 [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Gilbert Crockatt, *The Scotch Presbyterian Eloquence; or, the Foolishness of their Teaching. Discover'd from their Books, Sermons, and Prayers: and Some Remarks on Mr. Rule's Late Vindication of the Kirk* (London: re-printed and sold by J. Hyde in Dublin, 1718).

‘There is scarce one of an hundred among the *Presbyterian* Vuglar, that will be either reason'd or laugh'd out of the strange Opinions they have of [Church of Ireland] Bishops; as particularly, that they will not suffer Witches to be burnt, because (*as they alledge*) every Bishop loses five hundred Marks *Scots*, for every Witch that's burnt in his Diocess. Nay, the generality of the *Presbyterian* Rabble in the *West*, will not believe that Bishops have any Shadows, being perswaded by some of their Teachers, that the Devil hath taken away their Shadow as an earnest of the Substance for their opposing of the Covenant Work in the Land.’

Magical Protection against butter-stealing witches [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S *Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim V, vol. 16, Parish of Ballymoney*, Lieutenant J. Greator, James Boyle, 1832.

(p.19) ‘On May Eve it is a customary practice with many of the elderly females of this parish get a branch of what they call the ”rowan tree” and place twigs of it over the doors of their byres and frequently over their kitchen doors. They also tie a twig to the tail of each cow. They will not mix the milk which they have on May Eve with the milk of the following day. As they say “it is unlucky to mix the milk of 2 years together”. The rowan tree is used as a charm against witchcraft and fairyism. It is astonishing to see this practice kept up by many intelligent persons and particularly in a district where the great mass of the population are educated. Although this practice is more general among the Roman Catholics than any other sect, yet it is not confined exclusively to them.’

¹⁵ Christian Shaw, the daughter of the laird of Bargarran, Renfrewshire, later married minister of Kilmaurs, John Millar, and became the recognised founder of the renowned Paisley thread making industry, see Rosalind K. Marshall, ‘Shaw, Christian (b. c.1685, d. in or after 1737)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oct 2005 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/55523, accessed 23 March 2014].

O/S Memoires, Parishes of County Londonderry II, vol. 9, Parish of Drumachose, J. Butler Williams, J. Bleakly, C.W. Ligar, May 1835.

(p.126) 'To cure this, a hank of green yarn (that is unbleached yarn) is drawn over the cow, commencing at the hinder part and putting the cow completely through the circle of the hank 9 times in the name of the Trinity and contrary to the grain of the hair. Also the cow's back is singed with a coal of fire 9 times, commencing at the hinder part.

The superstitious will not allow a coal of fire to leave the house, nor a drink of water given while churning, as they say it takes away the butter, nor will they allow their neighbours to go in at one door of the house and out at the other, for fear of taking away their butter.'

The power of a witch, 1873 [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoires, Parishes of Londonderry XIII, vol. 34, Parish of Clandermot, J. Stokes, 1835.

(p. 32) 'So prone indeed are the people to superstition that they believe themselves honoured, not only by the residence of cunning women among them but even of reputed witches.

In the neighbourhood of the parish church it is the general opinion that the high wind which in 1831 blew down the spire was caused by the illness and death of Bell Miller, an old woman of Ardlough, for, say they, "the moment she expired, the wind ceased to blow". She was believed to have the power of transforming herself into any shape, and her neighbours would sooner forfeit a sum of money than incur her displeasure, being persuaded that she had similar power over themselves and their cattle.'

David Herbison, 'Elegiac Stanzas: On the Death of a Beloved Brother' (taken from *The Select Works of David Herbison*, 1880).

Known as 'The Bard of Dunclug', David Herbison (1800-70) was born in Ballymena in the year 1800, and in his youth was apprenticed to a linen weaver. An attempt to immigrate to Canada in 1827 ended in disaster, when the ship Herbison was sailing on was wrecked on the St Lawrence River, near Quebec. However, while Herbison returned to mid-Antrim and began an illustrious poetic career; the majority of his family settled in North America. The following note is attached to the poem below and describes a youthful haunt of Herbison and his brother, which became associated with the activities of a local witch.

'Elegiac Stanzas: On the Death of a Beloved Brother

“The sound has come across the wave
To call me to a brother’s grave.”

Note. – The brother whose death is lamented in the following lines was born in Mill Street, Ballymena, on the 8th of February, 1794, and died in Quebec, North America, on the 30th of August, 1873. For a few years previous to his departure for Quebec, which took place in the Spring of 1817, he lived in Laymore, and with him I passed many a happy hour on the Rowantree Hill, and along the banks of the Clogher Burn – a stream now far famed for being the favourite resort of an old woman who was thought by all the credulous of the neighbourhood to be a witch. Be that as it may, her doings in many cases were indeed odd and laughable. Often have I seen her spread a white sheet over the burn, and then place on it knives, forks, spoons, dishes, and many other things belonging to the house, until it sank. She would then cry, “Dippy, dippy; come a’ to me; come a’ to me,” but whether they were at her bidding or not I could not get so near as to see. Her tricks of the above kind were numerous, and gave her no reputable name in the country. She has, however, long since paid the debt of nature; but her memory is not likely so soon to pass away from amongst us.

ADIEU! my dear brother, adieu!

In life we shall never meet more,
Out innocent joys to renew,
Along the green vales of Laymore.

In a far foreign land you are laid,
Where rolls the Saint Lawrence along,
Where man have found by your aid,
A home the wild woodlands among.

And many will loan o’er the spot
Where moulder your ashes away;
The world and its pleasures forgot
Your memory to keep from decay.

When I think of the days that are past,

Ere sorrow or sadness we knew,
My tears from their fountain flow fast,
I look, but in vain look, for you.

No more on the Rownatree Hill
We'll give to the echoes our song;
Nor yet by the witch-haunted rill
Our tale of contentment prolong.

Adieu! then, my brother, adieu!
In life we shall never meet more,
Our innocent joys to renew
Along the green vales of Laymore.

FAIRY BELIEF [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

From the pre-Christian era up until the seventeenth century, fairy belief in Gaelic Ireland provided a cogent explanatory mechanism for misfortune, from the destruction of agricultural

produce to death and illness in humans and livestock.¹⁶ Moreover, popular belief in “the good people”, “wee folk”, or “the gentry” continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often centring on the effects of elf-bolts and fairy blast on cattle, and the changeling abduction of healthy infants and young women of child-bearing age who had been replaced by sickly or irritable substitutes.¹⁷ Suspected changelings were variously held over fires, beaten, abandoned, and branded with hot pokers in a bid to expel the possessing fairy or force the return of the healthy woman or child.¹⁸ The case of Bridget Cleary, a suspected changeling murdered by her husband and others in 1895 in Tipperary, is the case study on which discussions of changeling killing usually centre,¹⁹ but it is clear the practice was far more widespread than once thought,²⁰ extending as far north as Ulster.

Irish people were not defenceless against the activities of malevolent fairies: magical practitioners (see below), along with specific rituals and magical protective devices, were often employed as counter-measures. Amulets made of mistletoe and mountain ash were used to prevent attacks on cattle, while baptism and the dressing of male children in female clothing prevented offspring being replaced by changelings. Other preventative measures included the avoidance of reported fairy dwellings, and the throwing of iron implements in the air, a practice adopted in the west of Ireland along with bonfire leaping.²¹

Despite the Cleary case, it has been argued that economic and societal change, including increasing literacy and improved communications, along with a better-funded, increasingly organised and proactive Catholic Church long opposed to such (perceived) ‘superstitions’,

¹⁶ Jacqueline Borsje, 'Monotheistic to a Certain Extent: The 'Good Neighbours' of God in Ireland' in, Anne-Marie Korte & Maaïke de Haardt (eds), *The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations into the Foundations of Western Monotheism, Studies in Theology and Religion 13* (Leiden & Boston, 2009): 54-9, 62-3, 74-7; Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, 'The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland' in, Peter Narvaez (ed.), *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (Kentucky, 1991): 199-200; Hutton, 'Witch-hunting in Celtic Societies': 63-5;

¹⁷ Edward MacLysaght, *Irish Life in the Seventeenth-Century* (Cork, 2nd ed., 1950): 177; Ignatius Murphy, *The Diocese of Killaloe in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1991): 201; S. J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (1982, repr. Dublin, 2001): 113-14; Richard P. Jenkins, 'Witches and Fairies: Supernatural Aggression and Deviance among the Irish Peasantry' in, *The Good People*: 42.

¹⁸ Elaine Farrell, *'A Most Diabolical Deed': Infanticide and Irish Society, 1850-1900* (Manchester, 2013): 30.

¹⁹ See Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: a True Story* (London, 1999).

²⁰ Simon Young, 'Some Notes on Irish Fairy Changelings in Nineteenth-century Newspapers' in, *Béascna*, 8 (2013): 34-47.

²¹ Henry Mackle, 'Fairies and Leprechauns', *Ulster Folklife*, 10 (1964), 51-4; MacLysaght, *Irish Life*: 177-8; Raymond Gillespie, *Devoted People: Belief and Religion in Early Modern Ireland* (Manchester, 1997): 50-1, 65, 109, 112.

saw a general decline in belief in fairies in post-famine Ireland.²² The selection of poems, prose, newspaper articles and folklore accounts below however suggest that fairy belief formed part of popular, supernatural Ulster Scots culture up until at least the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, many of the tropes of fairy belief in Catholic, Gaelic Ireland are present in Ulster Scots culture: changeling abduction, fairy trees, elf-shot, and the gradual pulling away of educated culture from popular beliefs.

Fairy belief- general [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry II, vol. 9, Townland of Derrybeg, J. Butler Williams, J. Bleakly, CW. Ligar, 1 May 1835.

(p. 126) ‘In the townland of Derrybeg in Benjamin Irwin’s house, a little woman apparently dressed in green came into the house to borrow a dish of oatmeal, and told them not to throw their water out at the back door as it went down upon their chimney, and also shut up the back door as it was upon their pass. (The pass means the fairy’s road). At the request of the fairy woman the door was shut up and remains shut to the present day. The little woman came back the harvest following and paid the dish of oatmeal she had borrowed from Mrs Irwin. The house is now occupied by Thomas Douglass. Information obtained from William Beacon and John [?] Stewart.’

O/S Memoires, Parishes of County Londonderry II, vol. 9, Parish of Drumachose, J. Butler Williams, J. Bleakly, C.W. Ligar, May 1835.

(p. 126) ‘It is said that the brooneys were invisible creatures who appeared by the night and used to thresh the corn through the country, for those who were favourites. The above superstition applies to all the neighbouring parishes. Information obtained from Matthew Irwin, farmer. 15 May 1835.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry XI, vol.31, Parish of Ballynascreen. J. Stokes, 1836.

²² Timothy Corrigan Correll, ‘Believers, Sceptics, and Charlatans: Evidential Rhetoric, the Fairies, and Fairy Healers in Irish Oral Narrative and Belief’ in *Folklore*, 116 (2005):1-3; Ó Giolláin, ‘The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland’: 208.

(p.15) ‘There are the usual superstitions about fairies, gentle bushes, etc. in the autumn of 1836 a man in the townland of Bancran was, it seems, so annoyed by the fairies that he was obliged to desert his house. Though the annoyance may be explained by natural causes, yet the strong belief that exists to the contrary serves to show the prevalence of the superstition. Copy of a memorandum made of O’Haran’s words, when examined on the subject of fairies. The full particulars of this event are as follows. They have been thought worthy of insertion as they serve to illustrate the habits of the people.

Denis O’Haran of Bancran Glebe says that about 1 month ago his wife saw a white woman in the byre. She came in in a great fright and told him, but when he went out he saw nothing. 7 days afterwards he went out and saw the gentle people in the byre. Memorandum: as to these gentle people. He first said, when asked if there was room in the barn for any more of them, that he could not tell. Afterwards that “it was as full as it could hold,” which he said in answer to one of the bystanders, who explained and repeated the question. Yet he contradicted himself again saying that at first he did not understand the question, afterwards that he did.

About 3 weeks after saying this, he saw, in company with another called Jemmy Burns of Derrynoyd, 3 hours after nightfall, the “people” again. They appeared like boys, 4 feet high with green jackets and caps. There were more than 60 of them. He saw them between 5 and 10 yards off, all in a body, in a little lane 6 feet wide; the boy Jemmy Burns (a full-grown man could not see them) in 4 days after this he deserted the house altogether.

As for the wife, she saw the white woman one night in her own bedroom lying across her “weans”. She came back into the kitchen and fainted. Her husband went down and saw nothing. (Memo: contradiction again?) One of his neighbours says that he beat the children and then when the wife went to grip the white woman it felt like a roll of wool).

At another time she was in the kitchen when the white woman came up to the room door, looked at her and went away again. She also heard a shout outside with voices and noises on the roof, and at the same time she heard a voice which declared that “for all the trouble he had been at in building the house, he maybe would not be alive that day 12 months,” she also heard music like the sound of pipers. 3 days after this O’Haran pulled down the house, though he had solemnly promised another person to set up again in it “to make trial once

more” 5 days after was the time appointed. His neighbours were so sunk in superstition that they believed he has been paid the price of his house in good British currency by the fairies! It is remarkable that the versions of this story, circulated by his neighbours of the same townland, contradict the above. He contradicted himself, also, in his own story. Now from these circumstances is not this conclusion justifiable, that even as in the parish of Banagher Finn McCool’s fingers were carved on the rock at Feeny on purpose, to produce superstition, also in this parish has Denis O’Haran acted as an agent to others for the purpose of strengthening the decaying superstition of the people. See Memoir of Banagher, in which that opinion is also advanced about the print of the man’s knee at the door of the old church. It would appear that no other explanation can satisfactorily be given for his own inconsistency in the relation which he gave.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim VI, vol. 19, Parish of Drummond, James Boyle, June 1838.

(p. 60) ‘An implicit belief exists in ghosts, fairies and banshees, in enchantments and in the power which the fairies so wantonly exercise in depriving cows of their milk, nor are these notions confined to any particular sect or denomination.’

J.B. Doyle, *Tours in Ulster: A Handbook to the Antiquities and Scenery of the North of Ireland* (Dublin 1854).

(pp. 276-7) ‘The northern peasantry, like their neighbours the Scotch, are much given to superstition. They are confident believers in the existence of the “wee-folk” or fairies, of whom they are greatly in awe. The supposed resorts of these tiny sprites are the old raths and doons so very common throughout the north; the almost universal preservation of which may be attributed to the influence of this superstitious dread. An amusing instance of this occurred a few years since, at the residence of the late Captain Millar, to the south of Ballymena. The Captain, being desirous of planting a very fine conical doon or rath in his demesne, sent a man to prepare holes for putting in trees; several of his labourers refused. However, one was induced to make the trial. In the progress of his work, he happened to be interrupted by a stony mass which he attempted to remove with the aid of a crowbar; in driving the instrument down with considerable force it slipped from his hands and disappeared altogether into the mound. Astonished at the unforeseen event, he immediately ascribed it as the work of the “wee-folk” who thus resented the invasion upon their manor. He now considered himself a lost man, that ill-luck and wasting were to be his portion; tottering with fear, he sought his

cabin, and having told his wife, took to his bed. An alarm was instantly made; the news flew through the country, and at length reached the ears of Captain Millar. A visit was made to the fort, a survey of the spot disclosed the mystery – the crowbar had by chance hit upon the entrance to the cave and fell from the labourer’s hands into the antechamber. The Captain soon caused the passages to be opened and in a small cyclopean chamber the lost crowbar was recovered, and restored with much merriment to the stricken owner who soon recovered from the shock; and thus a death-blow was very unexpectedly given to the dominion of the “wee-folk” in that neighbourhood from which it has not since recovered.

W.G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, vol. II (New York, 1902).

(pp. 3-4) ‘In the north of Ireland, fairies appear to have been of larger stature and more uncouth than elsewhere; there the fairy called “Grogan” is low of stature, hairy, with broad shoulders and very strong; or, in popular parlance, “uncoo wee bodies” but “terrible strang”. In Ulster, also, the peasantry on a day of mingled rain and sunshine sometimes say “the good people are baking today”; alluding to the unlimited supply of water for the purpose of moistening the flour and the sun-heat for baking fairy-dough. The fairies are not as numerous as formerly. An Ulsterman asked why they were not seen nowadays, thought for a little while and then replied “there’s them that says the wee-folk’s gone to Scotland, but they’re wrang. This country’s full o’ them only there’s so much scripture spread abroad that they canna get making themselves visible”.’

(pp. 237-9) ‘About a mile from the village of Doagh, County Antrim, stands a large slab called the “Holed Stone”. It is upwards of feet above the ground. At a height of about three feet there is a round hole perforated through it large enough to admit an ordinary sized hand. Whatever other uses it may have been created for, there can be little doubt but that it was connected with aphrodisiac customs. Marriage contracts are still ratified at this spot, as county couples go there to signify their betrothal clasping hands through the hole. It is said that not long ago a large stone with a hole through it stood on a hill near Cushendall in the same county.’

Frances Brown, ‘The Story of Fairyfoot’ (taken from *Granny’s Wonderful Chair*, 1856).

Frances Brown (1816-79) was often called ‘The Blind Poetess of Donegal’, and is perhaps best known for her children’s stories, in particular the collection *Granny’s Wonderful Chair*, published in 1856 (there were at least seven, subsequent editions of this collection in the nineteenth century). The below extract is a story from *Granny’s Wonderful Chair*, called ‘The Story of Fairyfoot’, which belongs in the same Ulster fairy tradition as fellow Donegal poet William Allingham’s influential poem ‘The Fairies’, and Ferguson’s ‘The Fairy Thorn’; and which arguably anticipates the supernaturalism of the Irish literary revival.

‘The Story of Fairyfoot

ONCE upon a time there stood far away in the west country a town called Stumpingame. It contained seven windmills, a royal palace, a market place, and a prison, with every other convenience befitting the capital of a kingdom. A capital city was Stumpingame, and its inhabitants thought it the only one in the world. It stood in the midst of a great plain, which for three leagues round its walls was covered with corn, flax, and orchards. Beyond that lay a great circle of pasture land, seven leagues in breadth, and it was bounded on all sides by a forest so thick and old that no man in Stumpingame knew its extent; and the opinion of the learned was that it reached to the end of the world.

There were strong reasons for this opinion. First, that forest was known to be inhabited time out of mind by the fairies, and no hunter cared to go beyond its borders—so all the west country believed it to be solidly full of old trees to the heart. Secondly, the people of Stumpingame were no travelers—man, woman, and child had feet so large and heavy that it was by no means convenient to carry them far. Whether it was the nature of the place or the people, I cannot tell, but great feet had been the fashion there time immemorial, and the higher the family the larger were they. It was, therefore, the aim of everybody above the degree of shepherds, and such-like rustics, to swell out and enlarge their feet by way of gentility; and so successful were they in these undertakings that, on a pinch, respectable people's slippers would have served for panniers.

Stumpingame had a king of its own, and his name was Stiffstep; his family was very ancient and large-footed. His subjects called him Lord of the World, and he made a speech to them every year concerning the grandeur of his mighty empire. His queen, Hammerheel, was the greatest beauty in Stumpingame. Her majesty's shoe was not much less than a fishing boat;

their six children promised to be quite as handsome, and all went well with them till the birth of their seventh son.

For a long time nobody about the palace could understand what was the matter—the ladies-in-waiting looked so astonished, and the king so vexed; but at last it was whispered through the city that the queen's seventh child had been born with such miserably small feet that they resembled nothing ever seen or heard of in Stumpingame, except the feet of the fairies.

The chronicles furnished no example of such an affliction ever before happening in the royal family. The common people thought it portended some great calamity to the city; the learned men began to write books about it; and all the relations of the king and queen assembled at the palace to mourn with them over their singular misfortune. The whole court and most of the citizens helped in this mourning, but when it had lasted seven days they all found out it was of no use. So the relations went to their homes, and the people took to their work. If the learned men's books were written, nobody ever read them; and to cheer up the queen's spirits, the young prince was sent privately out to the pasture lands, to be nursed among the shepherds.

The chief man there was called Fleecefold, and his wife's name was Rough Ruddy. They lived in a snug cottage with their son Blackthorn and their daughter Brownberry, and were thought great people, because they kept the king's sheep. Moreover, Fleecefold's family were known to be ancient; and Rough Ruddy boasted that she had the largest feet in all the pastures. The shepherds held them in high respect, and it grew still higher when the news spread that the king's seventh son had been sent to their cottage. People came from all quarters to see the young prince, and great were the lamentations over his misfortune in having such small feet.

The king and queen had given him fourteen names, beginning with Augustus—such being the fashion in that royal family; but the honest country people could not remember so many; besides, his feet were the most remarkable thing about the child, so with one accord they called him Fairyfoot. At first it was feared this might be high treason, but when no notice was taken by the king or his ministers, the shepherds concluded it was no harm, and the boy never had another name throughout the pastures. At court it was not thought polite to speak of him at all. They did not keep his birthday, and he was never sent for at Christmas, because the queen and her ladies could not bear the sight. Once a year the undermost scullion was sent to

see how he did, with a bundle of his next brother's cast-off clothes; and, as the king grew old and cross, it was said he had thoughts of disowning him.

So Fairyfoot grew in Fleecefold's cottage. Perhaps the country air made him fair and rosy—for all agreed that he would have been a handsome boy but for his small feet, with which nevertheless he learned to walk, and in time to run and to jump, thereby amazing everybody, for such doings were not known among the children of Stumpinghame. The news of court, however, traveled to the shepherds, and Fairyfoot was despised among them. The old people thought him unlucky; the children refused to play with him. Fleecefold was ashamed to have him in his cottage, but he durst not disobey the king's orders. Moreover, Blackthorn wore most of the clothes brought by the scullion. At last, Rough Ruddy found out that the sight of such horrid jumping would make her children vulgar; and, as soon as he was old enough, she sent Fairyfoot every day to watch some sickly sheep that grazed on a wild, weedy pasture, hard by the forest.

Poor Fairyfoot was often lonely and sorrowful; many a time he wished his feet would grow larger, or that people wouldn't notice them so much; and all the comfort he had was running and jumping by himself in the wild pasture, and thinking that none of the shepherds' children could do the like, for all their pride of their great feet.

Tired of this sport, he was lying in the shadow of a mossy rock one warm summer's noon, with the sheep feeding around, when a robin, pursued by a great hawk, flew into the old velvet cap which lay on the ground beside him. Fairyfoot covered it up, and the hawk, frightened by his shout, flew away.

"Now you may go, poor robin!" he said, opening the cap; but instead of a bird, out sprang a little man dressed in russet-brown, and looking as if he were an hundred years old. Fairyfoot could not speak for astonishment, but the little man said—

"Thank you for your shelter, and be sure I will do as much for you. Call on me if you are ever in trouble. My name is Robin Goodfellow;" and darting off, he was out of sight in an instant. For days the boy wondered who that little man could be, but he told nobody, for the little man's feet were as small as his own, and it was clear he would be no favorite in Stumpinghame. Fairyfoot kept the story to himself, and at last midsummer came. That

evening was a feast among the shepherds. There were bonfires on the hills, and fun in the villages. But Fairyfoot sat alone beside his sheepfold, for the children of his village had refused to let him dance with them about the bonfire, and he had gone there to bewail the size of his feet, which came between him and so many good things. Fairyfoot had never felt so lonely in all his life, and remembering the little man, he plucked up spirit, and cried—

“Ho! Robin Goodfellow!”

“Here I am,” said a shrill voice at his elbow; and there stood the little man himself.

“I am very lonely, and no one will play with me, because my feet are not large enough,” said Fairyfoot.

“Come then and play with us,” said the little man. “We lead the merriest lives in the world, and care for nobody’s feet; but all companies have their own manners, and there are two things you must mind among us: first, do as you see the rest doing; and secondly, never speak of anything you may hear or see, for we and the people of this country have had no friendship ever since large feet came in fashion.”

“I will do that, and anything more you like,” said Fairyfoot; and the little man taking his hand, led him over the pasture into the forest, and along a mossy path among old trees wreathed in ivy (he never knew how far), till they heard the sound of music, and came upon a meadow where the moon shone as bright as day, and all the flowers of the year—snowdrops, violets, primroses, and cowslips—bloomed together in the thick grass. There was a crowd of little men and women, some clad in russet colour, but far more in green, dancing around a little well as clear as crystal. And under great rose trees which grew here and there in the meadow, companies were sitting round low tables covered with cups of milk, dishes of honey, and carved wooden flagons filled with clear red wine. The little man led Fairyfoot up to the nearest table, handed him one of the flagons, and said—“Drink to the good company!” Wine was not very common among the shepherds of Stumpingame, and the boy had never tasted such drink as that before; for scarcely had it gone down when he forgot all his troubles—how Blackthorn and Brownberry wore his clothes, how Rough Ruddy sent him to keep the sickly sheep, and the children would not dance with him: in short, he forgot the whole misfortune of his feet, and it seemed to his mind that he was a king’s son, and all was well with him. All the little people about the well cried—

“Welcome! Welcome!” and everyone said—“Come and dance with me!” So Fairyfoot was as happy as a prince, and drank milk and ate honey till the moon was low in the sky, and then the little man took him by the hand and never stopped nor stayed till he was at his own bed of straw in the cottage corner.

Next morning Fairyfoot was not tired for all his dancing. Nobody in the cottage had missed him, and he went out with the sheep as usual; but every night all that summer, when the shepherds were safe in bed, the little man came and took him away to dance in the forest. Now he did not care to play with the shepherds’ children, nor grieve that his father and mother had forgotten him, but watched the sheep all day singing to himself or plaiting rushes; and when the sun went down, Fairyfoot’s heart rejoiced at the thought of meeting that merry company.

The wonder was that he was never tired nor sleepy, as people are apt to be who dance all night; but before the summer was ended Fairyfoot found out the reason. One night, when the moon was full and the last of the ripe corn rustling in the fields, Robin Goodfellow came for him as usual, and away they went to the flowery green. The fun there was high, and Robin was in haste. So he only pointed to the carved cup from which Fairyfoot every night drank the clear red wine.

“I am not thirsty, and there is no use losing time,” thought the boy to himself, and he joined the dance; but never in all his life did Fairyfoot find such hard work as to keep pace with the company. Their feet seemed to move like lightning; the swallows did not fly so fast or turn so quickly. Fairyfoot did his best, for he never gave in easily, but at length, his breath and strength being spent, the boy was glad to steal away and sit down behind a mossy oak, where his eyes closed for very weariness. When he awoke the dance was nearly over, but two little ladies clad in green talked close beside him.

“What a beautiful boy!” said one of them. “He is worthy to be a king’s son. Only see what handsome feet he has!”

“Yes,” said the other, with a laugh that sounded spiteful; “they are just like the feet Princess Maybloom had before she washed them in the Growing Well. Her father has sent far and

wide throughout the whole country searching for a doctor to make them small again, but nothing in this world can do it except the water of the Fair Fountain, and none but I and the nightingales know where it is.”

“One would not care to let the like be known,” said the first little lady: “there would come such crowds of these great coarse creatures of mankind, nobody would have peace for leagues round. But you will surely send word to the sweet princess—she was so kind to our birds and butterflies, and danced so like one of ourselves!”

“Not I, indeed!” said the spiteful fairy. “Her old skinflint of a father cut down the cedar which I loved best in the whole forest, and made a chest of it to hold his money in; besides, I never liked the princess—everybody praised her so. But come, we shall be too late for the last dance.”

When they were gone, Fairyfoot could sleep no more with astonishment. He did not wonder at the fairies admiring his feet, because their own were much the same; but it amazed him that Princess Maybloom's father should be troubled at hers growing large. Moreover, he wished to see that same princess and her country, since there were really other places in the world than Stumpinghame.

When Robin Goodfellow came to take him home as usual he durst not let him know that he had overheard anything; but never was the boy so unwilling to get up as on that morning, and all day he was so weary that in the afternoon Fairyfoot fell asleep, with his head on a clump of rushes. It was seldom that anyone thought of looking after him and the sickly sheep; but it so happened that towards evening the old shepherd, Fleecefold, thought he would see how things went on in the pastures. The shepherd had a bad temper and a thick staff, and no sooner did he catch sight of Fairyfoot sleeping and his flock straying away than, shouting all the ill names he could remember, in a voice which woke up the boy, he ran after him as fast as his great feet would allow; while Fairyfoot, seeing no other shelter from his fury, fled into the forest, and never stopped nor stayed till he reached the banks of a little stream.

Thinking it might lead him to the fairies' dancing-ground, he followed that stream for many an hour, but it wound away into the heart of the forest, flowing through dells, falling over mossy rocks and at last leading Fairyfoot, when he was tired and the night had fallen, to a grove of great rose-trees, with the moon shining on it as bright as day, and thousands of

nightingales singing in the branches. In the midst of that grove was a clear spring, bordered with banks of lilies, and Fairyfoot sat down by it to rest himself and listen. The singing was so sweet he could have listened forever, but as he sat, the nightingales left off their songs and began to talk together in the silence of the night.

“What boy is that,” said one on a branch above him, “who sits so lonely by the Fair Fountain? He cannot have come from Stumpingame with such small and handsome feet.”

“No, I'll warrant you,” said another, “he has come from the west country. How in the world did he find the way?”

“How simple you are!” said a third nightingale. “What had he to do but follow the ground-ivy which grows over height and hollow, bank and bush, from the lowest gate of the king's kitchen-garden to the root of this rose-tree. He looks a wise boy, and I hope he will keep the secret, or we shall have all the west country here, dabbling in our fountain and leaving us no rest to either talk or sing.”

Fairyfoot sat in great astonishment at this discourse, but by-and-by, when the talk ceased and the songs began, he thought it might be as well for him to follow the ground-ivy and see the Princess Maybloom, not to speak of getting rid of Rough Ruddy, the sickly sheep, and the crusty old shepherd. It was a long journey; but he went on, eating wild berries by day, sleeping in the hollows of old trees by night, and never losing sight of the ground-ivy, which led him over height and hollow, bank and brush, out of the forest, and along a noble high road, with fields and villages on every side, to a great city, and a low old-fashioned gate of the king's kitchen-garden, which was thought too mean for the scullions, and had not been opened for seven years.

There was no use knocking—the gate was overgrown with tall weeds and moss; so, being an active boy, he climbed over and walked through the garden, till a white fawn came frisking by, and he heard a soft voice saying sorrowfully—

“Come back, come back, my fawn! I cannot run and play with you now, my feet have grown so heavy;” and looking round he saw the loveliest young princess in the world, dressed in

snow-white, and wearing a wreath of roses on her golden hair; but walking slowly, as the great people did in Stumpingame, for her feet were as large as the best of them.

After her came six young ladies, dressed in white and walking slowly, for they could not go before the princess; but Fairyfoot was amazed to see that their feet were as small as his own. At once he guessed that this must be the Princess Maybloom, and made her an humble bow, saying—

“Royal princess, I have heard of your trouble because your feet have grown large: in my country that's all the fashion. For seven years past I have been wondering what would make mine grow, to no purpose; but I know of a certain fountain that will make yours smaller and finer than ever they were, if the king, your father, gives you leave to come with me, accompanied by two of your maids that are the least given to talking, and the most prudent officer in all his household; for it would grievously offend the fairies and the nightingales to make that fountain known.”

When the princess heard that, she danced for joy in spite of her large feet, and she and her six maids brought Fairyfoot before the king and queen, where they sat in their palace hall, with all the courtiers paying their morning compliments. The lords were very much astonished to see a ragged, barefoot boy brought in among them, and the ladies thought Princess Maybloom must have gone mad; but Fairyfoot, making an humble reverence, told his message to the king and queen, and offered to set out with the princess that very day. At first the king could not believe that there could be any use in his offer, because so many great physicians had failed to give any relief. The courtiers laughed Fairyfoot to scorn, the pages wanted to turn him out for an impudent imposter, and the prime minister said he ought to be put to death for treason.

Fairyfoot wished himself safe in the forest again, or even keeping the sickly sheep; but the queen, being a prudent woman, said—

“I pray your majesty to notice what fine feet this boy has. There may be some truth in his story. For the sake of our only daughter, I will choose two maids who talk the least of all our train, and my chamberlain, who is the most discreet officer in our household. Let them go with the princess: who knows but our sorrow may be lessened?”

After some persuasion the king consented, though his councillors advised the contrary. So the two silent maids, the discreet chamberlain, and her fawn, which would not stay behind, were sent with Princess Maybloom, and they all set out after dinner. Fairyfoot had hard work guiding them along the track of the ground-ivy. The maids and the chamberlain did not like the brambles and rough roots of the forest—they thought it hard to eat berries and sleep in hollow trees; but the princess went on with good courage, and at last they reached the grove of rose-trees, and the spring bordered with lilies.

The chamberlain washed—and though his hair had been gray, and his face wrinkled, the young courtiers envied his beauty for years after. The maids washed—and from that day they were esteemed the fairest in all the palace. Lastly the princess washed also—it could make her no fairer, but the moment her feet touched the water they grew less, and when she had washed and dried them three times, they were as small and finely shaped as Fairyfoot’s own. There was great joy among them, but the boy said sorrowfully—

“Oh! if there had been a well in the world to make my feet large, my father and mother would not have cast me off, nor sent me to live among the shepherds.”

“Cheer up your heart,” said the Princess Maybloom; “if you want large feet, there is a well in this forest that will do it. Last summer time, I came with my father and his foresters to see a great cedar cut down, of which he meant to make a money chest. While they were busy with the cedar, I saw a bramble branch covered with berries. Some were ripe and some were green, but it was the longest bramble that ever grew; for the sake of the berries, I went on and on to its root, which grew hard by a muddy-looking well, with banks of dark green moss, in the deepest part of the forest. The day was warm and dry, and my feet were sore with the rough ground, so I took off my scarlet shoes and washed my feet in the well; but as I washed, they grew larger every minute, and nothing could ever make them less again. I have seen the bramble this day; it is not far off, and as you have shown me the Fair Fountain, I will show you the Growing Well.”

Up rose Fairyfoot and Princess Maybloom, and went together till they found the bramble, and came to where its root grew, hard by the muddy-looking well, with banks of dark green moss

in the deepest dell of the forest. Fairyfoot sat down to wash, but at that minute he heard a sound of music and knew it was the fairies going to their dancing ground.

“If my feet grow large,” said the boy to himself, “how shall I dance with them?” So, rising quickly, he took the Princess Maybloom by the hand. The fawn followed them; the maids and the chamberlain followed it, and all followed the music through the forest. At last they came to the flowery green. Robin Goodfellow welcomed the company for Fairyfoot’s sake, and gave everyone a drink of the fairies’ wine. So they danced there from sunset till the gray morning, and nobody was tired; but before the lark sang, Robin Goodfellow took them all safe home, as he used to take Fairyfoot.

There was great Joy that day in the palace because Princess Maybloom's feet were made small again. The king gave Fairyfoot all manner of fine clothes and rich jewels; and when they heard his wonderful story, he and the queen asked him to live with them and be their son. In process of time Fairyfoot and Princess Maybloom were married, and still live happily. When they go to visit at Stumpingame, they always wash their feet in the Growing Well, lest the royal family might think them a disgrace, but when they come back, they make haste to the Fair Fountain; and the fairies and the nightingales are great friends to them, as well as the maids and the chamberlain, because they have told nobody about it, and there is peace and quiet yet in the grove of rose-trees.

Fairy bushes and fairy forts [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry XI, vol. 31, Parishes of Ballynascreen, Desertmartin and Kilcronaghan, J McCloskey, 1821.

(p. 124) ‘The popular creed, both of natives and settlers equally, admits the existence of fairies. In Irish they are called shigeoh and similarly in the vernacular tongue, by way of propitiation, the gentry or gentle people. They are supposed to reside in the old thorns of the Danish forts, which thorns are often seen to blaze with their unreal fires. They are the same diminutive, playful, capricious malevolent beings that we find depicted in ancient northern poetry. They have the same propensity to the abstraction of unchristened children and of women at the period of *accouchement*. The lot of such changelings is a sever one: to bolt the suspected imp in a riddle over a strong fire; if a fairy, it will ascend in the smoke.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim XIV, vol. 37, Parish of Carrickfergus, Lieutenant G. H. Mallock, April 1832.

(p.77) ‘Fairies are frequently seen about old forts and thorns. A spirit named Button Cap, from a button on the front of his cap, formerly haunted the castle, where, previous to some event, he was seen astride a canon.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry II, vol. 9, Parish of Drumachose, J. Butler Williams, J. Bleakly, C.W. Ligar, May 1835.

(p. 109) ‘A small hill called the Fairy Now is a lump of soil grown over with a scrag of oak. It stands about 4 and a half feet above the level of the field on which it stands. It has never been laboured and it is said to be very gentle. The above mound stands in the holding of Samuel Shannon, townland of Derrybeg. I have seen the above, 22 May 1835.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of Londonderry I, vol. 6, Parish of Artrea, James Boyle and J. Stokes, 1836.

(p. 23) ‘On an eminence in Aughrim and holding of John Lenox there stands the remains of a gentle bush, locally called the Scroggen. The bush has fallen to one side at some former period by a wind storm. It was enclosed by a carn of stones that occupies 12 by 9 feet and stands about 4 feet above the level of the field. The carn is at present studded with sloe bushes. The occupier on the farm on which it stands has sustained a serious loss of cattle by encroaching on the precincts of the carn at some former period, but to make amends and relive himself from a continuance of such losses he had subsequently planted the base of the carn with a quantity of ash trees and prevents any further trespass on it or the remains of the old haw bushes. The place is believed to be very gentle and is said to be illuminated by night at different periods. Informants, James and Robert McCleery.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim I, vol. 2, Parish of County Antrim, James Boyle, April 1839.

(p. 63) ‘They are remarkably superstitious. In no part of Ireland does a more implicit belief in witchcraft, sorcery or the black art, as also in fairies, brownies and enchantments. For corroboration of this assertion it is almost sufficient to refer to the instances given in the Appendix and to state that there are still 23 “gentle bushes” in the parish. These as well as the

old raths are held in great reverence, and their demolition or mutilation is considered as sacrilegious.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim, I, vol. 2, Parish of Carnmoney, James Boyle, April 1839.

(p. 99) ‘In Ballyhenry and holding of John McCrum stands a very ancient thorn, said to be dreaded by night. Information obtained from John Fee, Thomas McCombs, George Tolan and others. 4th March 1839.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim, I, vol. 2, Parish of Carnmoney, James Boyle, April 1839.

(p. 99) ‘In Ballyveasey and holding of David Biggars also stands a gentle bush, said to be the haunt of fairies, and as such much dreaded by the local inhabitants.’

Belfast Newsletter, 20 October 1843, Fairy Bushes.

On Thursday night last, a singular circumstance occurred at Sessiamagarral Fort, about a mile from Benburb, in the County Tyrone. On the morning of Friday last, a pit was found dug from North to South of the above-mentioned fort, about twenty-five feet in length, 8 in breadth and 12 in depth; and its calculated that the united efforts of less than 20 men could not have performed the labour in one night, and persons from all parts of the surrounding country have flocked to see it for the past few days, whilst the people in the vicinity profess total ignorance of the means by which the work was accomplished or the immediate object of it. Being in the neighbourhood, spending a day with a friend with a friend, we had the curiosity to visit it and whilst at the fort heard the following various conjectures among the visitors – Some imagined that the pit was dug by a money-dreamer and a number of his friends, and supported this conjecture by pointing out a round hole at the one extremity of it, such as might be occupied by a crock or firkin. Others more ignorant, asserted their opinion that it was the work of “themselves” of the “good people” as they term fairies; whilst another party amongst whom we were, conjectured that arms had been concealed there, probably since ’98 and were now intended to be to be put in readiness at this eventful crisis. This having occurred simultaneously with the active measures taken by the Government for the

suppression of the Repeal movement, argues, in our opinion, that some information of which we are ignorant, has been given to the higher powers.²³

Samuel Ferguson, 'The Fairy Thorn. An Ulster Ballad' (Taken from *Lays of the Western Gael*, 1864).

One of the most central figures of nineteenth-century Irish literature, Samuel Ferguson's (1810-86) upbringing in the Ulster Scots rural culture of South Antrim provided inspiration for much of his poetry. Ferguson's poetry is marked by an intense fascination with the ballad form and the subjects of Irish mythology, folklore and supernaturalism, which have made him, for many, one of the great forerunners of William Butler Yeats and other poets of the Irish Literary Revival. Nevertheless while Ferguson spent much of his career in Dublin; his development of the Irish ballad and his interest in Irish mythology and folklore are chiefly mediated by a profound attachment to the province of Ulster.

'The Fairy Thorn. An Ulster Ballad

Get up, our Anna dear, from the weary spinning wheel;
 For your father's on the hill, and your mother is asleep;
 Come up above the crags, and we'll dance a highland-reel
 Around the fairy thorn on the steep.

At Anna Grace's door 'twas thus the maidens cry,
 Three merry maidens fair in kirtles of the green;
 And Anna laid the rock and the weary wheel aside,
 The fairest of the four, I ween.

They're glancing through the glimmer of the quiet eve,
 Away in milky wavings of neck and ancle bare;
 The heavy-sliding stream in its sleepy song they leave,
 And the crags in the ghostly air:

And linking hand in hand, and singing as they go,
 The maids along the hill-side have ta'en their fearless way,

²³ The Repeal Movement was led by Daniel O'Connell and sought the repeal of the Act of Union and the restoration of the Irish Parliament abolished in 1801.

Till they come to where the rowan trees in lonely beauty grow
 Beside the Fairy Hawthorn grey.

The Hawthorn stands between the ashes tall and slim,
 Like matron with her twin grand-daughters at her knee;
 The rowan berries cluster o'er her low head grey and dim
 In ruddy kisses sweet to see.

The merry maidens four have ranged them in a row,
 Between each lovely couple a stately rowan stem,
 And away in mazes wavy, like skimming birds they go,
 Oh, never caroll'd bird like them!

But solemn is the silence of the silvery haze
 That drinks away their voices in echoless repose,
 And dreamily the evening has still'd the haunted braes,
 And dreamier the gloaming grows.

And sinking one by one, like lark-notes from the sky
 When the falcon's shadow saileth across the open shaw,
 Are hush'd the maiden's voices, as cowering down they lie
 In the flutter of their sudden awe.

For, from the air above, and the grassy ground beneath,
 And from the mountain-ashes and the old Whitethorn between,
 A Power of faint enchantment doth through their beings breathe,
 And sink down together on the green.

They sink together silent, and stealing side by side,
 They fling their lovely arms o'er their drooping necks so fair,
 Then vainly strive again their naked arms to hide,
 For their shrinking necks again are bare.

Thus clasp'd and prostrate all with their heads together bow'd,

Soft o'er their bosom's beating - the only human sound –
 They hear the silky footsteps of the silent fairy crowd.
 Like a river in the air, gliding round.

No scream can any raise, no prayer can any say,
 But wild, wild, the terror of the speechless three-
 For they feel fair Anna Grace drawn silently away,
 By whom they dare not look to see.

They feel their tresses twine with her parting locks of gold,
 And the curls elastic falling as her head withdraws;
 They feel her sliding arms from their tranced arms unfold.
 But they may not look to see the cause:

For heavy of their senses the faint enchantment lies
 Through all that night of anguish and perilous amaze;
 And neither fear nor wonder can ope their quivering eyes
 Or their limbs from the cold ground raise,

Till out of night the earth has roll'd her dewy side,
 With every haunted mountain and streamy vale below;
 When, as the mist dissolves in the yellow morning tide,
 The maiden's trance dissolveth so.

Then fly the ghastly three as swiftly as they may,
 And tell their tale of sorrow to anxious friends in vain-
 The pinned away and died within the year and day,
 And ne'er was Anna Grace seen again.'

Fairy changelings [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

William Allingham, 'The Fairies' (Taken from *Poems*, 1850).

William Allingham (1824-89) was born at Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal. While he was one of the most celebrated and well-known Irish poets in the Victorian era; his work was relatively

forgotten by the time another Ulster poet, John Hewitt, almost single-handedly revived Allingham's poetry in the latter half of the twentieth-century. If however, Allingham's poetry is only now beginning to be re-established; his poem 'The Fairies' has become an influential example of the depiction of fairies in contemporary culture.

'The Fairies'

Up the airy mountain,
 Down the rushy glen,
 We daren't go a-hunting
 For fear of little men;
 Wee folk, good folk,
 Trooping all together;
 Green jacket, red cap,
 And white owl's feather!

Down along the rocky shore
 Some make their home,
 They live on crispy pancakes
 Of yellow tide-foam;
 Some in the reeds
 Of the black mountain-lake,
 With frogs for their watchdogs,
 All night awake.

High on the hill-top
 The old King sits;
 He is now so old and grey
 He's nigh lost his wits.
 With a bridge of white mist
 Columkill he crosses,
 On his stately journeys
 From Slieveleague to Rosses;
 Or going up with the music
 On cold starry nights,

To sup with the Queen
Of the gay Northern Lights.

They stole little Bridget
For seven years long;
When she came down again
Her friends were all gone.
They took her lightly back,
Between the night and morrow,
They thought that she was fast asleep,
But she was dead with sorrow.
They have kept her ever since
Deep within the lake,
On a bed of fig-leaves,
Watching till she wake.

By the craggy hillside,
Through the mosses bare,
They have planted thorn trees
For my pleasure, here and there.
Is any man so daring
As dig them up in spite,
He shall find their sharpest thorns
In his bed at night.

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather!

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry II, vol. 9, Parish of Drumachose, J. Butler Williams, J. Bleakly, C.W. Ligar, May 1835.

(p. 126) ‘Joseph McFarcin, a linen weaver in the townland of Derryork about 70 years ago, was taken by night up into the air, it is said, by the fairies.’

Belfast Newsletter, 29 January 1870, Fairies in Belfast.

Yes, indeed! In Belfast – in this utilitarian town of ours, as well as in those German cities and villages whose bright mythology carried from Arabia by the crusaders still lives in the popular belief, is to be found a lingering recollection of the beautiful little people in whom many of our grandmothers believed so steadfastly. In one of the crowded streets of small houses with which Belfast abounds, an incident occurred the other evening which, for the nonce, transports us to the “hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves” once sacred to the elves. A woman had gone out of her house leaving it the charge of a child who, in turn, went out locking the door after her. After sundown, a neighbour passing happened to look in and saw – a fairy. Looking in she saw an ample ring of them, the Queen, the veritable Empress Mab it must have been – sitting in the centre, dressed in the most brilliant green and attended by little Hop and Mop and Drop and Pip and Skip and Gill and Tit and Nit and all the rest of the tiny and beautiful maids of honour. In a while she brought another woman to look and, in the gloaming, this new spectator certainly saw one which was quite enough to confirm her friend’s revelation, since she knew that fairies had the power of making themselves invisible and could get through any enclosure. Good gracious! She had a fine baby at home and perhaps they were gone to steal it and leave instead thereof one of their own mischievous little vixens. And off she hurried, for her mother – peace to her ashes – had often told her of a good woman whose lovely child was stolen in the same way. As crows gathered and as the shades of began to deepen, the convictions deepened, too, that all was not right. To heighten the alarm it was whispered that the good woman had left one of her little girls in the house. What had become of her? Few dared to speculate for the fairies were present, though unseen, and could hear what was said of them. In a remote country district we have actually heard the peasantry speak with baited breath about the exploits of these airy creatures in the belief that an incautious word would be avenged. But if the townspeople dared not to speak ill of them, they would do ill by deputy. In a trice, a messenger was away for the people. In due course came the men in green, but not the delightful green which gives such fitting relief to the beautiful complexions of the fairies. The police actually looked in through the key-hole and

saw the suggestion of one tiny being, the rest having perchance gone off on dew-drops, pressed into their service, to their dwelling in the caves whose entrance overlooks the town. There was evidently something wrong. The house was haunted and the people about were indebted entirely to their numbers for keeping each other in countenance and courage. At the supreme moment, up came the good man of the house and his fugitive little daughter who had gone to meet him. The door was timidly opened for he thought there was surely something in all the stir. Imagine the disgust of the expectant crowd when a doll turned out to be a prolific fairy. It was handsomely dressed in green having been presented on St. Patrick's Day, to the little girl. Still, there is always some water where the stirk is drowned and it is clear there must be something wrong with house – at least such is the opinion of the more credulous of the recently affrighted neighbours who are not likely soon to forget this fairy tale of fact.

Changelings-murder [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Belfast Newsletter, 11 August, 1840 County of Armagh Assizes: Murder of a Child by his Father.

John Blakely was arraigned for the murder of his son, Felix Blakely, a child of 6 or 7 years, at Armagh on the 1st of March by strangulation with his hands and other violence. The prisoner pleaded not guilty. The prisoner, being too poor to engage professional assistance, his Lordship assigned Mr Blacker as his Counsel.

Ann Finlay deposed – ‘I know John Blakely and knew a woman named Mary Turley. She and prisoner lived together but she is now died. They had four or five children – one of them was named Felix; he was youngest but one. Mary Turley died in confinement of the second child after Felix. Only one of children is now alive – a little girl. I did not see Felix for two months before he was found dead. Before his death he and his father lived for a fortnight in William Rainey's, Armagh. I sent the child home to his father at Rainey's a fortnight before he (the father) said he took him to a lodging in the country. I sent the child home on a Sunday and saw it alive for the last time on the following Tuesday, at Rainey's. The child had had the small-pox and afterwards a bowel complaint before I sent him away – he had not the recovered. He lost the sight of one of his eyes in the small-pox. On the right foot, the second toe decayed from the same disease. After the child's death I saw his body in Armagh infirmary. After I heard the child was dead I went to prisoner, At James Mulholland's, where he was working. I inquired of it was the dead body of Felix that had been brought in? He made no answer for about five or ten minutes. He then said “what could he do with it? (The

child). Sure he was tormented with the trouble it gave to everybody – no one would take this week’s earning to take care of it”

“John” (said I) “had you not (you should not have) done what you have done. I never brought a blush to your face (craved you) for all the trouble it gave me. I would have begged the world with it to take care of it”. To Mr Blacker – “I told the prisoner that if he had killed the child, all Ireland could not save him and that he had better make his road good”. Before the child took the small-pox it was a fine, healthy child. I know Mrs Rainey – she is rather a passionate woman. The report was that she alleged she had no luck in selling anything in her shop from the time it came about the house because it was “bewitched like”. The opinion of the country-people is that a bewitched child is a sickly one which has been left in place by a fine child taken away by the fairies. It was reported that Mrs Rainey advised the prisoner to take the head off the child and throw it behind the fire. To a Juror – I am sister to the prisoner’. [Witness here cried bitterly and there was a strong sensation in the Court]

Elizabeth Rainey – ‘I am the wife of William Rainey and live in Armagh. I keep a huckstry. The prisoner lodged in my house for about a month. He left me on the Wednesday after Shrove Tuesday. When he had been with me for about a fortnight, his sister sent a child to him. It remained there for about a fortnight. It slept with him and got its diet with him. It went by the name of Felix. On the Sunday evening before Shrove Tuesday, prisoner borrowed my apron to put it about the child and after he had done so he took the child and left the house between seven and eight at night. He did not say where he was going. He returned in the inside of two hours without the child but bringing back the apron. I said to him “John, what did the child say when you were leaving it?” – He replied that it said nothing. I said, if they give it a fire and a bit to eat, it would not give them much trouble and he replied “not much”. He then asked me for a drink; I told him I had no water except what was hot in the kettle. When [the] prisoner took it away, it wore an old flannel petticoat with a patch on it – an old torn sarsnet coat – and an old black calico bib. I never saw it alive after that night. I saw the dead body of a child in the infirmary nearly five weeks afterward. I think it was that of Felix Blakely – Dr Colvan, Ann Finlay (last witness) and Mrs Magill were present. The prisoner remained in my house till the Wednesday after he took the child away’.

To Mr Blacker – ‘I live in Lower Irish Street, Armagh. I am married and have five children from 3 to 15 years of age. The child was bare and hungry-looking; it had the small-pox and

had got bad care in the disease. It had not the appearance of a child of seven years, being spent and sickly. It was old-fashioned enough both in look and conversation. It used to sit up on its “hunkers” at the fire like an old man. It did not appear an idiot or a “natural”. When the child had been a week in my house, I began to wish its father would provide another lodging for it. He said it was getting care enough but that he had *a very good place for it*. I asked where this place was. He replied “in Mick Duffy’s in Bannbrook” or “in the Shambles”, I forget which. After I shut my shop of nights, I sometimes have a crack with my husband and a neighbour. We don’t tell old stories about fairies and so on – how should I know anything about fairies? (laughter) I never said anything to the prisoner about fairies – I merely said to him that his child was “not *right-looking*” and that it should be with me no longer; if it had good clothes it would have been like other children. I never called it a witch. I heard my children say that when it was upstairs, it used to sing foolish little song and that it played little tricks among the ashes and was “bringing *wee things*” about the fire. I don’t know what “wee things” or “wee people” are. I never saw the deceased child do more than play a little trick, as if to frighten the others. I often asked the prisoner to be allowed to give the child a halfpenny-worth of bread in the day but he did not say he would permit me. I never told him the child would come to no good; but that if it got care it might thrive. He complained of it, and asked what he would do with it; and I told him he should let his sister keep it and give her a shilling a week for doing so. I swear, I never said to him that I would take off its head and throw it behind the fire. [The] Prisoner said that his sister would never get it. He had given the child its supper before he rolled it up in my apron’.

Abigail Magill – ‘I lodged in Rainey’s house on the night the prisoner took the child away. After he returned, he came to my room with a candle in his left hand and asked for a drink of water. I told him where to get it and he lifted two tin-fulls with his right hand which trembled in the act. I desired him to take a drink to the child. He said he left it in the country. I never saw the child after that; but I saw its body in the infirmary, after the doctors had sent for me. There was a pearl on the right eye and two of the toes had grown together in the small-pox. To Sir T. Staples – ‘I saw the united toes of the dead body and often while it was alive’. (Witness described the clothes found on the body and said she was sure they were the same as the child had worn when alive).

To Mr Blacker – ‘When the prisoner told me had had left the child in the country, I had suspicions about it. I never heard quarrelling between Mrs Rainey and the [the] prisoner

about the child. I didn't pay any heed to the idle stories of people who said the child was "so-and-so" (a changeling).

Robert Woods – 'I know Miss Lodge's grounds about a mile from this town. I was there on 2nd April, about 11 o'clock. In the gripe of a ditch, I observed the dead body of a child. It was wrapped in old clothes and covered with some tufts of grass and fog. I went to Mr Pooler, Miss Lodge's gardener, and told the circumstance. I next went to Rainey's, steward to Miss Lodge. A man of Rainey's and I went to the ditch. In the course of the day an inquest was held on the body. Dr Colvan attended. I saw the body removed from the ditch. There was an old dirty cloth wrapped round the head, old flannel rolled around the body and a black cloth round its neck. I heard that the body and the clothes were removed to the infirmary'.

Joseph Barbour – 'I carried the dead body of a child from Miss Lodge's side of Mr Dobbin's dam to the infirmary and delivered it to the doctors'.

John Colvan, Esq. – 'I am a physician and surgeon. On the 2nd of April last, I saw a dead body in Miss Lodge's grounds. The body was that of a child of probably five or six years. I re-examined the body at the infirmary. It had the appearance of having been dead for a considerable time. Putrefaction had commenced on the abdomen. It was a cold, dry time for the year and the place where the body was found was a cool one. It might, therefore, have lain for a longer time than we could reasonably suppose. I named eight or ten days at the time of the inquest as I was pressed for an opinion but I thought it might have been dead much longer. My opinion is that the child's death was occasioned by external violence. There was a large bruise betwixt the eyes and one much larger on the right side of the throat. The tongue protruded partially from between the lips and teeth. From these marks and from the apparent weak state of the child, I not only concluded that its death had been a violent one but I was even led to form an opinion as to the mode of the death. The skeleton was that of an emaciated child; and apparently, a little violence would have occasioned death. The wounds appeared to have been inflicted by some hard, blunt substance. They might have been caused by a fall or a blow. I observed on the right side of the head, a cicatrix of a large ulcer which had denuded the bone. The right eye was completely blind from a disease we term stapheloma, or projecting humour and the left eye was also injured from opacities of the cornea. Two of the toes on the right foot had run together in healing from small-pox. It was I and an apprentice of mine, Mr Davison who lifted the body out of the ditch and undressed it

on the field. The clothes on the upper part seemed as if pinned round it; but those on the lower part were put on as they had been worn’.

To Mr Blacker – ‘The body lay in the ditch with the face up. I did not find internal marks to occasion death. If the child had been exposed to the inclemency of the air, for a short time, it would probably have died after the infliction of the injuries. The wound betwixt the eyes was not a superficial one. The blood was effused into all the structured down to the bone which was injured but not broken. In the other wounds the blood was also effused into all the structures. I thought the wounds the only visible cause of death’.

John Reavey – ‘I live in Portadown. In April last I heard of a man’s having killed a child at Armagh. I saw a person matching the description passing through Portadown and gave information to the Captain of Police who ordered a party of his men to go with me. The man I refer to was the prisoner. When he saw us, he escaped into Mr Shillington’s timber but was captured on the Lurgan Road. He told Capt. Locke that he lived in High Street, Newry. I saw him again in the police barrack. Capt. Locke warned him not to say anything that might commit himself. My brother and I, Mick Cromey and Corporal Daly of the police were present with him in the barrack afterwards. Mick Cromey and my brother asked him why he had killed the child. We could not get him stopped from declaration of the facts. He gave himself two or three names – one of which was Turley. I also said he had been bred in Sheepbridge’.

John Wilson, Sub-Constable – ‘It was I who arrested the prisoner. I found him lying in a Mr Boyd’s garden, at the end of Portadown, on 27th April. I told him there was a charge against him and asked him where he lived. He said in Newry, or its neighbourhood. He denied that he ever lived at Armagh’.

Mr Blacker, for the defence, argued that the evidence did not bear out the second count of the indictment, alleging strangulation as the cause of death; and quoted from Sir George Lewin’s reports in support of his argument. He also submitted, as to the first count, charging the death as occasioned by throwing the deceased down on the ground &c. thereby giving him a mortal wound, that it did not appear in the evidence of the surgeon whether the mortal wound was occasioned by a blow or by a fall to the ground; and he referred to a precedent given in the work already referred to, to show that this would not be sufficient to sustain the count.

Dr Colvan recalled – ‘My opinion as to the cause of death is this, that if life was lingering after the violence, it may have been finished or accelerated by the inclemency of the weather.’

The witness’ depositions were then read where it appeared that he had alleged exposure to the weather as one of the causes of death.

Dr Colvan to the Court – ‘The tongue of the deceased protruded which indicated suffocation – not strangulation. Strangulation is considered as effected by placing a substance tightly round the neck. Suffocation may be caused by pressing the hand against the throat and squeezing the wind-pipe. Choking is properly the stopping of the oesophagus by the pressure of some extraneous substance’.

Sir T. Staples quoted from *5 Carrington and Paine*, 121, as reported in *Roscoe on Evidence*, 650, to show the sufficiency of the evidence to sustain the indictment so far as regarded the acceptation and admitted meaning of the terms choking and strangulation.

Mr Hanna, QC cited from *Roscoe*, 651 to a similar effect.

The Court held the precedent good but did not wish to preclude the prisoner the benefit of a future consideration of the point raised by his Counsel.

Mr Blacker then addressed the jury briefly on the part of the prisoner. No witnesses were called for the defence.

His Lordship began his charge to the jury and his recapitulation of the evidence at five minutes past three o’clock and concluded at a quarter past four. At five minutes to five the Jury returned to the Court with a verdict of – guilty. The prisoner did not evince any particular concern when the verdict was announced. He preserved a dogged, listless air during the whole trial and on one or two occasions we caught him smiling while chatting with a policeman and the jailers in the dock.

Wednesday August 5.

John Blakely, for the murder of his own child, was then called up to receive sentence.

Judge Burton (having put on the black cap) – ‘John Blakely you have been indicted for the murder of your own child and on that indictment have been tried. After a full and patient

investigation into all the circumstances of the case, you have been found guilty and on a review of the evidence brought forward in the course of that trial, it is my opinion that no other verdict could [have] been returned. You now, therefore, await the dreadful sentence of the law being passed on you. Your victim was your own child – a child about five or six years of age – helpless and sickly in its constitution – when this is taken into consideration, the mind, in contemplating the act, can only be possessed by one feeling and that is one of [the] greatest horror that it is possible to conceive. You cannot expect any mercy in this world and, therefore it will be absolutely necessary for you to use the little time that will be left to you to supplicate for that mercy in the next world of which you stand so much in need and I would earnestly recommend you set about doing so. I am now obliged to pass on you the sentence the law allows me which is this – that you be taken from this place whence you came and from that to the usual place of execution and there be hanged by the neck until you be dead and that your dead body be buried within the precincts of the prison; and may the Lord have mercy on your soul!’

During the delivery of this address in which his Lordship appeared much affected, the prisoner did not betray the least symptom of agitation or weakness – He stood perfectly unmoved and apparently regardless of what was going on. On being conveyed back to the gaol, the only symptom that could be observed of the working of the mind within was a slight hectic blush the overspread his countenance. He walked away with a firm and steady step.

Belfast Newsletter, 23 July 1852, County of Antrim Court Assizes (Belfast), Child Murder.
 Petit Jury – Messrs. James Boyd, James S. Cunningham, James Ellison, Hugh Erskine, William Erskine, William Shaw Ferguson, John Lawther, John Ligget, Hugh Halliday Hannay, John Kelly, James Moore and Samuel Molyneaux.

Samuel Gilmore was next indicted for the murder of a child, name unknown, on 9th June at Ballymacormick.

Sir Thomas Staples stated the case for the prosecution.

Catherine Montgomery examined by Mr. Law – ‘I have known the prisoner these ten years. I live with my brothers and sisters. I had a child by the prisoner. The child was born on 11 April. He wanted me to marry him, but I did not do so. The prisoner demanded the child from

me by an order and a bailiff. My sister took him. It was seven weeks old then. The prisoner was before this decreed £5 lying-in money. The child was healthy when I parted with it. The prisoner's sister came for me after I sent him the child. I went, and a man who was in the house said the child had been stolen and asked me if I had it. I said not. The prisoner said he was out fastening the mare in the bog and when he came in the child was away. I saw it again at the inquest. There were three large marks of violence its face. I thought the pig might have killed it and said so when it was missed, but the prisoner said he thought not.'

[Cross-examined by Mr. McMehan] – 'The prisoner wanted a fortune with me but I had none. I think if the pig had killed the child, the prisoner would not have liked to say so.'

Margaret Montgomery examined by Sir T. Staples – 'I am the sister of the last witness. I took the child home to the prisoner and laid it on his arm. My brother told him to take care of it. I went the next day but they would not let me see the child. I never saw it again.'

Malcolm McMullan examined – 'I saw the child several times. It appeared healthy and well. I did not see it on the 9th June but I saw it a day or two previously. On that day the prisoner came to my house and told me he had lost the child. He wondered what could come of it. I said maybe the pig had destroyed it. He said not, for the pig had not been out since the middle of the day. The sister then said she had left the child on the bed when she went out to milk and the prisoner said he had gone out to fetter the mare and when he came back it was away. He wondered if the "wee-folk" or fairies could have taken it. The mother of the child was then sent for, to see if she had taken it. I saw the child again at the inquest. I cannot, however, say positively that it was the same child for it was greatly disfigured. There were cuts on its face and across its throat.'

[Cross-examined] – 'They all appeared fond of the child. The prisoner had a large pig – a breeding sow and a hungered one. She was kept in a house at the end of the kitchen but could have broken out of it. The prisoner appeared very fond of the child and all were on great trouble when it was lost. He was always a good neighbour and kind "both to beast and bodie".'

Robert Maguire (police constable) – 'The prisoner came to the barrack and told me the child had been stolen away when he and his sister went out. I went down to his house to make inquiry about the child and suspecting that the mother might have taken it away, went and brought her, as well as the prisoner, to the magistrate. I was present when the prisoner dug up the child. It was in a basket and covered with some old clothes. He said he had buried it there himself.'

John Hetheron, (police constable) – ‘I saw the prisoner at Bridewell. He told me on the next day he wanted to tell me about the case. I said I wanted to hear nothing about it. He then said he had buried it in a potato ridge. He said he had been sleeping at the fire and was awoke by a noise. When he awoke, he said he saw the sow having the child in its mouth. That he got it from the beast but it caught it again and before he could get it relieved, it was killed. He then took me to where he had buried the child, took it up, and carried it to the barracks and brought it out of the basket. It had three wounds on the face and throat. The wound on the throat was about an inch long. I went and saw the bed, which was about two feet high. I also saw the pig. It was a very large sow. The prisoner said he had been determined to take the child and bury it in his father’s grave. It would be difficult for the pig to get into the bed.’

[Cross-examined] – ‘I think the pig could not have got the child, except it had leapt into the bed.’

Dr Maxwell – ‘I saw the body of the child. I found a large incised wound across the nose. It must have been inflicted by a cutting instrument. There were a number of other wounds. There were punctured wounds. There was a large incised wound across the throat but it was not so clean a wound as the one across the nose. There was one up the right cheek. It was an irregular wound, the bone was fractured. I cannot say by what kind of instrument it might have been inflicted. My first impression was that the wounds had been inflicted by the bite of an animal, but I think the one across the face could not have been so, in the first instance. It was a clean incised wound.’

Dr Black – ‘I examined the body on the subsequent day. The wound across the face must have been inflicted by a sharp instrument. It could not have been inflicted by the bite of an animal. I think also that two other wounds on the face could not have been inflicted by a bite either. The tongue was divided by a sharp instrument. I think the wound across the throat was not caused by a bite, for the skin was not removed to the extent it would have been if caused by a bite. The wound across the face was sufficient to cause death from the loss of blood.’

[Cross-examined] – ‘There was part of the wound in the throat regular, and part of it irregular. It would have required the greatest violence to have cut the child’s head in two by the blow of a turf spade.’

Dr Diamond – ‘I assisted Dr Maxwell. The wound on the throat was a lacerated one, but that on the face was by a sharp instrument. I think some of the other wounds could not have been caused by a bite.’

James Wilson – ‘The prisoner’s mother came to my house on the evening of the 9th of June she went the opposite direction.’

Mr John Jellet, coroner – ‘I held and inquest on the body on the 15th June. I cautioned the prisoner to say nothing that would incriminate himself. He made a long, rambling statement and I took a condensed account of what he said which was read over to him, and he signed it. Mr Henry, the Sub-inspector also took down the statement and we compared the two.’

The Clerk of the County then read the statement. It was to the effect that the pig was feeding at a tub in the kitchen and went to the bed, snapping out [at] the child which the prisoner immediately attempted to take out of the pig’s mouth; but before he could get it relieved, it was dead. He then washed it and laid it again on the bed, and after night took and buried it where it was afterwards found, without telling the family about it.

William Moore, Esq. J.P – ‘The prisoner made a statement to me also. I cautioned him previously.’

The Clerk of the Court then read the statement. It was the same as the previous one. Mr McMechan then addressed the jury for the defence. His Lordship summed up. The jury retired for half-an-hour and returned with a verdict of guilty, with a recommendation to mercy, on account of the prisoner’s previous good character.

Fairy blast or elf-shot [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of Londonderry IX, vol. 28, Parish of Cumber, Lieutenant Edward Vicars, November 1832.

(p. 20) ‘Whenever an elf-stone is found, it is left undisturbed as they believe that it was cast to that place by the “invisible gentry” or fairies , to revenge any injury done to their rightful property such as cutting or breaking any part of a bush, levelling or in any other way demolishing any part of any fort, moat or wall, speaking disrespectfully of themselves or any of the aforesaid things.

When one such offence has been committed the stone is believed to be discharged and the cattle immediately fall ill. If any cattle fall ill on the land on which this small stone was first seen and replaced, it is immediately looked for, and if again found, is put into a vessel of sufficient size to contain as much water as the beast may have 3 drinks from, after which it is

carefully deposited in the original place. If the animal does not on this recover, the wizards are immediately besought to apply the usual remedy.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry XI, vol. 31, Parish of Lissan, J. Bleakly, 1836.

(p.105) ‘James Lunnon of Tintagh (a farmer) declares that on foggy days he has often heard the gentle folk or fairies on the face of the mountain a little above his house, knocking, as it were, 2 stones together and afterwards laughing hearty; and believes with many others of his neighbours that the flint arrowheads (some of which are in his possession) are all made by the fairies and thrown by them at the cattle which is called by the people elf-shooting. From James Lunnon, James Harkness and Martha Heaney.

The Presbyterians are equally superstitious in this parish, which is evident from their desire to preserve the fairy bushes which are in various parts of the parish.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim XI, vol. 29, Parish of Antrim, James Boyle. May 1838.

(P.29) ‘They have not got any legendary tales nor ancient music among them. The lower class are almost all superstitious having an implicit belief in the existence of fairies and of ghosts, in witchcraft and charms, and perfectly convinced that cows are blinkered and deprived of their milk by the fairies and can only be cured by a charm.

Old thorns and forts are held as sacred and considered “gentle places”, that is, that fairies assemble about them. To remove either is considered as sacrilegious and the person who would do so is looked upon as insane, for he is sure never to prosper. The favourite punishments for such transgressions seem to be the death of the offender’s cattle, sickness of some of his family or the burning of his house. These superstitious notions do not seem to be much on the decline.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim III, vol. 10, Parish of Islandmagee, James Boyle, April 1840.

(p. 67) ‘The flint arrowheads and perforated druidical amulets or “elf-stones” are held in extreme reverence. The mist rude amulets are the most prized, and with them they will on no

account part. They are considered as indispensable acquisitions in their cowhouses, as being charms and infallible preventatives against witchcraft or enchantment and against the loss of cow's milk, it being deprived of the butte by the fairies and against the cow's being elfshot. The usual cure for cattle when elfshot is giving them a drink of water in which salt, an elfshot and one or more (an odd number) of pieces of silver are thrown. An elfstone is frequently hung over a cowhouse door and during the illness of the animal, about her head or is suspended from her horn.

The other common superstitions of the county of Antrim are well known and prevalent here, nor is there one of these to be found in any other district of the north which is not in full force in the parish of Islandmagee.'

Belfast Newsletter, 9 August 1852, elf-shot.

On Monday last, three young women named Sarah Reynolds, Margaret Megaghan and another, were brought before Captain Erskine, J.P., Cavan, for assaulting and abusing each other. It seems that a day or two previous, Sarah Reynolds, who has a child whom she imagines to be fairy-struck, communicated her misgivings on that point to her two companions, when the three immediately agreed to start off in search of a wizard or fairy-man living some miles distant who would supply them with a magic thread to remedy the mischief done by the evil-minded fairies. On their way, they made rather free with the "mountain dew" and before arriving at the fairy-man's they quarrelled and battered each other with great gusto. The upshot of the expedition was the three "chums" returned to Cavan *minus* some blood but *plus* a goodly quantity of alcohol. How Captain Erskine settled the matter between the belligerents we have not heard – *Anglo-Celt*.

O/S Memoires, Parishes of County Antrim VI, vol. 19, Parish of Duneane, J. Bleakly, March 1837.

(pp. 115-6) 'Daniel Mellon, who resided in the townland of Artlone some short time ago, built his house near the Danish fort. On Thursday, 2nd March this year, 1837, he died of paralysis at the age of 54 years. His superstitious neighbours affirm that he was shot by the fairies. From Moses Mays.'

THE EVIL-EYE [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

From the medieval period onwards, the mass of the Gaelic-speaking, native population of Ireland believed the evil-eye (magical powers located in their eyes) harmed humans, livestock and agricultural produce, through intentional use by witches and unintentionally by those unlucky enough to have inherited the ‘gift’.²⁴ Belief in the evil-eye continued in these communities throughout the early modern period, but by the nineteenth-century it had seeped into Ulster Scots popular culture. It is also referred to as ‘over-looking’ or blinking and is occasionally linked to fairy attack.

General belief [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry XI, vol. 31, Parishes of Ballynascreen, Desertmartin and Kilcronaghan, J McCloskey, 1821.

(p. 124) ‘In a mountainous region such as that under review, superstitious holds longest her old domain. Witchcraft is now forgotten, or perhaps never had footing here, though fascination or the effects of an evil-eye both on man and beast are commonly believed. There are still some ghosts seen.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim XIV, vol. 37, Parish of Carrickfergus, Lieutenant G. H. Mallock, April. 1832.

(p. 77) ‘It is believed that cows are deprived of their milk either by being “elf-shot” by the fairies or by being blinked. The “evil eye” is confidently believed in here.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Down III, vol. 12, Parish of Blarish, Lieutenant G. F. W. Bordes, Nov. 1833.

(p.32) ‘Their old traditions, manners and customs are losing popularity, for the croaking of a raven or hooting of an owl will not disturb the plebians as a foreboding of evil in the manner of “other times”; yet the greater number believe in fairies, elves and the visitation of departed spirits. Another absurdity is the bewitching or overlooking of cattle and this imaginary malady is so far from losing ground that a number of both sexes may be found who pretend to cure these fantastic diseases (as well as some real ones as toothache etc.) by remedy still

²⁴ See: Hutton, ‘Witch-hunting in Celtic Societies’: 59-60, 64-5; Jacqueline Borsje, *The Celtic Evil Eye and Related Mythological Motifs in Medieval Ireland* (Paris, 2012), chapters 1 and 2; Eva Pocs, ‘Evil Eye in Hungary: Belief, Ritual, Incantation’ in, Jonathan Roper (ed), *Charms and Charming in Europe* (Palgrave, 2004).

more whimsical, a charm; and when the grass season turns out bad, applications to these people are pretty numerous, who never make a charge but always expect a present.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry I, vol. 6, Parish of Termoneeny, C.W. Ligar, July 1836.

(p. 126) ‘The Presbyterians, the descendants of the Scotch settlers, and the Roman Catholics, the descendants of the native Irish, are equally superstitious, respecting the existence and mischievous propensities of the fairies and also that there are certain men and women who by merely looking at a cow or horse can deprive the one of milk or kill the other, which is called “blinking”. Those persons possessing this power are said to have an “evil or covetous eye”. As one instance out of many may be stated the following recent circumstances. John Martin of Knocknakielt in this parish, having had a cow that was suddenly deprived of her milk, sent a bottle of some of the milk she had before given by his daughter to his son’s house near Maghera, and a Roman Catholic servant maid there went off to the Rev. Mr McKenna, Roman Catholic clergyman, for the purpose of having the cow cured. He gave her some blessed salt, which was dissolved in the water and administered to her but without effect. This failure is attributed partly to the owner of the cow being a Presbyterian and partly to the fault of the girl, who confessed she had kept a small portion of the salt for the use of herself, having placed it under her pillow to guard her against the “gentry”. The cow is still unrecovered and is believed to have been “blinked” (that is looked at by some one who had an “evil eye” or covetous eye).’

MAGICAL PRACTITIONERS [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Recent research has demonstrated that nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland was served by a variety of supernatural healers. This included magical practitioners who cured specific ailments or diseases using a gift inherited or passed onto them, faith or divine healers who transferred God's power onto the sick in order to heal them, and commercial magical practitioners. This latter group offered a range of services, including the diagnosis and cure of humans attacked by fairies and witches. They were particularly concerned with changeling abduction and the effects of elf-bolts and fairy blast. These practitioners were known in Ireland by variety of names, including elf-doctor, fairy man or woman, herb doctor, cow-doctor, wise-man or woman, and spae-man and spae-woman.²⁵

Commercial practitioners [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

James Orr, 'The Spae-Wife' (Song, taken from Poems, on Various Subjects, 1804)

Tune – "Come under my Plaidy".

The weaver, small farmer and poet James Orr (1770-1816) is now rightly regarded as one of the most prominent labouring-class Romantic Irish poets of his generation. Orr's poetry is particularly remarkable for its insightful chronicling of his local, Ulster Scots, East Antrim community. As the poem below demonstrates, Orr, like his friend and fellow poet Samuel Thomson, was critical of superstitious practice, directing readers, in well-wrought Ulster Scots vernacular, to instead consult the Bible in matters of wisdom and foresight.

'The Spae-Wife

Ye frien's o' deep knowledge, if wise ye wad be,

²⁵ See: Young, 'Some notes on Irish Fairy Changelings in Nineteenth-Century Irish Newspapers': 38-43; Correll, 'Believers and Sceptics, and Charlatans: Evidential Rhetoric, the Fairies and Fairy Healers in Irish Oral Narratives and Beliefs': 2, 11-14; Richard P. Jenkins, 'Witches and Fairies: Supernatural Aggression and Deviance Among the Irish Peasantry' in, *Ulster Folklife*, 23 (1977): 33-56; Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-famine Ireland, 1780-1845*: 115-16; Catherine Cox, 'The Medical Marketplace and Medical Tradition in Nineteenth Century Ireland' in, Ronnie Moore and Stuart McClean (eds), *Folk Healing And Health Care Practices In Britain and Ireland: Stethoscopes, Wands and Crystals* (Oxford and New York, 2010): 55-6, 73; Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: a True Story*, chapter 2; St. John D. Seymour, *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology* (London, 1913): 236-7, 239-42; Richard Jenkins, 'The Transformations of Bidy Early: From Local Reports of Magical Healing to Globalised New Age Fantasies' in, *Folklore*, 118 (2007): 165-70.

Creep into my cave an' a' secrets ye'll see;
 If maiden, or mother, uncertainty bother,
 Frae doubt an' frae darkness, their min's I can free:
Ilk lass, no tald lees on, wha deems, an' wi' reason,²⁶
 The youth she oblig't frae her fund arms will flee,
 An' wife, in a fear ay, that *jilts* meet her dearie,²⁷
 May learn the *hale* truth by applyin' to me.²⁸

Gif Chanticlear's ta'en frae the roost whare he craw't;²⁹
 Or horse, kye, or sheep, frae the pasture-fiel' ca't,
 My head I'll bestow ye, if I dinna shew ye
 The leuks in a glass, o' the *loun that's in faut*:³⁰
 Or else if ye *cleek up*, an' toss my delft tea-cup,³¹
 If danger, or death's near, the *gruns* plain will shaw't.³²
 By cuttin' o' cartes folk, an' no' by black-arts, folk,
 O past, present, future, I'll read ye a *claut*.³³

A *spunkie* reply't, wha oureheard the dark dame ---³⁴
 "Guid wife! they wha trust ye defeat their ain aim;
 "The henpecked *taupie*, wha'd wiss to be happy,³⁵
 "Sud ax nane wha ken --- what the wife does at hame:
 "Ilk sport-lovin weary, might dread to come near ye,
 "Wha ken'st the dark *neuk* whare she try't the *blythe* game ---³⁶
 "The grand plan of Nature's conceal'd frae a' creatures;
 Nor cud their skill chang't gif they kent the hale scheme.
 "Ye promise promotion, an' sin' frae the mead
 "The shepherd to sea, whare some shark soon he'll feed;

²⁶ Every.

²⁷ Contemptuous term for a young woman.

²⁸ Whole.

²⁹ The cockerel.

³⁰ It is the young male who is at fault.

³¹ Hook up.

³² Tea-leaves, dregs.

³³ A scraping/a selection.

³⁴ Spirited, lively young person.

³⁵ Half-wit, foolish person.

³⁶ Corner/happy.

“The young thing, sae bonie, weds some *canker’t clownie*,³⁷
 “Because ye’ve presag’d that nae ither’s decreed---
 “While dupes trust the Sybil far mair than the bible,
 “An’ change the last sixpence that ye may be fee’d,
 “I’ll scorn the to-morrow, an’ banishin’ sorrow,
 “Learn mair light frae whiskey than e’er fill’t your head.

The “Carnmoney Witch”, 1807-8.

In 1807, in Carnmoney, a small, relatively poor, Presbyterian village in Co. Antrim, Alexander Montgomery and his wife became convinced their only cow had been bewitched when her milk could not be churned into butter. Mary Butters, a wise-woman from Carrickfergus was duly consulted but her cure turned out to be worse than the disease, causing the deaths of a number of local people. The below newspaper articles provide a narrative account of the tragedy and what happened to Mary Butters afterwards. The poem is by Francis Boyle, a theologically and politically conservative Presbyterian poet from Gransha, near Comber, Co. Down, who wrote in the Scots verse style and was probably born in the mid-eighteenth century.³⁸ The version given here was published in the early twentieth century by the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*.

The Aberdeen Journal, 7 October 1807, Dreadful Catastrophe.

A melancholy event took place some time ago, in the house of Alexander Montgomery, tailor at Carmonie Meeting-house in Ireland, which shows the extreme ignorance, folly, and superstition, of the country people:-

“Montgomery had a cow, which continued to give milk as usual, but of late no butter could be produced from the milk. An opinion, which has long been entertained by many people in the country was unfortunately instilled into the mind of Montgomery’s wife, that whenever such circumstance occurred, it was occasioned by the cow having been *bewitched*. This family were informed of a woman named Mary Butters, who resided at Carrickfergus, and could, by contrary incantations, destroy the evil genius. They brought her to the house. The enchantress informed the family, that, after night fall, she would try a spell that could not fail.

³⁷ Short-tempered/coarse fellow.

³⁸ For more poetry by Francis Boyle, see Frank Ferguson (ed.), *Ulster Scots Writing: An Anthology* (Dublin, 2008).

Accordingly, about ten o'clock at night, she gave orders for Montgomery, and a young man who was accidently there, to go to the cow-house, turn their waistcoats inside out, and, in that dress, to stand close by the head of the cow until they heard from her. They immediately went out, and did as she desired, whilst Montgomery's wife, his son, a lad about 20 years of age, and an old woman, who was a lodger, remained in the house to watch the astrologer's operations. She then caused the door to be shut, the chimney to be stopped, and every crevice that could admit air to be carefully closed up.

"Montgomery, the father, and the young man who went into the cow-house, remained there for several hours, until it was daylight. The young man then went and knocked at the door, but not receiving any answer, he looked through a window, and beheld the four persons within lying stretched on the floor. They immediately broke open the door, when they found the mother and son both dead, and the other two nearly so. They carried out the two former, but in doing so, the young man had nearly lost his life, by the sulphurous vapour that filled the house. One of them expired in a few hours, but Mary Butters, the sorceress, recovered, and has been committed to jail.

"It is not known what stratagems she employed to work her pretended enchantment, but the people who went into the house found a pot on the fire, in which were needles, large pins, and crooked nails, with a quantity of milk. Little doubt can be entertained that she had been burning sulphur, and that the vapour from it proved fatal to the sufferers. A coroner's inquest has been held, and the following is a copy of their verdict- "It is the opinion of the Jury, that the deceased Elizabeth Montgomery came by her death from suffocation, occasioned by a woman named Mary Butters, in her making use of some noxious ingredients, in the manner of a charm to recover a cow." The report of the inquest upon the other bodies was similar.

Belfast Newsletter, 15 April 1808.

Court Report from the Carrickfergus County Assizes: 'Mary Butters, the Carnmoney witch, was discharged by proclamation.'

John S. Crone, 'Witchcraft in Antrim' in, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, Second Series, 14/1 (February 1908): 35-7.

'CARMONEY WITCHES:

... Printed in memory of witch-craft 1808 ...

A humorous modern Song, founded on fact,

by F.B.—, Cumber, Granshaw.

Tune—"Lovely Molly has an air—"

In Carrick town a wife did dwell,
 Who does pretend to conjure witches
 Auld Barbara Goats and lucky Bell,
 Ye'll no lang to come through her clutches;
 A waefu' trick this wife did play,
 On simple Sawney³⁹, our poor tailor,
 She's mittimiss'd⁴⁰ the other day
 To lie in limbo with the Jailor:
 This simple Sawney had a Cow
 Was aye as sleekit as an otter
 It happen'd for a month or two,
 Aye when they churn'd they got nae butter;
 Roun-tree tied in the Cow's tail,
 And vervain glean'd about the ditches;
 These freets⁴¹ and charms did not prevail,
 They cou'd not banish the auld witches:
 The neighbour wives a' gather'd in
 In number near about a dozen,
 Elspie Dough and Mary Linn,
 An' Keat M'Cart the tailor's cousin,
 Aye they churn'd an' aye they swat,
 Their aprons loos'd and coost their mutches⁴²
 But yet nae butter they could get,

³⁹ 'Sawney' is a Lowland Scots diminutive of the first name Alexander.

⁴⁰ A legal term for a warrant authorising the detention of a person in prison.

⁴¹ 'Freet' refers to butter-stealing witches. See 'freet', *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>.

⁴² Mutches were linen caps worn in Scotland by women and children.

They blest the Cow but curst the witches:
 Had Sawney summoned all his wits,
 And sent awa for Huie Mertin,
 He could have gall't the witches guts
 An' cur't the kye to Nannie Barton;
 But he may show the farmer's wab⁴³
 An' lang wade through Carmoney gutters,
 Alas' it was a sore mis'jab
 When he empoly'd auld Mary Butters;
 The sorcerest open'd the scene,
 With magic words of her invention,
 To make the foolish people keen
 Who did not know her base intention,
 She drew a circle round the churn,
 An' wash'd the staff in south run water
 An' swore the witches she would burn,⁴⁴
 But she would have the tailor's butter.
 When fable night her curtain spread,
 The she got on a flaming fire,
 The tailor stood at the Cow's head
 With his turn'd waistcoat in the byer;
 The chimney cover'd with a scraw,
 An' ev'ry crevice where it smoak'd,
 But long before the cock did crawl
 The people in the house were choak'd,
 The muckle⁴⁵ pot hung on all night
 As Mary Butters had been brewing,
 In hopes to fetch some witch or wight
 Whas entrails by her art was stewing
 In this her magic a' did fail
 Nae witch or wizard was detected;

⁴³ Web or weave: as in a web of fine thread, possibly linen.

⁴⁴ Convicted witches were hung in early modern England and Ireland, but in Scotland they were strangled, then burned.

⁴⁵ Large.

Now Mary Butters lies in jail,
 For the base part she has acted.
 The tailor lost his son an' wife,
 For Mary Butters did them smother
 But as he hates a single life,
 In four weeks time he got another;
 He is a cruse auld canty chiel,⁴⁶
 An' cares nae what witches mutters
 He'll never mair employ the deil,
 Nor his auld agent, Mary Butters;
 At day the tailor left his post,
 Though he had seen no apparition
 Nae wizard grim nae witch nor ghost,
 Though still he had a strong suspicion
 That some auld wizard wrinkled wife,
 Had cast her cantrips⁴⁷ o'er poor brawny
 Cause she and he did live in strife,
 An' whare's the man can blame poor Sawney;
 Wae sucks for our young lasses now,
 For who can read their mystic matters
 Or tell if their sweet hearts be true,
 The folk a run to Mary Butters;
 To tell what thief a horse did steal,
 In this she was a mere pretender
 An' has nae art to raise the deil
 Like that auld wife, the witch of Endor⁴⁸
 If Mary Butters be a witch,
 Why but the people all should know it,
 An' if she can the muses touch
 I'm sure she'll soon descry the poet,
 Her ain familiar⁴⁹ aff she'll sen'

⁴⁶ A man.

⁴⁷ A magical spell.

⁴⁸ In the bible, the Witch of Endor, on the orders of King Saul of Israel, summoned the spirit of the prophet Samuel.

Or paughlet wi' a tu' commission,
 To pour her vengeance on the men,
 That tantalises her condition.'

Belfast Newsletter, 10 December 1833, Witch-Finding in County Down.

In a country parish not quite fifty miles from the “flourishing city” called Saintfield the inspiring theme of many a village lay, lived, or rather lives an honest farmer whose cow had got herself bewitched, as was supposed for the “guid wife” –

“wi' toil and pain
 Might plunge an' plunge the kirn in vain
 For oh, the yellow treasure's ta'en
 By witching skill
 An' dawitt twal-pint Hawkie's gaen
 As yell's the bill”

This was a state of things not to be endured and accordingly, after a solemn family council had been held on the subject, it was resolved that the dreadful ceremony should be resorted to for compelling the witch or warlock to make his or her appearance and to take the fatal spell off poor “Hawkie”. This design was communicated to a number of friends who agreed to attend, some through curiosity and others from a hearty wish to have a knock at the witch. The party first rendered themselves in some degree spirit-proof by a decent infusion of spirits inwardly, conformably to the ancient approves practices in similar cases.

After a reasonable libation, therefore, of pure “unchristened” native, operations were begun – the goodwife and children were sent to bed – even the cat and dog were removed lest the sound of human or beastly voice should mar the efficacy of the charm. The chimney was closely covered with a green “scrow”, the windows were firmly stuffed so as to exclude even the faintest glimmer of the moon's “pale beams” on which an elf might ride and perchance intrude its little essence within the consecrated circle. A rousing fore was put on which would have boiled in half an hour as many potatoes which would have served Fionn Mac Cumhal and a troop of his Devil-daring Fenians after a week's starvation. We forgot to mention that

⁴⁹ In English witchcraft belief in particular, witches were believed to own familiars, which were in actuality personal demons who harmed and destroyed at their bidding.

in order to make the chimney *perfectly* secure a bed quilt was spread over the incumbent sod and matters having “progressed” so far the party who were to keep watch outside retired with a lighted candle to the barn all well armed – one young man with a loaded gun and the remainder with good blackthorn cudgels, pitchforks and other weapons calculated to keep at a respectful distance all devils with brains in their skulls. The object of having this rural “constabulary” in attendance was to prevent Satan and his crew from tearing down the house about the poor man’s ears in order to get at the powerful charm which was to work them so much evil. The operator inside the house then shut the door, carefully closed every chink through which a breath of air might pass and, to make things secure, he rolled an immense stone against the door which no devil with ordinary muscles might force. He then filled a pot with the bewitched cow’s milk into which he put twelve cobbler’s awls and setting the pot upon the fire, he “hoded and blew” with almost as much force as did the “old gentleman piper in Tam O’Shanter.”⁵⁰

The fire blazed, the milk boiled and the awl blades rolled fearfully through its foaming whiteness, but all was still as the dead calm which precedes an Alpine thunder-storm – the devil came not, but he was hourly expected and long and anxious were the looks which the “conservative” party in the barn cast in the gathering darkness as the moon gradually sunk behind the clouds of the west; and anxiously did they scrutinize their weapons as each sleepless mouse peered from its little den and rustled among the surrounding straw. Business was commenced at the “hour of night’s black keystone” and it was now two o’clock in the morning, neither devil nor witch was to be heard or seen, the candle nearly burned out and the part felt a general inclination to fall into the arms of “*Murphy*”. They therefore gallantly determined that since the devil would not come to look for them, they would go and look for the devil and forth they sallied, “Andro and his cutty gun” leading the way as it was wisely considered that a “long shot” like Bob Acres was the safest way of dealing at first with an unknown enemy. The procession then cautiously advanced to the door and called to the conjurer within. No answer was returned. A louder call, accompanied by an effort to push in the door was then made; but all was silent as an echo sleeping on the moonlit side of Scraba or Sliabh Cruib. A louder call, and still more energetic efforts were then made when a few hollow moans from within were faintly heard and it was believed that Satan, by some invisible aperture, effected an entrance and done his work in silence. With some difficulty the

⁵⁰ This was a common form of counter-magic used by wise-women or cunning-folk. The ‘old gentleman’ is a reference to the Devil taken from Robert Burns’ poem *Tam O’Shanter*.

door was at last burst open and the poor man was found lying on the floor nearly dead from suffocation! When brought to the air he fainted and it was not without considerable trouble that animation was restored. It was some days before he fully recovered from the effects of his superstitious enterprize. At a distance, it may be supposed that in this narrative we have been drawing upon our “invention”. We have been doing no such thing – we have stated simple facts which have been authenticated to us by most respectable authority and our object in giving them publicity is that they may illustrate a portion of the spirit of the age and may serve as a warning to witch-finders in general, if there be any other lurking remnants of such characters in “that there County” of Down.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of Londonderry XIII, vol. 34, Parish of Clandermot, J. Stokes, 1835.

(p. 32) ‘The superstitious of the parish are not, however, confined to legends. If [a] business fails, recourse is had to some preternatural observances. The first step is to search about the hob for crickets to which, if found, the evil is attributed. The harmless insects are then usually scalded to death, after which the hob and fire are removed to the other end of the room at whatever expense or inconvenience. Should this prove insufficient, one of the room doors is altered. Application to a cunning woman is the last resort.

When the marriage bed seems likely to prove unfruitful, application is similarly made to a cunning woman, without consideration of the expense or the distance of her abode. The first preliminary is a tender of gold or silver, this being indispensable for eliciting the magic spell. After some further formalities the applicants are gravely advised to removed their bed to another part of the house, to repeat so many prayers, to use meagre diet, to avoid groomsmen and bridesmaids etc. These imposters are well rewarded.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry V, vol. 18, Parish of Tamlaght O’Crilly.

Thomas Fagan. 28 July 1836.

(p. 48) ‘2 persons, the one a Presbyterian and the other a Covenanter and near relations, the accused was a woman, a Covenanter, the accuser a Presbyterian. Both parties were brought before the Covenanting minister, the Rev. Mr. Smith in the meeting house at Knockcloghrim for the purpose of examining them. The woman was found guilty and expelled [from] the congregation. The woman was pursued from the cows of the Presbyterian into her own house almost breathless, and on further examination a large chest was opened in which was deposited a crocks of milk in a boiling state, as if occasioned by a very hot fire. Across the

mouth of each crock was the form of a cross of wood. Attached to each point of the cross was a long hair, supposed to have been taken from the tail from the tails of the cows. Her husband, from the shame of his wife being accused and found guilty of so horrible a crime as her, [was] found dead the same night. It is said the cure was affected and the milk and butter restored by taking a quantity of straw from the eave of the house of the person found guilty and burning under the nostrils of the cow or cows blinked. The priests perform the cure by taking all the milk the cow gives and blessing it and also blessing salt out into it. This to be given to the cow without letting a particle to the ground. This cure was given to the cow of a Presbyterian in [the] parish of Termoneeny but without effect.’

Liverpool Mercury, 6 January 1871, Witchcraft in Ireland [Newtownards, Co. Down].

At Newtownards (County Down) quarter sessions, on Tuesday, Hugh Kennedy, to recover the sum of £14 for wages alleged to be due for one year. It appeared that the plaintiff and defendant were brothers, and the point in dispute was whether the plaintiff had been hired at £7 a year or £7 per half year. During the examination of the plaintiff he stated that his brother’s house and land were frequented by witches, and that he had been employed to banish them. The witches did not belong to the “good people,” as they were evilly and maliciously inclined towards his brother, the consequence of which was that his land got into a bad condition, and his cows into a state of settled melancholy. There was a certain charm of great repute in the neighbourhood for putting to flight these unwelcome visitors; but it was only useful when properly applied and performed, and no other person but plaintiff could be got to undertake the serious task, and perhaps, of gaining their ill-will. The method pursued was this-Plaintiff locked himself in the house alone, all others leaving for the time being. He stopped up the keyholes, closed up the windows, stuffed up the chimney, and, in fact, left no mode of egress to the unfortunate witches, whom he was to summon into his presence to meet their well-merited doom. He then lit a fire and put a pot of milk on it, and into the pot he put three rows of pins and needles which had never been sullied or contaminated by use. These he boiled together for half an hour, during which time the witches had the satisfaction of nearly choking him with the smoke for his cruel conduct. In the interim he had a great conflict with them, and believed the potency of the spell to be all powerful, as they had never been seen or heard of since. The cows resumed their former healthy condition, and the land its wonted fertility. The case being one of a rather “complicated” nature, it was left to arbitration. Subsequently it was announced in court that the arbitrators had awarded to the plaintiff the sum of 10s. The plaintiff seemed to think that the services he had rendered, not

alone to his brother, but society at large, by the banishment of the “evil ones,” was deserving of a more munificent reward.-Dublin Express.’

Magical healing [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry II, vol. 9, Parish of Drumachose, J. Butler Williams, J. Bleakly, CW. Ligar, 1 May 1835.

(p. 126) ‘If a cow or heifer is “elf-shot”, a cure is effected by giving a drink of water, salt and oatmeal off a sixpence, 3 ha’pence or an entire horseshoe. Some give it off an “elf-stone”, as they call the petrified shells or sea urchins which are generally found through limestone districts of this county. Some rub the cow’s back 3 times against the grain of the hair (in the name of the Trinity) with holy water or some other cure prepared by old women or men who profess to be cow doctors. Some of the preparation is also put into the cow’s mouth, nostrils and ears.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim XIII, vol. 35, Parish of Templepatrick, James Boyle, November 1838.

(pp. 146-7) ‘Cure for the chin cough: take the child or send to a man whose wife’s maiden name is the same as her husband’s surname, and obtain from him a piece of bread, butter and cheese, and give it to the child, which will immediately prevent its coughing. Many applications have been made to Daniel Rea near Lyle Hill for this cure. Or by chance find a hairy worm, locally called godmother’s worm, and sew it inside a piece of scarlet cloth, and put round the child’s neck, will also prevent its severe coughing.

Or put the child 3 times under the belly of an ass and put over his back will prevent coughing. 2nd November 1838.’

Belfast Newsletter, 12 July 1839, Perils and Escapes of a Covenanter as Related by Himself.

In *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* for the present month a curious extract is embodied from an old and scarce volume entitled *A Rare-soul strengthening and comforting Cordial for Old and Young Christians*. It comprehends, amongst other matters, the biography of the author, John Stevenson, land-labourer in the parish of Daily in Ayrshire who died in the year 1728 and was originally dictated by him for the edification of his descendants:

Whilst I stayed at Cragidarroch, they had a child about three quarters old which my wife gave suck to. He fell into a violent fever which threatened to take away his life, in everyone's apprehension that saw him ... Wherefore I came about midnight and looked a little at the child who was in great trouble. Having thus viewed him for some time, I went out to the garden to beg his life from God. I went to the upper end of a long walk where there was a summer house or seat with a hedge about it and there I chose to offer up my supplications.

When I had for some time earnestly pleaded for his life, the terror of Satan fell upon me in such a way I immediately concluded the enemy was at hand and wanted to fright me from my prayers (for I was not ignorant of his devices) wherefore I resolved I would continue the duty. On my doing so I heard a noise on the other side of the hedge and it seemed to me like the groaning of an aged man. It continued for some time, yet I knew nobody could be there; for on the other side of the hedge where I heard the groaning was a great stank or pool. I nothing doubted but it was Satan and I guessed his designs but still I went on to beg the child's life. At length he roared and made a noise like a bull, and that very loud. From all this, I concluded that I had been provoking God some way or other in the duty and that he was angry with me and had let the enemy loose on me, and might give him leave to tear me in pieces. This made me entreat of God to show me wherefore he contended and beg he would rebuke Satan; but the enemy continued to make a noise like a bull and seemed to be roaring about the hedge, towards the door of the summer-seat, bellowing as he came along. Upon this, I got up from my knees and turned my face towards the way I thought the enemy was coming and looked to God still that he might rebuke him. After that he made a noise like a mastiff-dog in great trouble. This was not so terrible to me as the other. I got some courage and having a stick in my hand I resolved to stand still to see if he appeared to me in any shape but instead of that he went past into a place hard by, full of nettles, and there groaned as formerly. I heard him very distinctly and composedly, yet I thought I would go in and consider what could be the meaning of this dispensation.

Accordingly, I came in and whispered to my wife that I had been somewhat frightened. The old Christian woman that sat by, overhearing me, drew a bow at a venture and pierced between the joints of the harness, telling me to take care lest I had provoked God by the want of submission and being too much set upon the child being spared. No sooner had she spoken thus than I was convinced of my fault, yet could not think of the child's dying. I inclined once more to venture out – yea tried it a second time – but Satan, I then thought, was just ready to

devour me so I saw I need not go on to contend if I would not learn submission as to the child's life. Whereupon, I looked up to God and begged he would rebuke Satan and allow me to go and pray for the child's eternal salvation and I would not anymore beg his life. No sooner had I done this I went out with a holy boldness and had not the least trouble from Satan any more at that time.

The curative power of holy-wells [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Fermanagh I, vol. 4, Parish of Enniskillen, Lt. Chaytor, Oct. 1834.

(p. 71) 'In the townland of Carrickmacmea in Lord Belmore's demesne there were formerly 3 holy wells, much celebrated for their miraculous cures, called as follows: Tubber-na-suil or "well for the eyes", Tubberfaris or "Fergus's well" and Tubberphadrig or "Patrick's well". They have not been used lately as station wells, and consequently no care taken of them. The ground being marshy only two of them can be traced. The other (Tubberfaris) has totally disappeared, but its situation is pointed out not far distant from the other two. Tubber-na-suil is not easily found; Tubberphadrig is quite perfect, but dry in summer and has a small heap of stones placed near it.

The inhabitants state the about 40 years ago the wells were held in the highest reputation and visited by numbers afflicted with various diseases. The cures said to have been obtained by them are miraculous in the extreme. Individuals lame for years have there thrown away their crutches and recovered their strength. A man now living within a mile of the well states that his sister (through an affection of the smallpox) lost the sight of an eye, and that by advice a few years afterwards she had recourse to Tubber-na-suil. By using the water and performing the necessary stations she recovered the sight of the eye as perfectly as before! This he says he is ready and willing to attest upon oath. Such is the superstitious simplicity of the peasantry that these and innumerable such stories are believed as truths, though they are now discountenanced by the clergy of every denomination.'

Curative power of "elf-shot" [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry XI, vol. 31, Parish of Lissan, J. Stokes, 1836.

(p. 93) 'The ancient arrowheads of flint so frequently found are also much regarded for their supposed virtues in the cure of cattle. The following is the recipe: all the arrowheads that can

be got (the greater the number, the greater the virtue and the more expeditious the cure) are put into salt and water along with 3 ha'pence and a piece of silver, generally a sixpence. The cure is then performed by rubbing the salt and water on the cow with the hand, beginning from the top of the tail and proceeding to the nostrils. This is done three times, during which sundry prayers and charms are uttered. After this, part of the water is put into the mouth and nostrils of the cow and a part also at the foot of some fairy bush; the remainder is put behind the fire.

The people affirm that these arrows are shot from the Danish fort by the fairies and that they pierce the cow through the side. They pretend that they can show the print of the arrow. This superstition prevails as much among the Presbyterians as among the Roman Catholics. This part of the parish is poorer than the other.'

J.B. Doyle, *Tours in Ulster: A Handbook to the Antiquities and Scenery of the North of Ireland* (Dublin 1854).

(pp. 278-9) 'Another singular instance of superstition is that connected with what are called elf-stones. These are of two kinds, one are the flint arrow-heads, so common in the North, the other are a species of fossil echinus found in tilling the land; the former are called elf-arrows for the cure of cows or horses that are said to be elf-shot. When a cow gets sick and loaths her food, she is said to be elf-shot. Immediately, the owners send for the Elf-man or "man of knowledge". The fairies have the knack of wounding the animal internally *without piecing the skin* and it requires *much* skill to discover the wound. The elf-man proceeds to make his search for it by "running his finger along the flanks and sides and down the slip of the backbone". When his well-practised finger finds the hollow under the skin he at once proceeds to the cure. The following recipe was taken from the lips of one of the most celebrated of these worthies, on the road between Ballymena and Rasharkin and which the writer had corroborated in its leading particulars in many parts of the district.

Take as many elf-arrows as convenient, not less than three, the *cawm* of three pots (the sotty deposit upon the outside), three brass half-pence and a silver sixpence; pour a gallon of water upon these and place the pot over the fire and stir the whole up together till it boils: when cool enough to drink, let the cow be drenched three times a day in the name of &c. The cow, this doctored generally recovers; and if she dies it is because some mortal offence has been committed against the "wee-folk" by the owner or his retainers.

It was with difficulty he could be persuaded that his services were not required beyond the gratification of curiosity. Upon our giving expression to our incredulity, the good temper of the doctor was scarcely proof against the sight, notwithstanding the charm of a *fee* for his trouble; and gravely assured that his services had been required by many of the gentry including the Presbyterian minister of ... The elf-bullet is used as a charm to protect cows in the *byre*. When one of these has been picked up upon the land it is immediately suspended in the byre and under its protection the cattle are esteemed secure from the malignant pranks of the unfriendly elfs.’

GHOSTS [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Ghosts, or the earth-bound spirits of the departed, remain a part of the Irish supernatural that awaits detailed exploration.⁵¹ The literature relating to English ghost belief is far more extensive.⁵² In early modern England (1550-1750), ghosts did not haunt buildings, were not considered evil, were more likely to be heard than seen, and were not violent towards people or their possessions. They also usually had a message to relay or a moral purpose to fulfil, such as exposing a murderer. Ghost beliefs however were regarded as superstitious and unorthodox by the Protestant Churches, and up until 1660 ghosts were regarded by many of the educated elite as merely demons in human form. Poltergeists, or noisy, mischievous ghosts, did not become part of British culture until the late 1800s.⁵³

The below selection of documents could be used to make the case that in nineteenth-century Ulster there was a strong tradition of ghost belief; with haunted houses and poltergeists becoming discernible by the end of the century.

Spirit encounters [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Belfast Newsletter, 20 June 1845, A Ghost in Lisburn.

A degree of excitement, which for the present bids fair to outrival that produced by famous ghost of Cock-lane, has prevailed for the last eight or ten days among the lovers of the marvellous in Lisburn, in consequence of the pranks of some mysterious visitant which, in the waywardness that usually characterises the proceedings of such gentry, has taken a great fancy to disturbing the good folks resident of the neighbourhood of the fair-famed Piper Hill; but its most particular attentions are lavished on the house of a poor old woman, the doors and windows of which have suffered very much from its operations. Numbers of people nightly assemble to witness the proceedings and stones are seen dashed about with great violence – strange and unearthly noises are heard and various other indications of

⁵¹ Exceptions are: Andrew Tierney, 'Return of the Repressed?: "Haunted Castles" in Seventeenth-Century Munster' in *Eire-Ireland*, vol. 45, nos 3-4 (2010): 7-26; Raymond Gillespie, 'Popular and Unpopular Religion: a View from Early Modern Ireland' in Kerby A. Miller and J.S. Donnelly (eds), *Irish Popular Culture, 1650-1850* (Dublin, 1998): 32.

⁵² John Newton (ed.), *Early Modern Ghosts* (Durham, 2003); Owen Davies, *Ghosts: a Social History*, 5 vols (Pickering & Chatto, 2010); Todd Butler, 'The Haunting of Isobell Binnington: Ghosts of Murder, Texts and Law in Restoration England' in *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2011): 248-76.

⁵³ See Owen Davies, *The Haunted: a Social History of Ghosts* (Palgrave, 2007); Jo Bath and John Newton, "'Sensible Proof of Spirits" Ghost Belief during the Later Seventeenth Century"' in *Folklore*, vol. 117 (2006): 1-14.

supernatural agency seem to be at work; but as yet no one can discover from which quarter the missives are sent, or whence the unearthly sounds proceed. Of course conjecture, with all its aids and appliances, is not idle – and the most celebrated local astrologers and soothsayers have been consulted in order to bring unto light the mysterious eld [*sic*] connected with the unknown – while the love most people cherish for the wild and wonderful has not failed to lend a helping hand in rendering more graphic the real and imagined details of the affair. Some suppose the visitant to be no other than the familiar spirit of the Pope, which for several weeks past has been among its friends in Downing Street watching the progress of the Maynooth Bill – and now that the measure is safe, takes an occasional run over to the Green Isle to amuse itself at the expense at the denizens of Lisnagarvy. Others again argue that it is only the Devil himself returning from the Conciliation Hall! – while a still greater number of persons quietly attribute the whole affair of a worthy disciple of the latter gentleman – one who lives only a short distance from the scene of his labours. Be these opinions as they may, certain it is that some evil spirit of *terra firma* is busily engaged, to the great annoyance of a poor old widow and her immediate relatives; and it might be well, now that the farce has been repeated so often, for the police to keep a sharp lookout – they will soon detect the real author of this petty mischief – and perhaps a night or two’s confinement might break the spell of the magician, at least for a little season. The ghost still continues his pranks and the public are led to conclude that it is no less a personage than the ghost of Tom Steele, the “Head Pacificator” sent here by the great mendicant to divert our good folks attention off *Dan* who has made, as on former occasion, a private arrangement to “steal a march” to Belfast to canvass the electors, but quite incognito. Mr McEvoy dictates this as the most *rational* course, as he dreads the passage through Lisnagarvy.⁵⁴

Belfast Newsletter, 1 June 1847 – Court Report. Raising a Ghost.

Before Thomas Verner, Esq - An elderly woman residing in the neighbourhood of Peter’s Hill preferred a complaint against two of her “journeymen” – lads about thirteen years old – for leaving her employment without giving the customary notice. The juveniles lived in the house with the complainant and were engaged by her to drive an ass and cart through the town for the purpose of selling the “pure Cromac” to the inhabitants.⁵⁵ They were pale,

⁵⁴ The Maynooth Bill was introduced by Sir Robert Peel and proposed increasing the government grant to the Catholic seminary at Maynooth. Tom Steele was named thus by Daniel O’Connell and charged with quelling faction-fighting within the Repeal Movement. The Reverend Nicholas McEvoy was a prominent clerical supporter of the Repeal Movement.

⁵⁵ Water from the springs in the Cromac district of Belfast was exceptionally pure.

hungry-looking creatures with outward garments elaborately patched, yet notoriously ragged. Their voices were attuned to but one scale of notes and that was the counter-tenor they were wont to cry – “any water wanting”.

The Complainant inveighed in loud and indignant, but not in classic terms, of the treachery of the boys in absconding from her service, without saying as much as “by y’re leave”, which fact she proved.

Mr Verner – ‘Well, my lads, what do you say this charge?’

The latter of the boys looked at his worship, then at the proprietress of his favourite ass, sighed and proceeded – a tear in his eye and terror on his face – ‘Why, Sir, we were affeared to stay in the house for she could raise a ghost and kill us with fear.’ (Laughter).

Mr Verner – ‘Did she ever raise a ghost?’

Boy – ‘She did and frightened me to death so that I could not rise out of bed all the next morning.’ (Laughter).

Mr Verner – ‘What way did she take to raise the ghost?’

Boy, still greatly frightened – ‘When she wanted to raise *him*, she rattled the poker with a big noise between the bars of the grate and shouted in a quare long voice “Arthur-Arthur-Arthur-come-here.”’ (Loud laughter).

Mr Verner – ‘And you say you saw a ghost? I wish you could show me one?’

Mr O’Rourke – ‘It must be the ghost of a magistrate your worship means. I say, my good woman, *could* you raise the ghost of a magistrate? If you could, you would make a fortune for we require a second one here every day.’ (Roars of laughter).

Mr Collins to the boy – ‘Who was Arthur the ghost?’

Boy – ‘The master’.

Mr Collins – ‘Was he very cross when he was here, that you are so much afraid of him, when he comes from the other world?’

Boy – ‘He was the divil of a fellow.’ (Laughter).

Mr Verner to Complainant – ‘I must dismiss this case because you threatened to bring Arthur.’ (Laughter)

The boys brightened and left the court.

St. John Seymour and Harry L. Nelligan, *True Irish Ghost Stories* (Dublin, 1914).

(pp. 153-4) ‘We now come to the ordinary type, *i.e.* where a figure appears. The following tale illustrates a point we have already alluded to, namely, that the apparition is sometimes

seen by a disinterested person, and not by those whom one would naturally expect should see it. A lady writes as follows: "At Island Magee is the Knowehead Lonan, a long, hilly, narrow road, bordered on either side by high thorn-hedges and fields. Twenty years ago, when I was a young girl, I used to go to the post-office at the Knowehead on Sunday mornings down the Lonan, taking the dogs for the run. One Sunday as I had got to the top of the hill on my return journey, I looked back, and saw a man walking rapidly after me, but still a good way off. I hastened my steps, for the day was muddy, and I did not want him to see me in a bedraggled state. But he seemed to come on so fast as to be soon close behind me, and I wondered he did not pass me, so on we went, I never turning to look back. About a quarter of a mile farther on I met A. B. on 'Dick's Brae,' on her way to church or Sunday school, and stopped to speak to her. I wanted to ask who the man was, but he seemed to be so close that I did not like to do so, and expected he had passed. When I moved on, I was surprised to find he was still following me, while my dogs were lagging behind with downcast heads and drooping tails. "I then passed a cottage where C. D. was out feeding her fowls. I spoke to her, and then feeling that there was no longer anyone behind, looked back, and saw the man standing with her. I would not have paid any attention to the matter had not A. B. been down at our house that afternoon, and I casually asked her:

"Who was the man who was just behind me when I met you on Dick's Brae?"

"What man?' said she; and noting my look of utter astonishment, added, 'I give you my word I never met a soul but yourself from the time I left home till I went down to Knowehead Lonan.'

"Next day C. D. came to work for us, and I asked her who was the man who was standing beside her after I passed her on Sunday.

"Naebody!' she replied, 'I saw naebody but yoursel'.'

"It all seemed very strange, and so they thought too. About three weeks later news came that C. D.'s only brother, a sailor, was washed overboard that Sunday morning."

Séances [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

True Irish Ghost Stories, St. John Seymour and Harry L. Nelligan, (Dublin, 1914).

(pp. 214-5) 'A clergyman in the diocese of Clogher gave a personal experience of table-turning to the present Dean of St. Patrick's, who kindly sent the same to the writer. He said: "When I was a young man, I met some friends one evening, and we decided to amuse ourselves with table-turning. The local dispensary was vacant at the time, so we said that if

the table would work we should ask who would be appointed as medical officer. As we sat round it touching it with our hands it began to knock. We said:

"Who are you?"

"The table spelt out the name of a Bishop of the Church of Ireland. We asked, thinking that the answer was absurd, as we knew him to be alive and well:

"Are you dead?"

"The table answered 'Yes.'

"We laughed at this and asked:

"Who will be appointed to the dispensary?"

"The table spelt out the name of a stranger, who was not one of the candidates, whereupon we left off, thinking that the whole thing was nonsense.

"The next morning I saw in the papers that the Bishop in question had died that afternoon about two hours before our meeting, and a few days afterwards I saw the name of the stranger as the new dispensary doctor. I got such a shock that I determined never to have anything to do with table-turning again."

Vengeful Ghosts [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Cecil Frances Alexander, *The Legend of Stumpie's Brae*.

Born Cecil Frances Humphrey (1818-95), in Dublin, she later married a Church of Ireland clergyman, William Alexander, who later became bishop of Derry. Cecil Alexander wrote the well-known children's hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' and it is as a writer of children's hymns that Alexander is perhaps best-known. Alexander also had an interest in local history and stories, and in 'The Legend of Stumpie's Brae' she faithfully describes, in Scots idiom, the supernatural story of Stumpie's Brae, which recounts the tale surrounding the naming of Stumpie's Brae in Lifford, Co. Donegal.

'The Legend of Stumpie's Brae

Heard ye no tell o' Stumpie's Brae?

Sit doon, sit doon, young freen,

I'll mak yer flesh creep the day,

An' yer hair stan' on enn.

Young man it's hard to strive wi' sin
 An' the hardest strife o' a'
 Is where the greed o' gain creeps in,
 An' drives God's grace awa'.

Oh, it's quick tae do, but it's lang tae rue,
 When the punishment comes at last,
 And we would give the world tae undo,
 The deed that's done an' past.

Over yon strip of meadow land,
 And o'er the burnie bright,
 Dinna ye mark the fir-trees stand,
 Around yon gables white?

I mind it weel in my younger days,
 The story yet was rife:
 There dwelt within that lovely place,
 A famer an' his wife.

They sat the-gither all alone,
 Ane blessed the Autumn night.
 When the trees without, and hedge and stone
 Where white in the sweet moonlight.

The boys an' girls were gone doon all
 A wee till the blacksmith's wake;
 There pass'd ane onby the window small
 An' guv the door a shake.

The man he up an' open'd the door-
 When he had spoken a bit.
 A pedlar man stepped into the floor,
 Doon he tumbled the pack he bore,

Right heavy pack was it.

‘Gude save us aa’, saes the wife, wi’ a smile,
 ‘But yours is a thrivin’ trade’.
 ‘Aye, aye, I’ve wandered mony a mile,
 An’ plenty have I made’.

The man sat on by the dull fire flame,
 When the pedlar went to rest.
 Close to his ear the Devil came,
 An’ slipped intil his breast.

He look’d at his wife by the dim fire light,
 And she was as bad as he-
 ‘Could we no murder thon man the night?
 ‘Aye, could we, ready’ quo’ she.

He took the pickaxe without a word.
 Whence it stood ahint the door;
 As he pass’d in, the sleeper stirr’d,
 That never waken’d more.

‘He’s deid!’, says the auld man, comin’ back-
 ‘What o’ the corp, my dear?’
 ‘We’ll bury him snug in his ain bit pack,
 Niver ye mind for the loss of the sack.
 I’ve ta’en oot a’ the gear’.

‘The pack’s owre short by twa guid span’.
 ‘What’ll we do?’ quo’ he.
 ‘Och, you’re a doited, unthoughtfu’ man;
 We’ll cut him aff at the knee’.

They shortened the corp and the pack’d him tight,

Wi' legs in a pickle hay;
 Over the burn in the sweet moonlight,
 They carried him till this brae.

They shovell'd a hole right speedily,
 They laid him on his back-
 'A right pair are ye', quo' the PEDLAR, quo' he,
 Sitting bolt upright in the pack.

'Ye think ye've laid me snugly here,
 An' none shall know my station.
 But I'll haunt ye far, an' I'll haunt ye near,
 Father an' son, wi' terror an' fear
 Til the nineteenth generation'.

The twa were sittin' the verra next night,
 When the dog began to cower.
 And they by the pale blue fire light,
 That the Evil One had power.

It had stricken nine, jist nine o'the clock,
 The hour when the man lay dead;
 There came to the outer door a knock,
 And a heavy, heavy tread.

The old man's head swam round an' round,
 The woman's blood 'gan freeze,
 For it was not a natural sound,
 But like some ane stumpin' o'er the ground
 An the banes o' his twa bare knees.

And through the door like a sough of air,
 And stump, stump, round the twa.
 Wi' his bloody head, and his knee banes bare

They'd maist ha'e died of awe!

The wife's black locks e'er morn grew white,
 The say, as the mountain snaws,
 The man was as straight as a staff that night,
 But he stooped when the morning rose.

Still, year an' day, as the clock struck nine,
 The hour when they did the sin,
 The wee bit dog began to whine,
 An the gaist came clatterin' in.

Ae night there was a fearfu' flood-
 Three days the skies had pour'd;
 And white wi' foam, an' black wi' mud
 The burn in fury roar'd.

Quo' she, 'Gude man, an' it's o'er the linn,
 And it's up to the meadow ridge-'
 'Aye' quo' the Stumpie, hirplin' in.
 And he gie'd the wife a slap on the chin,
 'But I cam' roun' by the bridge'.

And stump, stump, stump to his plays again,
 And o'er the stools and chairs;
 Ye'd surely hae thought ten women an' men,
 Were dancing there in pairs.

They sold their gear, and o'er the sea,
 To a foreign land they went,
 O'er the sea-but wha can flee,
 His appointed punishment?

The ship swam o'er the water clear,

Wi' the help o' the eastern breeze,
But the verra first sound in guilty fear,
O'er the wide, smooth deck, that fell on their ear,
Was the tappin' o' them twa knees.

In the woods of wild America,
Their weary feet they set,
But the Stumpie was there the first, they say,
And he haunted them on to their dying day,
And he follows their children yet.

I haud ye, never the voice of blood
Call'd from the earth in vain;
And never has crime won worldly good,
But it brought its after-pain.

This is the story of Stumpie's Brae,
An' the murderers fearfu' fate.
Young man, yer face is turned that way,
Ye'll be a gangin' the night that gate.

Ye'll ken it weel, through the few fir trees,
The house where they went to dwell,
Gin ye meet ane there, as daylight flees,
Stumpin' aboot on the banes o' his knees
It'll jist be Stumpie himself.'

Poltergeists⁵⁶ [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

The Cookstown Ghost

Belfast Newsletter, 16 November 1874, The Cookstown Ghost.

Cookstown has lately been singled out for the attentions of a visitor whose freaks and doings have caused no little wonderment and [illegible]. Were the time a little farther advanced the narrative of the manifestations which have so completely upset the ordinary tranquillity of this community might be embodied in a fairly exciting Christmas story. It would abound with mystery and weirdness and incomprehensibility. The story, however, would lack the orthodox moral; it would be wanting in an end; the inexplicable would remain unexplained, for the simple reason that at present it admits not of solution. The stranger has not yet made himself visible to any eye but his presence is too obtrusively indicated by uncanny acts to be either unnoticed or uncared for. The absolute identity of the unseen is, therefore, a matter of grave conjecture, public opinion being strongly divided as to whether he is a ghost, a spirit or simply an atom of depraved humanity indulging in a fanciful and certainly much-to-be-condemned form of amusement. According to all preconceived notions of ghostdom, a form from that land of shades should assume a spectral, faintly illuminated human aspect, having a peculiar predilection for the witching hour of midnight, “when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead”. Such is not the case in this instance, for in no shape or entity is our unquiet friend ever observable, while neither cock crow, the sun at noon day, nor the hush of twilight, exercise controlling power over his actions. If a ghost then he be, he undoubtedly has a dispensation freeing him from all the known thralldom of his kindred genus. By some, who have sufficient nerve and courage to become factious on the subject, it is asserted that a spirit has broken loose from the mystic storeroom of Mrs Guppy – one which disdains the further confinement of dark séances and the undignified monotony of table-rapping. There are others again who are quite incredulous and hem and haw and hint and declare that the thing is not so ghost-like or mysterious as it seems; that, in fact, if they just had their way, Cookstown would soon resume its wonted serenity and be no more troubled with this paradoxical invisible apparition. Whatever the agent may be, though, certain it is that the household selected for its scene of operations has been put to infinite pain and annoyance. And not all the sympathy and kindness and assistance of friends and neighbours are able to relieve them from their unwelcome guest, or prevent them from suffering unpleasantness

⁵⁶ For a readable history of this subject, see: Peter Maxwell-Stuart, *Poltergeists, A History of Violent Ghostly Phenomenon* (Stroud, 2011).

which seemingly trivial in themselves are yet perfectly torturing in their recurrence and strangeness. The unknown is of the most evil and malign disposition, with a well-developed tendency to destroy and to revel in mischief pure and simple. If it be a ghost or a spirit at liberty to wander “fancy free”, an unaccountable partiality is shown for one habitation and a very perverse propensity for interfering with the delf [sic], the cooking other domestic matters. In fact, the spirit seems most at home in the kitchen, as if it were the shade of some departed scullery-maid, whom “habit’s iron law” had compelled to return to earth, but whose sole remembered capacity was the smashing of the crockery-ware. The haunted house is situated on Old Town Hill and is occupied by a Mr Allen who carries on a respectable business as a grocer. If not exactly in the sere and yellow leaf, Mr Allen is somewhat stricken in years. Intelligent and candid in his walk of life, he has gained the esteem of all who knew him; and the fact that he should be the object of such bewildering occurrences, as have and are almost daily taking place, creates all the more commiseration, and a feeling very much akin to indignation in the town. The manifestations of something unusual and untoward first became noticeable some eighteen months ago. The phenomena were then merely confined to breaking the windows. It may be thought that there was nothing very extraordinary nor ghost-like in such a procedure, but there was. When several panes were broken and the how and means escaped attention, a strict watch was put upon the windows, but all was useless; the cause was still undiscoverable. Sometimes stones were used as the *media* but by whom or what nobody could see; and more frequently again the glass broke, apparently of its own accord. Even the frames at last to get abused, more especially at the rear of the house, and the strictest and most constant guard could make nothing of it. The house, by the way, is a small two-story building with three windows behind and the ordinary shop and front windows before. The yard is small and surrounded by a wall ten feet high from whence extend the open fields. All the glass at the back of the premises having been repeatedly broken, and every effort as protection avoided, one of the windows was barricaded with a shutter to which was affixed a bell in such a position that if the shutter were moved, the bell must ring. Men were also placed at each window with loaded guns so that it was impossible for any individual to approach without being at once observed and in their power. Notwithstanding this, a shutter was taken down, the bell simply noting the fact when it was accomplished and that in such a gentle, tinkling monotone as to be almost unheard. In front of the premises, glass was broken with the same security and freedom from observation. Fear now commenced to grow into serious alarm, which in no way decreased, as other incidents, equally, if not more bewildering in their character, became of daily occurrence. Bowls took a

fancy to rotate, with various degrees of swiftness, upon the tables and then, as if smitten with the same idea of self-martyrdom, shot off at a tangent, ending sharply and forever their symmetrical usefulness upon the floor. Coats, which formerly hung with all the staidness and propriety upon their respective pins, now shivered and fluttered, as if seized with an ague, and again expanded in all their proportions as if each were enveloping an invisible Falstaff or an aspiring Claimant. Hats too unto themselves wings and bodily flew away. In sooth [sic], the natural order of affairs in the house were completely deranged and the more agitated became the inanimate articles, the more excited became, naturally enough, the members of the family. Every conceivable project that could be devised for elucidating these mysteries failed utterly in pointing out a cause which could be understood. Even the potatoes boiling in a pot on the fire became mashed and leaped behind the fire. And when ten or twelve were entered for boiling, a tot up in a few minutes revealed the startling fact that several had altogether and accountably disappeared, though many pairs of straining eyes were watching with almost painful eagerness, every motion of the immovable pot. Latterly also, large stones, weighing on average about three pounds or three pounds and a half, have rolled slowly down the stairs, bobbing with leisurely ease from step to step. These have been sometimes damp and wet with clay, as if just removed from a ditch or roadway, and that other times, dry and clean as if preserved from the weather for a considerable space of time. No persons have been in the upper portion of the house where such events have happened and not the vaguest shadow upon which to found a belief in the collusion or complicity of any parties in the causing of them has been at all afforded. These manifestations will show the cruel and persistent manner in which Mr Allen and his family have been afflicted, though they are far from exhausting the minor details of a system of persecution as vexatious and hard to be borne as it is strange and unexplainable both in cause and result. The family consist of Mr and Mrs Allen, two sons and a daughter. One of the two male branches, a young man of twenty-two or thereabouts, resides constantly with his father and is said to be an apt student of the art of legerdemain. Rumour will insist on mixing him up with the occurrences, but they have been known to take place when he was away working on the farm. Mr Allen has ceased to accept or even to listen to any interpretation or explanation of the facts. He is not, by any means, a nervous man not superstitious in his way of thinking; but having seen these things occur, and being utterly unable to assert a reason for them, he would at the present moment, be an easily manipulated disciple of the most ardent spiritualist. The whole affair in its recital might seem quite a ludicrous matter, were it not for the very great pain suffered by those most concerned. That the people of the town are much excited by it and anxiously awaiting the *denouement* is

unquestionable. The usual morning salute in meeting a friend is now invariably accompanied by the query "Is all quiet at Allen's?" And not alone in Cookstown but in all the district for miles round the doings of the ghost are canvassed and criticised with the greatest interest. It has been shrewdly suggested that a Belfast detective might soon purge the premises of the spirit, but Mr Allen scouts the possibility of such aid as not only useless but absurd. Perhaps he is right; but in all human probability I think he is wrong. This being the market day the great topic was, of course, actively discussed and theories beyond number asserted each as the true and particular explanation of this whole business. Meanwhile the ghost is not yet laid, but more of him anon.

Belfast Newsletter, 19 November 1874, The Cookstown Ghos.t

To say that we have a ghost amongst us is, I think, not strictly correct as nothing, not even any of the shadowy forms flitting along through dark corridors and disappearing in a solid wall, or sinking suddenly into the ground, which is the stereotyped programme of all respectable ghosts, nor any other approved "appearance" through the medium of which such unwelcome visitors are supposed to show themselves to mortals, has yet been seen by anybody; but we are aware that an unseen agency is at work in our midst which defies all our efforts to unravel. We cannot even get a glimpse of a retiring figure in white, no blood-freezing noises; not even the rustle of an unseen garment; in fact nothing that is said to indicate or designate the presence of a spirit from the world of the "departed dead". Some think it is not a ghost at all but a conglomeration of atoms which became unmanageable in the hands of Dr Tyndall during some experiment in Belfast; but this of the matter is considered doubtful.

Clergymen, doctors, [illegible] churchwardens and businessmen of all grades and degrees of ability have tried their hand at lifting the veil but all with the same result, leaving the matter as mysterious as they found it.

The general impression just now seems to be that the manifestations as we have them, are the work of some satanic agency, evoked by some person or persons unknown; that the agent has now the whip-hand of his employer and things are to go on as present *ad infinitum* or till a more practised hand reduced him to obedience. That this notion is gaining ground is not to be wondered at, inasmuch as, of the hundreds of mysterious things which have happened, not the [illegible] remote clue has been found to connect a single one of them with any human

being; and the supposition that these were the result of human agency has long ago been discarded by the sufferers and is fast dying out in the public generally.

[Subsequent passage illegible]

During this time an [illegible] of apparel has been cut up into fragments, said to be valued for upwards of £60 – in one particular case to the amount of £4 10s. One time a new hat would be cut round and round and [?] lying out in the street a few minutes after having been used without the apparent possibility of any person having done it. Coats, trousers, vests, blankets shawls similarly destroyed without a shadow of suspicion resting on any person. This continued at intervals till within the last two months when the work of destruction assumed another form which brought it to public notice.

Belfast Newsletter, 23 November 1874, The Cookstown Ghost.

Thus far-famed unknown continues to hold its revels in the same scene and, from its activity, shows no symptoms of removing to greener fields or newer pastures but bids fair to hold its present locale strictly in accordance with the terms of its first announcement – namely for the space of a year and a day. By the way, this notice was affixed to the door of its habitation for the time being and consisted of a slip of paper on which the handwriting bore an unmistakable resemblance to the calligraphy ordinarily done by an expert human hand. Shortly after the appearance of this intimation, it would seem as if it had changed its ghostly mind, as a similar scrap of paper, fastened on the door of a house nearer the centre of the town conveyed the dismal tidings to the terrified occupants that it purposed taking up its quarters with them; but up to the present time the promise has not been redeemed. No doubt it will keep its word, and when cast abroad upon the world from its present abode will hold them in dutiful remembrance. A few days ago a circumstance, or to speak in spiritualistic language, a manifestation occurred which some imagine confutes the idea of a ghost altogether. A wearing coat and a pair of boots were locked up for the night; to make certain of their perfect safety for the next day's use, as far as lock and key could guarantee it. When produced in the morning and examined, no marks of their having been tampered with were apparent. The owner, as any other person would do, I presume, thoughtlessly laid one of his boots by his side on the floor while he drew the other on, but lo! When he lifted it again, the upper part was cut away. The coat had been thrown on a chair to wait its turn, but when taken up was found to be minus a sleeve. The inference from this is, that so long as anything is well

secured it is out of danger, or when it is out of reach of human hands, the ghost does not hurt it. But most people reason about it in this way. Any clumsy ghost could perform the mutilation at its leisure in a room by itself and secured against intrusion, but to cut and hack in broad daylight and in the twinkling of an eye, shows the exalted grade of the unearthly visitor. This is no skulking, cowardly ghost that is only fitted for the paltry hole and corner business but a chief among his fellows, a master of line, who could cut off an eyebrow and you looking at him without knowing that anything has happened.

The Royal Irish Constabulary imagined when the window-breaking commenced they would handcuff the delinquent, no matter in what form or what species. But, by some process of reasoning known only to themselves, they came to the conclusion that, so long as they wore the Queen's uniform, nothing would appear. Two of them consequently assumed a non-official garb and in the attire of a couple of inoffensive, innocent-looking peasants, took up their post under a tree in close proximity to the haunted ground, a soft, damp sod beneath their feet, and a clear, frosty night sky above their heads to await the hour that would perhaps immortalise them. Here they waited with the patience and persistency which characterise the race, from dark till the dreaded hour when beings beyond the ken of mortal knowledge are let loose on the earth to frighten sleeping humanity; but nothing offered itself to their fraternal grip. Nothing daunted, they kept their stand till cock-crow, and still nothing for the hungry handcuff, not even anything that "made itself air, into which it vanished". A very simple but, as it turned out, not efficacious plan was suggested by an old woman, to prevent the stones from making a promenade of the stairs. To effect his desirable object she affirmed that it was only necessary to reverse the operation – namely by throwing one of them up again, when she hoped it would vanish into the air at the top of the stairs – a preliminary incantation, of course, preceding the performance. Some party, however, who disbelieved in the virtue of the charm prepared warm work for her by heating the stone, and the instant she touched it she declared it was not five minutes out of the pit. The rest of the work remains unfinished.

Meanwhile, up to the time I write the work of destruction proceeds as vigorously as ever, setting at complete defiance all efforts to discover the cause. A slight rustle is heard in the sitting-room and it is discovered that a pair of window curtains is destroyed, as if a handful had been torn from the middle of each. A hat is laid down, and in a few minutes it is found with the brim out through the band, and torn away on each side. A pair of boots is missing and discovered in the garden, hacked into pieces. The natural consequence of the continuance

of this miserable business is that people seem to be relapsing into old superstitious actions of a hundred years ago. Old ghost stories that used to entertain our grandfathers when they were children are revived and circulated, and children run from the deepening gloom of the evening and take up their stations in the chimney corner. Only a short time ago such books as “Cornelius Agrippa” were supposed to have become completely obsolete, and, indeed, when mentioned at all, their existence at any time was by many considered extremely doubtful;⁵⁷ but now it is somewhat astonishing to see the numbers of hard-featured, squint-eyed old fellows who appear in town, and not only admit that they have seen the book and read it, but even profess to know by means of how the ghost might be laid by the heels. They confidently say it is evidently some person very young in the science of spirit rapping, who though successful in evoking the spirit, has not sufficient experience to compel its return to the precincts of its own dominions.

The small party who still stick to the opinion that other than ghostly agencies are at work are getting into disrepute and the feeling is strengthening that it is unsafe to jest about so serious a matter or make any remarks derogatory to the character of the depraved spirit. In the face of this, nevertheless, the chairman of a meeting, consisting of nearly one thousand individuals a few nights ago had the temerity to state publicly that if he had possession of the house for one week, he would undertake to purge of its present visitor. Yet the manifestations are so confounding on the one hand, and the disposition to shrink from the belief that any wicked man may carry out a scheme of revenge by raising up a spirit from the land from whose bourne, it is said, no traveller returns, that another section of the community are just on the balance, ready to denounce their formerly cherished opinions, or to see them confirmed beyond dispute. Hence the great interest felt in the issue of the present unparalleled proceedings in this part of the country.

Belfast Newsletter, 5 December 1874, The Cookstown Ghost (an interview with Mr. Allen).

A snug parlour, a fine fire of ash-wood, a capacious easy chair, promptly wheeled round for the adventurous visitor were surely rather agreeable realities to find in the abode of shades. What would come next? The next thing was apologies for the absence of a lamp. I now

⁵⁷ Born in Cologne in 1486, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa worked as a physician, theologian and legal expert and wrote books on the occult, the most influential of which was arguably, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* ... (1531). Agrippa’s writing influenced English, elite magical practitioners such as John Dee.

ventured to remark that I saw by the papers their lamp had been broken but that I was cautious in believing all I saw in them, owing to the tendency reporters had of exaggerating.

“You may well say that”, he rejoined. “There’s reporters and there’s scoffers and as long as I able to keep them out, they’ll not get in her; for you, mem, it’s a pleasure to talk to you and I’ll just call my wife down, she will be proud to you”. I made my acknowledgements to all this civility and trusted I was not trespassing on their time. As I took the surroundings, they were submitting the broken lamp for my inspection and [illegible] busy repeating what he called the marvellous events that had transpired. She asked would I look at the lace curtains. I looked at them and observed that the holes were the same as scissors would make at any time. “Yes, mem”, she hastened to say, “that was the very part that surprised me”. “It was yourself that put the potatoes in the pot the time there were some missed?” “Oh, yes, with my own hands and it was me that tied the lid down with a string all round the pot; and when I went for to open the lid, says I, now I’ll just see if they’re all there and when I looked what would have uv it but uv my eleven pratus not one had I but six, that was five tuk. James there see’d me out them in”. James corroborates this statement. She then goes on to tell “that pratus had been often tuk and put at the back uv the fire and that, when somebody said they would do the fowl, they were afterwards conveyed to the field”[sic]. He now tells how one evening they were at worship and a copy of Kitte’s Bible was pulled down with a tug and threw on the floor. “I looked at her”, he says, “not to mind for she was always nervous when they begun”. After showing me the mutilated boots and hat, the broken delf, windows [?], he drew from his pocket a most voluminous correspondence from sympathising and enlightened spiritualists. One gentleman had pointed out the similarity between Wesley’s visitations and his, Wesley’s family being frequently disturbed at worship in the same way, and he seems flattered by the comparison. He was also strong in mediums, papers of “Daybreak” and “Moonshine” &c. and I thought, as he quieted the “marvellous” from them, what a most miserable cause that requires to be propped with such results as I had before me. In alluding to the reports connected with their son, the father admitted he was not all they would wish him to be, but none but scoffers, he declared, would impute some marvellous events to him; while his mother cried out there was no such a book as the “Black Art” in the house, and her son had never read “Cornelius Agrippa” in his life. I thoroughly believed her. I asked them why they never tried the simple plan of putting anyone in charge of the house while they retired from it for a while. He declared he would rather let Providence settle al for him. In the next sentence, however, he told of two men, strong in mysterious lore, whose aid he had

called in; the first had not succeeded but the other he thought would manage it. I said that was delightful and that I heard before of certain plans to lay the devil. “Just so, mem, and if I dare divulge it you would know all”. I could hardly repress laughing, I was so diverted as I felt my my notebook safe in my pocket, and thought of the strenuous efforts made to get in by a certain paper not far off. And now, having endeavoured truthfully to repeat what I heard and saw. I think those who have followed the unprejudiced by dogmas and untrammelled by superstition will begin to infer the whole thing may, perhaps be accounted for without either magnesian lights or the more conservative blue blaze. I returned to my hotel to find myself a heroine with my landlady and to receive many warm invitations back to Cookstown. *Fere libenter nomines id quod volunt credunt* – Men willingly believe what they wish to be true.

Belfast Newsletter, 30 November 1874, The Cookstown Ghost

If ghosts can “pale”, the shades of Mr Giles Scroggins and Mrs Veal must perform that involuntary act in view of the supernatural manifestations reported to have taken place at Cookstown in the North of Ireland. The current number of the *Spiritualist* contains a long account of the freaks played by some “unknown power” in and upon a house of business there situate, and of the abortive attempts which have been made by the Royal Irish Constabulary to discover the perpetrators of mischief rather above the ordinary range of practical jokes. The narrative consists of a series of reports which have appeared in the *Belfast Newsletter*, the property of Mr Henderson, Mayor of Belfast, who recently entertained a very hospitable fashion the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

The editor of the *Spiritualist* recommends the appointment of a scientific committee to investigate the matter and gives special reasons – some of them obviously sarcastic and ironical – why Professor Tyndall, Dr Carpenter, Professor Clerk Maxwell, Colonel Lane Fox, Professor A. Herschell, Dr Andrews, Professor Everett, Professor George Busk and the Mayor of Belfast should be nominated for this grave office of inquiry.⁵⁸ His own explanation of the facts is contained in the following astute commentary –

⁵⁸ John Tyndall was an Irish Physicist and President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS). The others named here are also luminaries of the Victorian scientific community. William Carpenter was a former president of the BAAS. James Clerk Maxwell and Professor J. D. Everett were both noted physicists. Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers was an anthropologist and archaeologist. Professor George Busk was a leading naturalist; Thomas Andrews was Professor of Chemistry at Queen’s University, Belfast. Professor Alex Herschell was a renowned astronomer.

“The narrative fits in with others of a like nature. Only a few weeks ago we recorded some similar occurrences in America and Mr William Howitt once published a pamphlet full of authenticated cases of stone-throwing by spirits. Two or three years ago we printed an account of stone-throwing by spirits at Peckham in which case windows were broken over and over again, in broad daylight, under the eyes of the police. It is pleasing to see that the narrative speaks well of Mr. Allen and his family, for not only are plenty of similar disturbances on record, but in ignorant communities unjust suspicions against the chief sufferers have sometimes taken root; only a few weeks ago we published how similar disturbances took place in the presence of a poor scared child who happened to be a medium; consequently, the poor little girl, to escape persecution, threw herself into the river in the attempt to drown herself. Sometimes these manifestations are attached to places rather than to persons; the place is then said to be “haunted” and in several cases, on inquiring into the history of immediate locality, it has been discovered that a crime has been committed on the spot. We would not advise anybody to form a spirit circle in the house, since a person possessing incipient medium-ship might be injured by developing it near low influences. It might or might not be safe for fully-developed mediums to go there; their own spirit guides should first be consulted as to whether they would be able to protect them from the power in the house. The simplest plan for Mr Allen to adopt is, when they are rolling stones about, to ask them to give one knock for ‘no’, three for ‘yes’ or to give raps at particular letters when he calls over the alphabet. Then ask them who they are and what they want. They should be dealt with kindly and the investigation be carried out in a most serious and not a flippant spirit, for communion between the two worlds is a very serious thing. Among experienced spiritualists, it is very generally believed to be a law that ‘the lower the spirit the greater its power over common matter’. The lowest spirits sometimes use their power mischievously at their own idle pleasure and sometimes use it for good purposes, under the guidance and instruction of higher and better spirits by which good work they gradually raise themselves and by working off their sins take a place in spirit life, in accordance with the universal law of eternal progression”.

Belfast News Letter, 24 February 1890. Shooting at a Ghost: An Extraordinary Story.

Our Portadown correspondent writes—A ludicrous incident took place in Edenderry the other night. It appears that since the dead body of a woman was discovered in the River Bann a few weeks ago the boathouse has been haunted, and the inhabitants of Francis Street and Foundry Street terrified to such an extent by the nightly visits of the “boathouse ghosts” that they were

actually afraid to come out of doors after dark. Indeed it is said that they contemplated removing from that quarter of the town altogether, and leaving it in possession of what they believed to be the spirit of the departed woman. But the tricks of the “boathouse ghost,” like the Drogheda ghost, and nearly all other ghosts, seem to have been harmless, consisting chiefly in tinkling the windows, kicking the doors of the houses in Francis Street, and otherwise annoying the occupiers. It seems to have taken such delight in playing these pranks on the Foundry Street people that it went on parade every night a few minutes after eleven o’clock. About the hour mentioned it is stated to have been seen crossing the river from Francis Street, and entering the boathouse. But it was somewhat later on Saturday night, the 15th of the present month, that the incident I am about to relate occurred. The ghost was seen on that occasion standing on the water, right opposite the boathouse, by a man, who, after “eyeing” it from head to foot, and satisfying himself that it was really a ghost, proceeded to the house of a neighbour, and, having knocked him up, informed him that “she”—meaning the ghost—was “about the boathouse.” The neighbour hastily dressed himself. The first man just as hastily primed and loaded a Martini-Henry, vowing that he would “give her as much as would keep her from visiting that locality for a fortnight.” In a few seconds the two returned to the spot where a minute or two previously the ghost had been seen. It was still standing in the same place, and seemed to defy all Edenderry. “Keep quiet now,” said the first man, raising the rifle to his shoulder. “Be sure and take good aim,” whispered his neighbour, stooping as he spoke to see that the ghost would not move. The rifleman evidently took this advice, for he “covered” his object with a closeness and precision that would have done credit to any of the “crack” shots that took part in the Inkerman battle. No sooner had he fired than the neighbour exclaimed, “Begorra, it’s down!” The two then proceeded to pick up the remains of the ghost. “Don’t see any trace of it here,” remarked one. “It must be about here some place,” said the other, “for I took too good aim to miss it.” “Oh, you hit it right enough,” rejoined the first, “I saw it falling,” On a closer examination of the spot it was discovered that the “ghost” was nothing more or less than the reflection of the light from the bridge lamp on the side of the boathouse. During the past week several persons have tried to calm the fears of the Foundry Street people by endeavouring to persuade them that there is “no such thing as ghosts,” but all to no purpose. They maintain that it was not the bridge lamp which knocked at their windows and disturbed them from their slumbers every night during the past four weeks. Common sense argument, undoubtedly. The ghost must still be at large. Saturday night’s occurrence has made residents in the vicinity of the boathouse determined to

have their revenge, and the rifleman has promised “that if he gets his hands on the ghost he will never quit it while there is a spark of life in it.””

St. John Seymour and Harry L. Nelligan, *True Irish Ghost Stories* (Dublin, 1914).

(pp. 110-13) ‘The next case related by Professor Barrett occurred in County Fermanagh, at a spot eleven miles from Enniskillen and about two miles from the hamlet of Derrygonelly, where there dwelt a farmer and his family of four girls and a boy, of whom the eldest was a girl of about twenty years of age named Maggie. His cottage consisted of three rooms, the kitchen, or dwelling-room, being in the centre, with a room on each side used as bedrooms. In one of these two rooms Maggie slept with her sisters, and it was here that the disturbances occurred, generally after they had all gone to bed, when rappings and scratchings were heard which often lasted all night. Rats were first blamed, but when things were moved by some unseen agent, and boots and candles thrown out of the house, it was seen that something more than the ordinary rat was at work.

The old farmer, who was a Methodist, sought advice from his class leader, and by his directions laid an open Bible on the bed in the haunted room, placing a big stone on the book. But the stone was lifted off by an unseen hand, the Bible moved out of the room, and seventeen pages torn out of it. They could not keep a lamp or candle in the house, so they went to their neighbours for help, and, to quote the old farmer's words to Professor Barrett, "Jack Flanigan came and lent us a lamp, saying the devil himself would not steal it, as he had got the priest to sprinkle it with holy water." "But that," the old man said, "did us no good either, for the next day it took away that lamp also."

Professor Barrett, at the invitation of Mr. Thomas Plunkett of Enniskillen, went to investigate. He got a full account from the farmer of the freakish tricks which were continually being played in the house, and gives a graphic account of what he himself observed: "After the children, except the boy, had gone to bed, Maggie lay down on the bed without undressing, so that her hands and feet could be observed. The rest of us sat round the kitchen fire, when faint raps, rapidly increasing in loudness, were heard coming apparently from the walls, the ceiling, and various parts of the inner room, the door of which was open. On entering the bedroom with a light the noises at first ceased, but recommenced when I put the light on the window-sill in the kitchen. I had the boy and his father by my side, and asked Mr. Plunkett to look round the house outside. Standing in the doorway leading to the

bedroom, the noises recommenced, the light was gradually brought nearer, and after much patience I was able to bring the light into the bedroom whilst the disturbances were still loudly going on. At last I was able to go up to the side of the bed, with the lighted candle in my hand, and closely observed each of the occupants lying on the bed. The younger children were apparently asleep, and Maggie was motionless; nevertheless, knocks were going on everywhere around; on the chairs, the bedstead, the walls and ceiling.

The closest scrutiny failed to detect any movement on the part of those present that could account for the noises, which were accompanied by a scratching or tearing sound. Suddenly a large pebble fell in my presence on to the bed; no one had moved to dislodge it, even if it had been placed for the purpose. When I replaced the candle on the window-sill in the kitchen, the knocks became still louder, like those made by a heavy carpenter's hammer driving nails into flooring."

A couple of days afterwards, the Rev. Maxwell Close, M.A., a well-known member of the S.P.R., joined Professor Barrett and Mr. Plunkett, and together the party of three paid visits on two consecutive nights to the haunted farm-house, and the noises were repeated. Complete search was made, both inside and outside of the house, but no cause could be found. When the party were leaving, the old farmer was much perturbed that they had not "laid the ghost." When questioned he said he thought it was fairies. He was asked if it had answered to questions by raps and he said he had; "but it tells lies as often as truth, and oftener, I think. We tried it, and it only knocked at L M N when we said the alphabet over." Professor Barrett then tested it by asking mentally for a certain number of raps, and immediately the actual number was heard. He repeated this four times with a different number each time, and with the same result.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this particular case is at the end of Professor Barrett's account, when, at the request of the old farmer, Mr. Maxwell Close read some passages from Scripture, followed by the Lord's Prayer, to an accompaniment of knockings and scratches, which were at first so loud that the solemn words could hardly be heard, but which gradually ceased as they all knelt in prayer. And since that night no further disturbance occurred.'

Haunted houses [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Belfast Newsletter, 23 August 1850, The Radiant Boy.

It is now nearly fifty years since the late Lord Londonderry, the late Viscount Castlereagh, was, for the first time, on a visit to a gentleman in the North of Ireland. The mansion was such a one as spectres are fabled to inhabit. The apartment, also, which appropriated to Lord Castlereagh, was calculated to foster such a tone of feeling from its antique appointments, from the dark and richly-carved panels of its wainscot, from its yawning width and height of chimney, looking like the open entrance to a tomb, of which the surrounding ornaments appeared to form the sculptures and entablature, from the portraits of grim and severe-eyed women arrayed in orderly procession long the walls and scowling a contemptuous enmity against the degenerate invader of their gloomy bowers and venerable halls and from the vast, dusky, ponderous and complicated draperies that concealed the windows and hung with the gloomy grandeur of funeral trappings about the hearse-like piece of furniture that was destined for his bed. Lord Castlereagh examined his chamber. He made himself acquainted the forms and faces of the ancient possessors of the mansion as they sat upright in their ebony frames to receive his salutation; and then, after dismissing his valet, he retired to bed. His candles had not long been extinguished when he perceived a light gleaming on the draperies of the lofty canopy over his head. Conscious that there was no fire in the grate, that the curtains were closed, that the chamber had been in perfect darkness but a few minutes before, he presumed that some intruder must have accidentally entered his apartment; and, turning hastily round to the side from which the light proceeded, saw, to his infinite astonishment, not the form of any human visitor, but the figure of a fair boy who seemed to be garmented in rays of mild and tempered glory which beamed palely from his slender form, like the faint light of a declining moon and rendered the objects which were nearest to him dimly and indistinctly visible. The spirit stood at some distance from the side of the bed. Certain that his own faculties were not deceiving him, but suspecting he might be imposed on by the ingenuity of some of some of the numerous guests who were then visiting in the same house, Lord Castlereagh proceeded towards the figure: it retreated before him; as he slowly advanced, the form, with equal paces, slowly retired; it entered the gloomy arch of the capacious chimney and then sank into the earth. Lord Castlereagh returned to his bed, but not to rest: his mind was harassed by the consideration of the extraordinary event which had occurred to him. Was it real? Was it the work of imagination? Was it the result of imposture? It was all incomprehensible. He resolved in the morning not to mention the appearance till he should

have well observed the manners and countenances of the family. He was conscious that, if any deception had been practised, its authors would be too delighted with their success to conceal the vanity of their triumph. When the guests assembled at the breakfast table the eye of Lord Castlereagh searched in vain for those conscious looks, that silent communication between the parties by which the authors and abettors of such domestic conspiracies are generally betrayed. Everything apparently proceeded in its ordinary course: the conversation flowed rapidly along from the subjects afforded at the moment, without any of the constraint which marks a party intent upon some secret and more interesting argument and endeavouring to afford an opportunity for its introduction. At last, the hero of the tale found himself compelled to mention the occurrence of the night. It was most extraordinary. He feared that he should not be credited; and then, after all due preparation, the story was related. Those among the auditors, who like himself, were strangers and visitors to the house, felt certain that some delusion must have been practised. The family alone seemed perfectly composed and calm. At last the gentleman whom Lord Londonderry was visiting interrupted their various surmises on the subject by saying. "The circumstances which you have just recounted must naturally appear to be extraordinary to those who have not long been inmates of my dwelling, and not long conversant with the legends of my family; and to those who are, the event which has happened will only serve as the corroboration of an old tradition that has long been related to the apartment in which you slept. You have seen the Radiant Boy. Be content. It is an omen of prosperous fortunes. I would rather that this subject should no more be mentioned".

St. John Seymour and Harry L. Nelligan, *True Irish Ghost Stories* (Dublin, 1914).

(pp. 114-5) 'Another similar story comes from the north of Ireland. In the year 1866 (as recorded in the *Larne Reporter* of March 31 in that year), two families residing at Upper Ballygowan, near Larne, suffered a series of annoyances from having stones thrown into their houses both by night and by day. Their neighbours came in great numbers to sympathise with them in their affliction, and on one occasion, after a volley of stones had been poured into the house through the window, a young man who was present fired a musket in the direction of the mysterious assailants. The reply was a loud peal of satanic laughter, followed by a volley of stones and turf. On another occasion a heap of potatoes, which was in an inner apartment of one of the houses, was seen to be in commotion, and shortly afterwards its contents were hurled into the kitchen, where the inmates of the house, with some of their neighbours, were assembled.

The explanation given by some people of this mysterious affair was as mysterious as the affair itself. It was said that many years before the occurrences which we have now related took place, the farmer who then occupied the premises in which they happened was greatly annoyed by mischievous tricks which were played upon him by a company of fairies who had a habit of holding their rendezvous in his house. The consequence was that this man had to leave the house, which for a long time stood a roofless ruin. After the lapse of many years, and when the story about the dilapidated fabric having been haunted had probably been forgotten, the people who then occupied the adjoining lands unfortunately took some of the stones of the old deserted mansion to repair their own buildings. At this the fairies, or "good people," were much incensed; and they vented their displeasure on the offender in the way we have described.'

True Irish Ghost Stories, St. John Seymour and Harry L. Nelligan, (Dublin, 1914).

(pp. 36-9) 'A strange story of a haunting, in which nothing was seen, but in which the same noises were heard by different people, is sent by one of the percipients, who does not wish to have her name disclosed. She says: "When staying for a time in a country house in the North of Ireland some years ago I was awakened on several nights by hearing the tramp, tramp, of horses' hoofs. Sometimes it sounded as if they were walking on paving-stones, while at other times I had the impression that they were going round a large space, and as if someone was using a whip on them. I heard neighing, and champing of bits, and so formed the impression that they were carriage horses. I did not mind it much at first, as I thought the stables must be near that part of the house. After hearing these noises several times I began to get curious, so one morning I made a tour of the place. I found that the side of the house I occupied overlooked a neglected garden, which was mostly used for drying clothes. I also discovered that the stables were right at the back of the house, and so it would be impossible for me to hear any noises in that quarter; at any rate there was only one farm horse left, and this was securely fastened up every night. Also there were no cobble-stones round the yard. I mentioned what I had heard to the people of the house, but as they would give me no satisfactory reply I passed it over. I did not hear these noises every night."

"One night I was startled out of my sleep by hearing a dreadful disturbance in the kitchen. It sounded as if the dish-covers were being taken off the wall and dashed violently on the flagged floor. At length I got up and opened the door of my bedroom, and just as I did so an appalling crash resounded through the house. I waited to see if there was any light to be seen,

or footstep to be heard, but nobody was stirring. There was only one servant in the house, the other persons being my host, his wife, and a baby, who had all retired early. Next morning I described the noises in the kitchen to the servant, and she said she had often heard them. I then told her about the tramping of horses: she replied that she herself had never heard it, but that other persons who had occupied my room had had experiences similar to mine. I asked her was there any explanation; she said No, except that a story was told of a gentleman who had lived there some years ago, and was very much addicted to racing and gambling, and that he was shot one night in that house. For the remainder of my visit I was removed to another part of the house, and I heard no more noises."

A house in the North of Ireland, near that locality which is eternally famous as having furnished the material for the last trial for witchcraft in the country, is said to be haunted, the reason being that it is built on the site of a disused and very ancient graveyard. It is said that when some repairs were being carried out nine human skulls were unearthed. It would be interesting to ascertain how many houses in Ireland are traditionally said to be built on such unpleasant sites, and if they all bear the reputation of being haunted.”

True Irish Ghost Stories, St. John Seymour and Harry L. Nelligan, (Dublin, 1914).

(pp. 39-40) ‘In the year 1869 a ghost made its presence manifest in the house of a Mr. M— in Co. Cavan. In the daytime it resided in the chimney, but at night it left its quarters and subjected the family to considerable annoyance. During the day they could cook nothing, as showers of soot would be sent down the chimney on top of every pot and pan that was placed on the fire. At night the various members of the family would be dragged out of bed by the hair, and pulled around the house. When anyone ventured to light a lamp it would immediately be put out, while chairs and tables would be sent dancing round the room. At last matters reached such a pitch that the family found it impossible to remain any longer in the house.

The night before they left Mrs. M— was severely handled, and her boots left facing the door as a gentle hint for her to be off. Before they departed some of the neighbours went to the house, saw the ghost, and even described to Mr. Thompson what they had seen. According to one man it appeared in the shape of a human being with a pig's head with long tusks. Another described it as a horse with an elephant's head, and a headless man seated on its back. Finally a "station" was held at the house by seven priests, at which all the neighbours attended. The

station commenced after sunset, and everything in the house had to be uncovered, lest the evil spirit should find any resting-place. A free passage was left out of the door into the street, where many people were kneeling. About five minutes after the station opened a rumbling noise was heard, and a black barrel rolled out with an unearthly din, though to some coming up the street it appeared in the shape of a black horse with a bull's head, and a headless man seated thereon. From this time the ghost gave no further trouble.'

GENERAL SUPERNATURAL [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

This part of the Supernatural Reader covers a number of areas of the supernatural, including the Devil, love-magic, omens and fortune-telling. It also provides some general, contemporary rumination on popular belief by self-regarding, educated, urban and urbane commentators.

General [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Sarah Leech, *Address to Lettergull* (Taken from *Poems on Various Subjects*, 1828).

Born in the parish of Taughboyne, Co. Donegal, Sarah Leech (1809-c.1830) had a tough upbringing, particularly following the death of her father, when she was only three years old. Educated until the age of twelve, Leech spun thread to financially support her mother and family. A toilsome task, often for long hours, in poor light and damp conditions; spinning badly affected Leech's eyesight, and she developed rheumatism at a young age. Nevertheless, Leech is a poet of remarkable ability and spirit, who displays a propensity for satire, often responding to the poetic attentions of local patrons by employing a characteristic form of Ulster Scots 'levelling'. Her poem 'Address to Lettergull' (near Raphoe, Co. Donegal) represents a veritable hotchpotch of Irish and Scottish beliefs and folklore.

'Address to Lettergull

O Lettergull, weel may you fare,
 And usual broils ne'er vex you mair,
 That Providence may aye shew care,
 For ane and a',
 Shall ever be my earnest prayer,
 Tho' far awa'.

May barley on your braes still grow,
 And rough heads on your Craigen knowe,
 Wi' which to mak' a *rantin lowe*,⁵⁹
 When North winds blaw,
 And gear in plenty on you row,
 Tho' I'm awa.

⁵⁹ Pleasant blaze of colour.

May ruthless bailiffs ne'er be sent,
 To drive you for a back-gaun rent,
 But may your time in joy be spent,
 Without alarm,
 While rosy health and sweet contest
 Smile on ilk farm.

O that your kye or nowtes may ne'er
 Be taught Phil's* cauld poun' wa's to fear,
 But may you have guid country cheer,
 Wi' beef and meal,
 That shall continue thro' the year,
 And never fail.

**Phil, the St Johnston (Donegal) pound-keeper.*

May nae curst *carlin* or fell sprite,⁶⁰
 Wha ride on broom-stick nags by night,
 By *cantrips* carry off your right,⁶¹
 At morn or e'en,
 And *elf-shot stanes* your kye ne'er blight,
 By wounds unseen.

But tak' a kind advice frae me---
 O, tipple not the strong *maut bree*,⁶²
 Lest late in Mary's glen you see
 Some goblin sprite,
 Or hear the wailing sad *banshee*⁶³
 Howl thro' the night:

For Joyce and Simpson baith can tell,

⁶⁰ A witch.

⁶¹ Magical spells.

⁶² Malt/liquor, drink.

⁶³ Irish female spirit.

How they heard there a ghaistly yell;
 But what thro' fear those loons befell,
 Let them declare,
 And how they scamper'd off pell-mell---
 O, what a pair!

Poor silly *gowks*, they thought the cry⁶⁴
 Of Sawney, who lay hid hard by,
 Their boasted courage this to try,
 Was that of *Clootie*,⁶⁵
 That darklins came their haste to spy,
 When sent on duty.

But fare ye weel – may you ha'e claes,
 Wi' health to roam about the braes,
 And Guid preserve you a' your days,
 Frae Satan's reach,
 Is what the muse sincerely prays---
 Your's ---SARAH LEECH.'

Samuel Thomson, *November, To Damon* (taken from 'A Year in Twelve Fits', in *New Poems, on a Variety of Different Subjects*, 1799).

Samuel Thomson (1766-1816) was a schoolmaster and poet, known as 'The Bard of Carngranny', who counted Robert Burns, Robert Anderson and James Orr among his extensive Romantic-era, literary network of correspondents. Thomson frequently employs a learned, poetic persona to point fun at local folklore and superstitions, though the recurrence of these themes in his work suggests that Thomson is often on the other hand upholding and preserving the traditions and beliefs of where he lives.

'November, To Damon

Now hoary Winter, could an' keen,

⁶⁴ Fools.

⁶⁵ The devil.

Erects his winter'd tap ance mair;
 And, shivering owre the naked scene,
 Flouts ragged rustics unco fair;
 Wha, ne'ertheless, on Hallowe'en,
 About the hearth sae *trig* an' clean,⁶⁶
 Reckless o' frost, or sna, or rain,
 Agree to burn their *nits* again⁶⁷
 While fairies fleet their gambols play,
 Thro' mony an *eldritch* glen an' brae.⁶⁸

In pairs, before the ingle now,
 The mystic nits are laid alang,
 And presently they a' tak' lowe,
 And blink and burn, some right, some wrang
 (O, Superstition! crazy fool!
 Thin, thin is worn thy silly school;
 For Learning's soul-exalting ray
 Has rescued mankind frae thy sway
 Except at times, when rural glee
 Invites thee back to laugh at thee.)

The auld gude man, indifferent sees
 The pastime that he ance held dear;
 While younkers eye the dancing bleeze,
 Wi' counterfeited hope and fear.
 An' social graunie taks her smoak,
 Laughs wi' the lave, and clubs her joke;
 Gies her auld mou the youthfu' twine,
 *Waesucks, to think on a lang syne,*⁶⁹
 And tells how happy she has been,
 A-burning nits on Hallowe'en.

⁶⁶ Neat.

⁶⁷ Nuts.

⁶⁸ Ghostly, unearthly.

⁶⁹ A pity to think on old times.

O, Damon, while the minutes flee
 On silent wing, unfelt, unseen,
 Wilt thou again come down to me,
 And laugh at Folly's Hallowe'en.
 How thy auld wrinkled dow and mine,
 Wad sit and plot, and girn, and whine;
 And burn prophetic nits forsooth,
 Insulting age wi' *glaiks* o' youth!⁷⁰
 The L—d preserve us frae their clutches,
 The grey-beard, auld-smell'd, wither'd witches.

A social jug here waits my frien',
 And eke the heel o' an auld cheese,
 That's now as onie raddish *keen*,⁷¹
 And canna fail, I think, to please.
 Here, hid apart frae vulgar strife,
 And a' the din o' married life;
 While Friendship smiles upon our lot,
 And closer draws the mutual knot,
 We'll sit and crack till midnight hour,
 Then gae to bed and sleep secure.'

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim XIV, vol. 37, Parish of Carrickfergus, Lieutenant G. H. Mallock, April. 1832.

(p. 77) 'The lower class are very superstitious, in fact more so than in any other part of Antrim. The fishers are particularly superstitious and observant of omens. There is an implicit belief in witchcraft and charms, in fairies and banshees. Many will swear that they have seen the Devil: he usually appears here in the form of a black dog and on very dark nights.'

⁷⁰ Tricks.

⁷¹ Smooth.

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry III, vol. 11, Parish of Aghanloo, C. W. Ligar, J. Stokes, 15 May 1835.

(p. 26) ‘A horse nail is put into the horn of the cow to prevent an ill-eye or witching. A petrified urchin shell (called an elfstone) is suspended over the cow house door to prevent the cattle from injury by elf shooting. A gentleman who served with his majesty’s service as an officer in the army resided in this parish, was suspected and believed by the absurd inhabitants of Aghanloo to have what is called an evil eye (that is, a covetous disposition) so that whatever cattle looked upon if he went out fishing in the morning, they were seized with a disease and died. This misfortune, as it was thought, was known to himself. Information obtained from Matthew Irwin.’

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Londonderry XI, vol.31, Parish of Ballynascreen. J. Stokes, 1836.

(p.15) ‘Of the same stamp as the above is a legend current among them about a pesht or monster who, it seems, played the same tricks as the great serpent of Laignapieste. A puppy was once found in the wood of Doon by one of the parishioners, who brought him home. To his astonishment it grew up to be a pesht and forthwith began to devour all the cattle in the country. The alarm produced by this was so great that a reward was offered by the rulers, of all the country that could be seen at one view, to whoever would kill it. He was accordingly killed, letting fall in the chase sundry parts of his bowels in different parts of the country still pointed out. After all the killer was cheated in his bargain. They brought him up to Spellhoagh Gap, a place more than a thousand feet above the sea, but from which nothing can be seen but a barren boggy ravine. This specimen is a sufficient sample of the remaining legends of the parish.’

Omens [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim III, vol. 10, Parish of Kilwaughter, Lieutenant R. Boteler, Aug. 1833.

(pp. 117-8) ‘There is a holy well on the farm of John Beggs, Lowtown, a few perches left of the road leading from the castle to the park. The superstitious of all denominations still practise the system of tying rags on a thorn-bush over the well at May Eve, and also to cast pins into the well. Rags may still be seen tied in the bushes overhanging the well, and pins at the bottom of it. It is a small spring well of a triangular shape. There is a tradition connected

with it that any person coming to it, either to perform stations or otherwise, if the water of the well does not boil while they are there it is not considered a good omen, as some of the family will die before that day 12 months. Even Presbyterians believe this, but this practice is greatly abolished.’

The Devil [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Belfast Newsletter, 28 December 1830, The Devil's Courtship.

The Devil was sick and queasy of late,
 And his sleep and his appetite fail'd him;
 His ears they hung down and his tail it was clapp'd,
 Between his poor hoofs, like a dog that's been rapp'd
 None knew what the devil ail'd him

He tumbled and toss'd on his mattress o' nights,
 That was fit for a fiend's disportal,
 For 'twas made of the finest thistles and thorn,
 Which Alecto herself had gathered in scorn
 Of the best down beds that are mortal

His giantly chest in earthquakes heaved,
 With groaning corresponding,
 And mincing and few were the words he spoke,
 While a sigh like some delicate whirlwind broke,
 From a heart that seem'd desponding

Now the Devil an Old Wife had for his dam,
 I think none e'er was older,
 Her years – old Parr's were nothing to them;
 And a chicken to her was Methusalem,
 You'd say, could you behold her.

She remembered Chaos a little child,
 Strumming upon hand organs,
 At the birth of Old Night a gossip she sat

The ancientest there, and was godmother at
The Christening of the Gorgons.

Her bones peep'd through a rhinoceros' skin,
Like a mummy through its cerement,
But she had a mother's heart, and guess'd
What pinch'd her son; whom she thus address'd,
In terms that bespoke endearment:-

“What ails my Nicky, my Darling Imp,
My Lucifer bright, my Beelze,⁷²
My Pig, my Pug-with-a-curly-tail,
You are not well. Can a mother fail
To see *that* which all Hell see!

“O, Mother dear, I am dying, I fear;
Prepare the yew and the willow
And the cypress black; for I get no ease
By day or by night for the cursed fleas
That skip about my pillow”

“Your pillow is clean and your pillow-beer
For I wash'd 'em in Styx last night, Son,
And your blankets both and dried them upon
The brimstony banks of Acheron
It is not the fleas that bite, son

I wish my Nicky is not in Love –

“O, Mother, you have nick'd it
And he turn'd his head with a blush
Not red-hot pokers or crimson plush
Could half so deep have pricked it.

⁷² Beelzebub.

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim I, vol. 2, Parish of Ballymartin, James Boyle and T. C. Hannington, 4 February 1837.

(p. 11) ‘They are not quite so superstitious as the people of most of the neighbouring districts but still most of the old and many of the young people firmly believe in ghosts, fairies and enchantments. Many will swear to have seen the fairies, the devil (in the shape of a black dog or pig) and the wraiths of their friends before their death Respect is paid to old forts but not to the same extent as in most districts. Unfortunately for the fine old hawthorns which once flourished here, there was no respect for them and even the forts are now beginning to feel the sad effects of the march of knowledge.’

Banshees [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Belfast Newsletter, 12 December 1853.

The banshee, or white fairy, ranks amongst the oldest and most widespread of the popular fancies of Ireland. The popular superstition is, or rather, was, that certain families of ancient and true Irish descent, have attaché to them a female spirit, which appears only to announce the death of some one of the members.

At the breaking of the Irish rebellion of '98, there lived in the neighbourhood of Glenarm, in the county of Antrim, a family named Carroll, whose ancestry for more than two centuries had owned the farm which they had occupied as tenants at the period we write of. The United Irish Societies, rapidly expanded and ranked amongst their members most of the young and even middle-aged, men of wealth or local influence in the country. Many, however, kept from sharing in any of the hostile and threatening displays made by individual societies. Amongst these were the family of the Carrolls, the male members of which had joined the system soon after it had taken root in Ulster. The father, however, was a man of quiet temperament, and wisely kept himself and his two sons, Murtough and Patrick, from rashly avowing their connexion with obnoxious societies; and whilst privately contributing both counsel and cash to “the cause” did or said nothing which could expose him to the fury of the Camden spies.

So matters stood with the family about the middle of 1797. In the early part of that year. Murtough, the elder of the two sons, had been betrothed to the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, and it was arranged that their marriage would take place on the birthday of the bride – in August. Mary O’Neill possessed nearly all the graces of her countrywomen. Being an only

child and her father “well to do” above most of his class, she had received a fair share of such educational advantages as Glenarm could afford at the time, which, though not great according to our modern standards, were sufficient to give her a polish above girls of her rank in the neighbourhood, At the period we write of, she was in her twentieth year and in the full beauty of her developed womanhood, well deserved the name she generally went by – “the rose Glenarm”. Like Byron’s heroine, she belonged to the class of beauties

“Whose large blue eyes, fair looks and snowy hands
Would shake the saintship of an anchorite”

But *unlike* not a few of this heart-subduing sisterhood she had all the modest unconsciousness of her own attractions which gives to beauty its greatest charm. Leaving Murtough with all the gushing and characteristic fervour of her countrywomen, she was beloved in return with a devotion not less tender and impassioned; and as the time fixed on for the marriage approached, few evening passed in which the stars were not out and the moon shining down upon the lovers from their lonely walk in the sheltered, rocky gorge which led down from the Carroll’s house to the sea.

Midsummer had already past and the future plans of the young couple had been settled. Murtough was to go home to the house of his father-in-law and undertake the management of the farm which was ultimately to become his own. The brief interval of a month stood between them and the consummation of their happiness and they had already begun to count the days when the news reached Ulster that Wexford was in arms. This signal for action flew like lightning through the North and an immediate general rising was once resolved by the United Societies of Antrim and Down. Arms and all warlike stores had been long provided and the various districts “told off” to their respective leaders who now issued orders for all speedily to rally round the national standard. On the evening following the issuing of these orders, Murtough Carroll prepared earlier than usual to the customary meeting place with Mary among the rocks and sat down upon a grassy knoll to the base the calm, waveless sea rolled in in long, undulating ripples, as the tide turned upon the flow. The sun had already set behind the hills of Antrim and twilight was stealing in like a changeling spirit amid the glow of day.

The calm beauty of the scene, working upon Murtough's thoughts, had lulled him into a sort of dreaming reverie during which a confused series of mental dissolving views, as it were, passed in rapid and disorderly procession before him – Mary, his mother, marching pikemen and the town of Antrim being the chief objects in the foreground in these shadowy picturings of his mind. Evening had already deepened into the night – the clear bright light of a northern sky – when the sound of an approaching footstep roused him from his musings; he jumped up and in another moment Mary rushed round the angle of the rock and into his arms. The extreme paleness which overspread her upturned countenance attracted the quick eye of her lover whose already anxious mind instantly traced it to the same hurtful accident by which his fears had been accounting for her delay.

“Darlin’ of my heart, what’s wrong? Were you hunted and who dared to touch my own Mary? Och! Jewel of my sowl, won’t you spake to your Murotugh” he rapidly ejaculated as she lay heavily in his embrace without speaking and almost without breathing. Laying her gently down on the knoll he had risen from, he threw back the rich auburn curls which clustered round her temples and bared her face and neck to the light breeze which was now blowing softly in from the sea. In a minute or two the faintness passed off and she slowly opened her large, tearful eyes.

“Och, Murtough, Murtough, I saw her”, were her first words.

“Ye seen what? Who? *Collen machree*, aise my heart an’ say what’s wrong. Shure it’s this hour I’ve been waiting for you and thinking how I’d tell you the news”.

“What news?” she hurriedly asked, evading his question; “tell me what happened for I’m well now; but we had better walk about for the air’s getting chill here”. She took his arm and they turned down into their usual walk.

Not being much of a tactician, nor skilled in gradually “breaking” disagreeable news, Murtough plunged at once into the worse he had to tell, trusting to the after-chance of softening away the effect. Mary had long known of his being a United man and he had, therefore, only to communicate the intelligence which had reached his father’s that morning.

“Wexford’s up and the boys is ordered in. It was only this morning that Dickson sent round the word an’ in three days we’re to be ready for the field. That’s all *acushla*; but don’t be frightened for there’ll not be a blow. We’ll soon drive the *fogies* out of Antrim an’ then I’ll come back to ask the new scarf ye promised to work me with your own purty hands an’ to ask for somethin’ else foreby”.

“Oh! Murtagh, is this the news!” sobbed out Mary, as soon as her lips were freed from the long, lingering kiss with which her lover had endeavoured to strengthen his own, feeble argument against danger. The unexpected intelligence seemed at once to justify and confirm the sudden fears excited by the cause of but partially abated terror and she continued. “Sure, then, I was right and it’s for you she was cryin’. Och! Murtough, darlin’, I have seen the banshee.

Young Carroll shared sufficiently in the popular dread of such an appearance to accept Mary’s statement as quite explanation enough of her terror and with his mind already full of probable dangers before him hardly questioned her application of the warning. Sensible, however, that any admission of his fears would only confirm those of his mistress and add to the difficulty of reconciling her to his joining the insurgent army, he tried to convince her that she had been mistaken.

“The banshee, alanna, shure it’s somebody has been frightenin’ ye; but I’ll larn them to keep their jokes to themselves”.

“It’s no frightenin’, Murtough, for both saw and heard her plain enough. My father went to Larne this mornin’ and as he wasn’t home till late, I could not get away; so knowin’ you’d be waitin’, I hurried round to the near cut, by Biddy Callaghan’s, and just as I got to the top of boreen, I heard a low, mournful cry, ‘there’s Biddy again’ thinks I, ‘cryin for the poor Tarry’. But it stopped all at once and I heard no more of it till I reached the corner of your hay-yard when – the Lord save and keep us! - I saw the banshee herself sittin’ among the stacks and she wrung her hands and raised her lonely wail, as I came for’ard. Och! Murtough, she’s come to tell me of your death, and who’ll come fort your Mary when you’re gone”.

Murtough felt that any attempt to combat such direct evidence of the apparition would be useless and therefore, withheld his intended suggestion that Mary had merely heard, as she at first thought, Widow Callaghan mourning for her son who had been lately drowned among the rocks. As no other plausible solution of the difficulty occurred to him, he fell back upon the only remaining means of calming his sweetheart's fears by removing the application from himself.

“Shure enough, then, ye've seen her an' there's no denyin' it's before a death; but ye know my ould uncle Andy's nearly done an' we can't expect he'll last much longer. So cheer up, *mavourneen*; and only hope he'll not put off the weddin' and then, heaven rest his sowl when it takes him”.

Mary readily caught at this interpretation of the preternatural warning though her fears for her lover made her slow in considering it beyond reasonable dispute. Murtough's assumed cheerfulness, however, helped considerably to weaken her apprehensions and she answered –

“The Lord send that it may be no worse and preserve you from danger that's comin'; but you mind your own dhrame, and you know a weddin' is always death”.

“Musha, Mary, but ye'll kill me before my time” he answered evasively, and with a forced smile, for he had thought of the dream too; “but whisht, *aroon* an' don't be the laistr uneasy; afore a month's past an' gone wid the blessin' of God, ye'll be laughin' at yer fears! And he put an end to further discussion on this unpleasant subject by another *argumentum ad labia* which told with better effect upon Mary than any appeal of a sterner logic. The lovers then turned homewards, conversing as lovers mostly do, when approaching marriage –

“the bloom of blight of all men's happiness” is the theme. When they reached the scene of the banshee's appearance, Mary tremblingly pointed out the spot which, with but ill-concealed unease, Murtough said, left no doubt as to some member of his own family being the object of the anticipatory keen. After accompanying her to her father's, he returned home full of the most unpleasant presentiments, which, however, the busy but secret preparations of the following day greatly helped to dissipate. From the silence of his family it was evident that they had seen or heard nothing on the subject of the *she fragh's* premonitory appearance and cry; and he thought it best to say nothing on the subject lest it might excite useless alarm.

He again met Mary before the first rays of an early moon appeared over the far-off hills of Arran and they lingered till she was up in the heavens – Mary exaggerating the dangers before her over and he was vehemently protesting there would not be a blow. On the following evening, the united men in the Glenarm district met at a preconcerted rendezvous to receive their final orders for the public muster on the coming day. Murtough Carroll and his brother were amongst those who formed the first complement of men for the field, his father remaining at home for the protection of the family.

We need not chronicle the fortune of these early victims of the Irish rebellion. Dickson, the leader, was seized before his men took the field; and McCracken assumed the command thus vacated. Under him, the division to which young Carroll belonged, strengthened by those of Templepatrick and Killead marched upon the town of Antrim which was then held by the Royal forces. The struggle was one of the most sanguinary which marked the horrors of '98 and ended in the defeat of the United troops who fled in the wildest disorder before the desolating pursuit of the British cavalry.

Many of them were thus taken and hanged on the spot without court-martial or any other form of trial and their bodies left to bleach in the summer sun as a warning to malcontents. The implication of the two Carrolls in the attack on Antrim was well known and large rewards were offered for their arrest – dead or alive – in common with that of some other individuals of respectability in the same neighbourhood. Patrick, the younger of the two, succeeded in making good his escape to Down where the insurgents had taken the field in large force under Monroe. Murtough intended doing the same but lingered in concealment near Glenarm for the purpose of seeing his mistress before he left. Exactly a month had elapsed since their last interview, a month of exquisite anguish and apprehension to Mary and of great hardship and danger to her lover. His presence in the neighbourhood was known and threatening proclamations warned the inhabitants against affording shelter or sustenance to him or any of the known rebels; whilst detached parties of yeomanry scoured the country, entering and searching at all hours still whatever house they chose. Notwithstanding this vigilance, young Carroll had managed to keep up communication with his family, and though them with Mary; but till this time it had not been thought safe for the latter to risk a personal interview. On the evening, however, before the day which was to have been their wedding day it was privately arranged that they should meet the following evening as the increased vigilance of the yeomanry rendered Murtough's remaining in the neighbourhood impossible.

Accordingly, at the appointed hour, she cautiously set out for the hiding-place of her lover, which was cave not far from the scene of their conversation when last introduced to the reader. In the interval of darkness which occurs between an autumn sunset and the rising of the moon, she stole away unobserved, as she thought, from her father's by a circuitous pathway to the shore. Every flutter made amongst the rocks by the home-returning seagulls and gannets filled her with alarm; and it was with a palpitating heart that she reached the refuge of her anxiously expectant lover. We need not attempt to describe the wild extravagance of delight with which Murtough clasped her to his heart, forgetting his own danger and thinking only of presence; nor the passionate burst of mingling grief and joy with which she received his embraces. Such a scene can be better imagined than described. In the very midst of their mutual rapture, young Carroll suddenly let go his hold of Mary and bounding from her, seized his gun which he had placed against the rock. A month's "keeping" had given him the ear of an Indian and he fancied that he had heard a low, momentary sound outside. He darted out, followed by Mary in an agony of terror. For a minute he saw nothing to excite alarm; but a cloud passing from before the newly risen moon exposed to view a party of soldiers stealthily creeping round the jutting base of a rock about fifty yards from where the lovers stood.

"In, Mary, in; back into the cave and as you value my life and your own, neither move or speak", hurriedly exclaimed Murtough in an earnest whisper, and pushing her back into the shelter of the rock. But the injunction was needless and unheard for she had already fainted in his arms. He laid her gently down on the mossy sward which carpeted the entrance to the cavern and turned to rush out.

"Surrender in the King's name or I'll fire", shouted the serjeant of yeomanry, who had been the first to reach the mouth of the narrow passage and now levelled his carbine at Carroll.

"Never, by the holy Virgin!"

The man fired and the bullet splintered the rock within a few inches of where Murtough stood. He bounded forward and, knocking over the serjeant with a blow of his musket, gained the open space in front of the cave. In a moment he saw that escape was all but impossible. The only means of flight was by a narrow winding ridge which connected his place of concealment with rocks landward and over this dangerous pathway the other soldiers were

now hastening. To present his musket and fire at the foremost was the work of a moment. The man reeled and fell over the edge, knocking heavily against the sharp and jutting rocks which broke his fall into the sea many fathoms below. The momentary confusion and pause which followed, enabled Carroll to hide behind a clump of furze which half-concealed the entrance to the cave where Mary and the serjeant yet remained insensible. With a yell, the soldiers rushed to the spot where the object of their pursuit had fired from and, finding him gone, dashed into the cave. The discovery of the supposed dead body of the serjeant for a minute delayed their search, and, in this second confusion, Murtough sprang from his hiding place towards the rocky ledge which the yeoman had just crossed. The action was seen and pursuit was instant; but bounding with the speed of a chamois amid its native hills, he had reached the narrow and dizzy path when one of a shower of bullets shattered his arm. He fell, but clutching the rock with his uninjured limb, had almost regained his footing, when a second shot struck him in the side and he rolled over the giddy eminence, like his own victim, a mangled corpse into the sea.

Before another moon shine upon the scene of her lover's death, Mary O'Neill was sleeping in her grave.

Fortune-telling [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

O/S Memoirs, Parishes of County Antrim III, vol. 10, Parish of Islandmagee, James Boyle, April 1840.

(p. 41) 'In a house in Balloo strange noises have been heard, and in several parts of the parish the fairies have been seen and their music has been heard. Many old women practise card-cutting and cup-tossing, telling fortunes and interpreting dreams. One old woman named Mary Haddock of Carnspindle townland is remarkable for her ability and dexterity in these acquirements.'

Belfast Newsletter, 3 April 1863, Armagh Petty Sessions – A Fortune Teller.

Daniel McGahan charged a scheming-looking fellow named Owen Magill, on whose hirsute appendage the snows of time had left their impressions with obtaining money under false pretences. The Plaintiff lives in Edenderry and it appears from the information sworn by him that the prisoner entered his house some few days ago and pretending that he was a dummy and gifted with supernatural knowledge, he proposed to spae the fortunes of the family. With

proverbial rural credulousness, McGahan, a simple rustic, accepted his offer. The communication was carried on by writing, now with chalk and on the bellows, an *airy* medium, and now with a pen on a slate. There was considerable mystery enshrouding the revelation, but the fortune of the McGahans cropped up sufficiently plain to show that there was a letter containing £6 in the Benburb post-office from America, which they only could legally obtain. The fortune-teller claimed five shillings as his fee which was paid and was considered a moderate charge, as he alleged he often got 10s [shillings] for his services. McGahan went to Benburb, presented himself at the post-office, demanded his letter; but either his friends in America had forgotten him or the fortune-teller was at fault, for his name and address were not in the office. Crestfallen, he returned to his home a disappointed man. The only resource he had was to punish the scamp by whom he had been deceived and he summoned him accordingly. In his examination he stated that he expected the letter and would not swear that it might not yet arrive. Under these circumstances, his worship did not think the charge could be sustained as the letter might yet come and dismissed the complaint. It might be added that Magill is a professional spaeman and to his other qualification annexes the very unenviable one of having, on two or three occasions, tuned approver against his father as the murderer of a man near Crossmaglen.

Love magic [\[Back to Contents\]](#)

Frances Brown (1816-79), *The Legend of May Eve*⁷³ (taken from *Lyrics and Miscellaneous Poems*, 1848).

The poem by Frances Brown is called ‘The Legend of May Eve’ (1848), and demonstrates her fascination with the ‘superstitions’ and folklore of her native Ulster.

‘The Legend of May Eve

OH! the moonlit Eve of the lovely May

That comes with song and flowers,

We have marke’d, as year by year it lay

On the valleys green and the mountains gray,

⁷³ In the north of Ireland, there was a popular superstition regarding a small wild herb, known to the peasantry by the name of “Yarra;” it was said, that if gathered and placed under the pillow of any unwedded person of either sex, on the night of May Eve, the sleeper should see, in a dream, his or her destined partner; but it was added, that the experiment had always some unfortunate result – and one of the numerous tales of this description is the subject of the following poem.

And the bright streams winding far away
 Through wild and woodland bowers-
 How died the faith of Earth's elder day,
 That fill'd its silent hours
 With prophet-dreams, and spells that clung
 To the bright May Eves when we were young!

But the young of our hills go forth no more
 To seek, at the fall of night,
 The flower that brings to the maiden's dream
 His glance and form, who yet may claim
 Her heart's high place though they never came
 Before her waking sight!
 And there comes from our youth a sad old theme
 Of that blossom's mystic might-
 Yet the girl was fair, and young, and gay,
 Who sought her love on the Eve of May.

The youth she saw had the glance and brow
 Of a dark and alien race,
 Who knelt at altars deem'd unblest'd-
 But never from the maiden's breast
 Might pass the track of that shadowy guest;
 And on each wanderer's face
 She cast a glance that knew no rest,
 In its silent search to trace
 The beauty of the brow, whose beam
 Had lighted her unforgotten dream.

The time of the sweet May Eve return'd-
 But the storm-clouds linger'd long
 Around our northern cliffs, for night
 Had heard the roar of the tempest's might;
 And a far-bound bark, as the dawn grew white,

Went down, where high and strong
 The billows beat o'er the sea-crag's height-
 And their foam-crests bore along
 One burden of their buried store
 To that maiden's feet on the wreck-strewn shore!

Oh! fair was that form in death,
 Though born in a land that loved not ours-
 But the tale of her haunting dream was told,
 For well she knew its matchless mould.
 Though the wave o'er her memory's depth that roll'd
 Was voiceless, as the towers
 Of silence raised in the Eastern wold,
 Where fall the sweet spring showers
 In vain, and orient sunsets shed
 Their splendours on the Persian's dead.
 We know not how that dark wave wore
 Its channel to the young heart's core;
 But the maid grew sad by her native streams,
 And she never smiled except in dreams!

OH! the moonlit Eve of the lovely May
 That comes with song and flowers,
 We have marke'd, as year by year it lay
 On the valleys green and the mountains gray,
 And the bright streams winding far away
 Through wild and woodland bowers-
 How died the faith of Earth's elder day,
 That fill'd its silent hours
 With prophet-dreams, and spells that clung
 To the bright May Eves when we were young!

But the young of our hills go forth no more

To seek, at the fall of night,
 The flower that brings to the maiden's dream
 His glance and form, who yet may claim
 Her heart's high place though they never came
 Before her waking sight!
 And there comes from our youth a sad old theme
 Of that blossom's mystic might-
 Yet the girl was fair, and young, and gay,
 Who sought her love on the Eve of May.

The youth she saw had the glance and brow
 Of a dark and alien race,
 Who knelt at altars deem'd unblest'd-
 But never from the maiden's breast
 Might pass the track of that shadowy guest;
 And on each wanderer's face
 She cast a glance that knew no rest,
 In its silent search to trace
 The beauty of the brow, whose beam
 Had lighted her unforgotten dream.

The time of the sweet May Eve return'd-
 But the storm-clouds linger'd long
 Around our northern cliffs, for night
 Had heard the roar of the tempest's might;
 And a far-bound bark, as the dawn grew white,
 Went down, where high and strong
 The billows beat o'er the sea-crag's height-
 And their foam-crests bore along
 One burden of their buried store
 To that maiden's feet on the wreck-strewn shore!

Oh! fair was that form in death,
 Though born in a land that loved not ours-

But the tale of her haunting dream was told,
For well she knew its matchless mould.
Though the wave o'er her memory's depth that roll'd
 Was voiceless, as the towers
Of silence raised in the Eastern wold,
 Where fall the sweet spring showers
In vain, and orient sunsets shed
Their splendours on the Persian's dead.
We know not how that dark wave wore
Its channel to the young heart's core;
But the maid grew sad by her native streams,
And she never smiled except in dreams!