

Folk Tales of Fermanagh

Dark Stories From Across the County

Séamas Mac Annaidh & Carlo Gébler

Illustration by James Killian



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by

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Illustrations by James Killian

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To and for the people of Fermanagh

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*“An art is better than a heritage
Nothing can beat a story
Who brings a tale takes two away”*

RACIAL PROVERBS, CHAMPION,
LONDON 2ND EDITION, 1950, PAGE 61.

Introduction

1

On 4 September 1607, partly because of government pressure on their seigneurial rights, and partly because they feared the conspiracy they'd been hatching with Spain had been discovered, Ulster's most powerful Gaelic figures, Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone, Rory O'Donnell, earl of Tyrconnell and Cúchonnacht Maguire, lord of Fermanagh, together with their followers, shipped out of Rathmullan, Co. Donegal and sailed to the continent, never to return to Ireland again.

The exodus of these Gaelic leaders opened the way to the plantation of Ulster by Scottish and English settlers who were loyal to the English crown, along with (an essential part of the colonization programme) the shiring of Ulster.

At the time these events got underway, in the area that would become known as County Fermanagh, the dominant language was Irish. This changed, of course, because the planters brought an alternative language as well as (which the language amplified) a new social and political order which displaced the proceeding one.

Over the following centuries in County Fermanagh (the process didn't happen immediately) the Irish language went into decline as Irish speakers gradually switched to English, a knowledge of which was essential for socio-economic advancement, and, in lockstep with that linguistic process, the culture and social practice encoded in the language gradually faded. By the twentieth century English had become the dominant language in County Fermanagh.

However, despite the loss of Irish and the values it carried, and the shift to English, it would be wrong to assume that by the twentieth century Irish social and cultural practice (mostly dating from the post-plantation period) was entirely vanquished. It wasn't. In memory and tradition (oral and musical mostly) it lingered on.

2

The Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) was established in 1935 in what was then the Irish Free State, with a brief to collect and classify Irish folklore materials in English and Irish. In its early days the Commission was more active in the Irish Free State than in Northern Ireland, which was part of the United Kingdom. Most of the Irish Folklore Commission's County Fermanagh material dates from the 1940s, the 1950s and the 1960s, most is in English and most has its roots in the post-plantation period.

In the IFC archive there are currently, we estimate, several thousand pages of Fermanagh related material (out of over half a million pages by the way) and it is from these that we have extracted most (not all, most) of the stories (subsequently re-written) that comprise this book. Most of the Fermanagh-sourced content is in English so for the Irish stories we have mostly used stories which also have Irish counterparts which can be heard in other parts of Ireland; so the versions given here may be read as restorations rather than translations. No stories appear twice; you will find no translations of the Irish content into English or vice versa. This, rather, is a book of stories, some in Irish, some in English. For readers who want to know more about the provenance of the material, these details are contained in the preamble that proceeds each tale. All the preambles are in English.

3

In order to write this book we read – we would like to think all but let's settle for most – we read most of the County Fermanagh material that the Irish Folklore Commission holds. Most of the material came from those whose confessional orientation was Catholic and therefore most of the material reflected back to us (albeit in complicated and unexpected ways) the baleful truth that for this constituency post-plantation, economic and social conditions were highly constrained and life was extremely difficult. But then, how could it be otherwise? When you've been deprived of wealth, power, capital, land, rights and status, as the Catholic

population were, this will inevitably and properly be reflected in all your iterations, especially those that are cultural, or folkloric.

4

The reason for making this book is not to draw attention to our unhappy history. The reason for making this book is to present (almost in the manner of an impresario) a selection of the best of the folk material that pertains to Fermanagh, most of which is in the Irish Folklore Commission. And it is our hope that as a result of reading this book readers will acquire a sense of the shape of the local tradition and its special virtues and come to agree, with us, that it deserves to be more widely celebrated than has been the case until now.

Séamas Mac Annaidh & Carlo Gébler

Note about the preambles that proceed each tale

Where the source is a published text, details of the text are supplied.

If the source material for a story came from the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) and was gathered in the usual way (i.e., it was gathered in the field by a collector from a source) then, for each title, readers can expect to find the following:

- (1) the Irish Folklore Commission file number
- (2) the page number
- (3) the name of the collector
- (4) the name of the subject who gave the tale and where they are from
- (5) the date when the original material was gathered.

However, where material came to the Commission from an enthusiast, then for each title readers can expect to find the following:

- (1) the Irish Folklore Commission number
- (2) the page number
- (3) the writer's name
- (4) the date when the material was submitted.

In addition to details about provenance, these notes also contain comments on the stories themselves.

The initials of the author of the note come at the very end.





The Golden Apples of Lough Erne

The Golden Apples of Lough Erne, *from* The Story of Conn-Eda or The Golden Apples of Lough Erne, *trans. from the original Irish by* Nicholas O’Kearney, J Russell Smith, London, 1855.

A strange, nearly incoherent tale about autonomy and control that follows the story of a hero whose life is ordered by others though he doesn’t know it, and that meshes familiar tropes (a wicked stepmother, a perilous quest, and helpful part-human, part-animal creature) with archaic, bloody, sacrificial material that harks back perhaps to an ancient horse cult. The reveal at the end, from the brother of the Firbolg king, which overthrows the reader’s and Conn-Eda’s understanding of everything that’s happened up to this point, reminds me of similar moments in modern dystopian fiction when hidden causes and purposes are illuminated and the hero realises that though he had always thought he has agency, in fact he has none. In my version I have scrupulously maintained the original’s eccentricities and inventions but tidied up the end a bit.

Long ago in the west of Ireland there was a place where the waters teemed with fish, the woods were full of game and the grasslands were so lush the livestock, after they'd eaten the grass, would flood the ground around them with their milk. It would just spontaneously pour out of them and spill across the ground. A traveller, passing through this land and seeing white puddles of milk in every direction he looked, named the country 'The happy isle of the west' because of what he could see.

The king at the time this name was given was Conn and his queen was Eda, a British princess. She fell pregnant and, as was customary, the royal druids examined her.

"You carry a boy," said the arch druid when they were done, "and, as he'll combine the best qualities of both parents in his person, we recommend he carry both his parents' names."

The boy was born and his parents named him Conn-Eda.

Queen Eda had no more children and died a few years later. Conn mourned his queen for a year and a day and then, as he was advised to do, he married the arch druid's daughter.

Conn's second wife bore Conn first a son, then several more children after him. One day, inevitably, the queen's thoughts turned to the future of her children. "When Conn dies Conn-Eda will be king," she said to herself, "whereas my son will be a nobody and his siblings will be nobodies too. Well, I'll have to change that."

The queen began to spread slanderous stories about Conn-Eda thinking that when Conn heard these he'd turn his son out and name their son as his heir.

Her libels, however, hadn't the effect she'd hoped.

"They're just lies," said Conn, when he first heard them, "made-up by some fool who wants to put a wedge between Conn-Eda and I."

The queen had an understanding with one of Conn's servants – for a small fee he repeated back to her everything Conn said – and this fellow duly reported these remarks back to her. The queen

wasn't best pleased by them.

"Seeing as my slanders aren't working," she said, "I'll have to try the enchantress."

Early the next morning she and her retinue visited the enchantress in her cabin.

"I want my step-son Conn-Eda removed from this kingdom," she explained, "and my son installed in his place."

"I won't help you," said the enchantress, "until you've agreed my reward."

"Name it," said the queen.

"First," said the enchantress, "you fill the circle that I'll make with my arm with wool, and then you fill the hole that I make with my stick with red wheat."

"You want wool and wheat," said the queen, "you can have wool and wheat, as much as you can manage."

The enchantress went to the door of her cabin, put her hand on her hip, and stuck her elbow out to make a circle.

"Your attendants," she said, "will feed wool in through my arm until they've filled my cabin right up to the roof."

Wool was fetched by the cartload and, once her cabin was stuffed full, the enchantress led the queen's party to her brother's cabin. She climbed on the roof and made a hole in the thatch with her staff.

"Your attendants will pour red wheat through this hole," the enchantress said, "and they won't stop until the wheat is touching the underside of the thatch."

Wheat was fetched by the cartload and her brother's cabin was stuffed.

"Right," said the queen when not a grain more could be got in, "seeing as you've got your reward, now you tell me how I can get what I want."

The enchantress produced a chess set.

"Here's what you do. You take this set and go to Conn-Eda and you say, 'How about a game of chess and who ever wins can impose their condition or *geas* on the loser?' He won't be able to

resist your challenge, and he won't be able to win the first game, either, not playing with these pieces. But you're only guaranteed to win that first game, don't forget that.

"Then, having won, you impose these terms. He must fetch to you, within a year and a day, from the Firbolg king who lives at the bottom of Lough Erne, the king's three golden apples, his black horse, and his hound, Samer. If Conn-Eda fails to bring these back, and don't worry he will fail, then he goes into exile, for life, and should he ever come back here, even for a day, he forfeits his head. So whether Conn-Eda picks exile or death, he won't be king. He can't be. He won't be here. But there will still have to be a king and, because there is no other choice, that will be your son. Your son will be king."

The queen found Conn-Eda and challenged him. "A game of chess," she said, "and the winner has the right to impose their condition or *geas* on the loser." Conn-Eda agreed. They played and the queen won, exactly as the enchantress had said she would.

Now it only remained for the queen to pronounce her *geas* and Conn-Eda's fate would be sealed. However, so great was her anxiety to have her step-son completely in her power, she forgot what the enchantress had said – that she could only guarantee the queen would win the first game – and she challenged Conn-Eda to play a second thinking that way she would crush him completely. They played the second game and this time her step-son won.

"Ah," said the prince, "since you won the first game you can impose your condition first."

"You must fetch me," she said, "within a year and a day, from the Firbolg king who lives at the bottom of Lough Erne, his three golden apples, his black horse, and his hound, Samer. If you fail you go into exile, for life, and should you return here, even for a day, your head comes off."

"Well," said the prince, "now my turn. See that tower?"

He pointed at the tower, close to where they were, jutting into the sky. It was capped with a roof that ended in a point.

"Until I return," he said, "you'll sit on the point at the top and

eat nothing except grains of red wheat that you spear with that pin that you have in your hair. And if I don't return at the end of a year and a day, then you're free to come down."

"Oh, don't worry, I'll be down," thought the queen, "because you will fail. Didn't the enchantress say so?"

A ladder was fetched and Conn-Eda watched as the queen, in her rich robes, climbed to the top of the tower and settled herself on the point. Then he turned away. Now he must begin his quest but the first thing to do, he decided, before he actually set out, was to ask his best friend, the druid, Fionn, for advice on the best way to proceed.

He went to Fionn's house and was let in.

"Your mood is low," said Fionn, seeing Conn's long face. "What's wrong?"

Conn-Eda related the whole story about the chess game and the *geas* he'd been set, while Fionn listened, nodding and pressing his lips together in a way that suggested he wasn't surprised by what he was hearing.

When Conn-Eda finished he expected Fionn would say something but he didn't.

"Have you no advice for me?" said Conn-Eda.

"Not right now," said Fionn. "But tomorrow, I'll go off to consult my god and when I come back I will."

The druid went away at dawn. He returned in the evening and called Conn-Eda outside.

"I find," he said, "you've been bound by a *geas*, a condition, designed to destroy you. No person on earth could have advised the queen to impose it except a certain enchantress from Lough Corrib, who of course is the sister of the Firbolg king of Lough Erne.

"There's nothing," he continued, "either I or the god I adore can do to help you. To get the help you need you must go to the one who knows all the things that are past, all the things that exist in the present, and all the things that will exist in the future – the bird with the man's head. You won't find him on your own, of course. You'll have to be taken to him and over here is the one who will

do that ...”

The druid waved at a shaggy little bow-backed horse tied to a nearby post.

“Once he’s got you to the bird with the man’s head, and he will, you give him this and you will tell him your story. Then he’ll help you.”

Fionn pressed a black stone into Conn-Eda’s hand. The prince thanked his friend and mounted.

“Drop the reins,” said the little horse.

Conn-Eda let go the reins and the little horse carried him – it took seven nights and seven days – to the mouth of a cave inside which sat the bird with the man’s head.

“What have you brought me?” called the bird with the man’s head.

Conn-Eda held up the stone.

“Throw it and then tell me what you have to tell me.”

Conn-Eda flung the stone into the mouth of the cave and then told his story, from the chess game to the *geas* to his conversation with Fionn. When Conn-Eda had finished the bird with the man’s head bent down and used his long red tongue to lift the black stone into his mouth. Then the bird with the man’s head flew to the top of the cliff above the cave and dropped the stone into a hollow up there where he kept his precious things.

“See the flat stone to your right?” the bird with the man’s head called down.

Conn-Eda did.

“Underneath it you’ll find an iron ball and an iron cup. Take them. Your horse will tell you what to do then.”

The bird with the man’s head spread his wings and vanished into the clouds. Conn-Eda dismounted and lifted the stone away. There was the cup and the ball. He took them and re-mounted.

“Put the ball in the cup and throw it,” said the little horse.

Conn-Eda did as instructed. The ball landed, rolled a few feet, stopped. The little horse ambled after it and, as he drew closer, the iron ball of its own accord started to roll on showing the way

to go, and it led them, over the course of another seven days and nights, all the way to Lough Erne, where it disappeared into the lake, leaving Conn-Eda and the little horse on the shore staring at surface of the dark peaty waters.

"Reach into my ear, said the little horse, "the one on the left."

Conn-Eda put his hand in. There was something in there all right. He pulled and out came a little bottle with a stopper in its neck and a wicker basket.

"Don't lose those, you'll need them," said the little horse. "Now the hard part begins."

The little horse stepped down the bank and into Lough Erne and then he kept walking, going deeper and deeper, until he and Conn-Eda were completely submerged and the surface was way above their heads. In front of them was the iron ball that had rolled in earlier and, as soon as they were close, it started to roll again of its own accord, leading the way, just as it had done on dry land. The little horse, with Conn-Eda on his back, followed where it led all the way across the lough and right up to the footings of the stone wall deep underwater that marked the far shore.

"We're across," Conn-Eda said. He looked up and saw three giant snakes, admittedly slightly blurry-looking because he was seeing them through water, sitting on top of the stone wall.

"Open the basket," said the little horse. There's meat inside – three pieces. Take them out. When I leap up you fling a piece into the mouth of each snake."

Once Conn-Eda had the meat pieces ready the little horse leapt out of the water and into the air. The snakes on the wall lifted their heads and opened their jaws ready to strike. One, two, three ... Conn-Eda lobbed a piece of meat into each pink mouth. The jaws closed and the snakes dropped their heads down and the little horse flew over them and landed on the far side of the wall, where once again they found the iron ball was waiting for them. It began rolling of its own accord and the little horse walked after it.

Now, as they went, it grew hotter and the air grew murkier, and in the distance a mountain appeared with flames and hot coals

pouring from the top.

“Hold on,” said the horse.

The horse flew up through boiling air, passed over the mountain’s fiery mouth, and then dropped to the earth on the other side, again just short of the ball. It rolled and the horse followed and the air went from hot, to lukewarm, to cool.

“Still alive?” asked the horse.

“Yes,” answered the prince, “but scorched.”

“The salve in the little bottle will fix your burns.”

The prince unstopped the bottle and tipped some of the heavy, oily liquid it held onto his blisters. They vanished and his skin was as whole as it had been before he was burnt. The ball tracked on. The horse followed. A city loomed ahead, with high walls and a gate flanked by towers out of which flames poured.

“Now for what really is the hardest part,” said the little horse. “If you reach into my right hand ear you’ll find a knife. Take it out and cut off my pelt. Then drape this over yourself like a cloak and it will get you in through the gate and once that’s done, you can then pass in and out as often as you like and fulfil your *geas*.”

“However, in return for my skin, I ask the following: when you finish flaying me, don’t leave my remains for the birds to devour. Sprinkle what’s left in the medicine bottle on my corpse and bury me.”

“I won’t do what you ask,” said the prince. “I won’t skin you.”

“But without my hide on you can’t get into the city,” said the little horse, “and if you can’t get in you’ll fail your *geas* and have to go into exile. Do you want that? No, of course not. So, you’ve no choice. You have to do as I say.”

“Did you know from when we set out,” said Conn-Eda, “that I’d have to skin you in the end?”

“I did, yes,” said the little horse.

“And did Fionn know when he sent us off?”

“Oh yes,” said the little horse. “Of course he knew.”

The prince, realising he had no alternative but to do what he’d been told, reached inside the little horse’s right ear and began to

feel around. He found the knife and pulled it free.

And once it was out, the knife started to move. Conn-Eda's fingers were still around the handle, so the knife was leading his hand rather than his hand moving the knife.

The knife stabbed its point deep into the animal's neck and then cut a deep gash across the throat from out of which gushed the little horse's blood – warm, red and thick.

Next thing, the little horse collapsed under the prince, wriggled at his feet and died. The knife in Conn-Eda's hand didn't stop though. It twitched and dug itself into the carcass and, still leading Conn-Eda's hand, cut a deep careful line right around the horse's body and then, with the point, peeled the pelt off completely.

Seeing the pelt was now completely cut away and knowing it was his way into the city, Conn-Eda pulled it over himself quite forgetting he had promised to sprinkle what was left in the medicine bottle on the little horse's remains and then bury them.

He set off. He walked across the plain. He went through the gates and passed into the city. Then he remembered.

"On no," he said, "I've forgotten to do what I promised the little horse I'd do."

He returned to the bloody mound of muscle and vein, bone and sinew. A flock of ravens were pecking at the remains. He threw the pelt down, drove them off, unstopped the bottle and poured what was left inside onto the carcass. The flesh began to fizz and smoke and pulsate. He wondered if it was about to dissolve and vanish but instead it metamorphosed into a man with skin and hair.

"What are you?" the prince asked.

"Surely you mean, 'Who are you?'" said the man who'd appeared. "I'm the brother of the Firbolg king and the enchantress is our sister, and a few years back I was transformed into the little horse who carried you here. It was Fionn who did that and when you went to consult him he was forced to give me up. You broke that part of the spell. However, I'd never have got my human shape back if you hadn't slit my throat and flayed my corpse. So thank

you.”

“If you say so,” said Conn-Eda, though he only said this for the sake of having something to say. He wasn’t sure he actually believed any of what he was hearing.

“You don’t have to worry, it’s all true,” said the man, as if he’d read Conn-Eda’s mind. “This was all planned. My sister, the enchantress, was the start of it. When the queen, your step-mother, came to her, she saw chance had gifted her a way to set me free. So, she set the queen going, suggested the chess game and the rest, and the queen set you going, and then you went to consult Fionn, as my sister knew would happen, and finally here we are and I *am* free. Thanks to you I’m restored to what I was. Otherwise I’d still be a little horse.

“Now, for you are still bound by the queen’s conditions, we will enter the city and my brother will give you what you came for.”

The Firbolg king’s brother lifted the pelt and wrapped it about himself like a cloak. Then, together with Conn-Eda, he entered the city. His brother, the king, was delighted to have his brother back and he was delighted to welcome the visitor his brother had brought with him too. Celebrations that lasted months followed and then Conn-Eda realised he must get home before a year and a day elapsed, or he would have failed his *geas*. He broke the news that he must go. The Firbolg king presented his visitor with the three golden apples, the horse and his hound, Samer.

“On your way back you needn’t fear the burning mountain, the hissing snakes, or the journey underwater along the lake’s floor,” said the king. “That horse of mine will get you home safe and sound and what’s more, he’ll get you get back here to us in a year’s time and every year thereafter, if you so wish.”

Conn-Eda made the journey home without mishap. As he approached his father’s compound he could see his step-mother sitting on the point of the tower, her robes tattered and shredded after a year in the open.

“I’m just an hour short of a year and a day,” Conn-Eda called up to her when he was close enough for her to hear.

Seeing Conn-Eda below and hearing what he said, the queen knew her scheme had failed. Her son would never be king. Conn-Eda would be king. There was no point in carrying on.

She jumped from the tower and crashed to her death near where Conn-Eda was standing. Her body wasn't buried: it was burnt and the ashes scattered and then her father, the druid, was sent into exile, her children along with him. The prince and his old friend Fionn never met or spoke again.

Conn-Eda planted the three golden apples in his garden, and a great tree sprung up instantly and over the years that followed it produced masses of fruit. His father died in due course, he assumed the crown and his country acquired a new name, Tyrkennedy, the land of Conn-Eda.







Truth and Lies

This is a version of a story told in Fermanagh over one hundred years ago. It was written down in the 1940s for the Irish Folklore Commission by Liam Ó Briain who was born between Cashel and Garrison and worked as a National School teacher in Tullaghan, Co. Leitrim. He had heard it as a child told by Bessy Clarke, an old neighbour in Scribbagh, who died in Enniskillen Workhouse in 1924. 'We all intended to have poor Bessy buried in Garrison and be at her funeral but trouble came in the North and a lot of folk were on their keeping' [i.e. on the run].

NFC 1014:172 (1944)

There were two young men in our village many years ago. Times were hard, neither of them had any work and so they decided that they would have to leave the village and find work wherever they could.

They were both fine strong young fellows but they were as different as chalk and cheese. One of them was straight and honest and would never tell a lie. If the master said 'Is that you talking down there?' he'd say, 'Yes Sir, sorry Sir, it was me.' But strange to say the other young man delighted in telling lies, and he told lies even when the truth would hurt nobody. And he'd say

to the master, 'No Sir, it wasn't me. It's that man on the ladder out there who's getting the bird's nest out of the gutter.' And the whole class would run to the window but there'd be no man, no ladder, no bird's nest – sure there wasn't even a gutter round the roof of the old school.

Now the two men used to argue about this, each convinced that his was the better way of doing things.

Anyway, one morning they got up, gathered their few possessions into little bundles, and meeting at the edge of the village they set off, still arguing about telling the truth and telling lies. They walked for some miles till eventually they came to a fork in the road. As they had no particular destination in mind they were free to take either road and so they decided that each would go his own way and that they would return to this spot in seven years and then they would see which of them had been the more successful, the man who told lies, or the man who told the truth and that in this way they would settle the argument for once and for all.

Well, the man who told lies he set off in one direction and before long he came to a fine farmhouse. He went up and knocked at the door and when the woman of the house came out he told her that he was looking for a job.

Are you any good with horses? she asked.

'Ah Ma'am, indeed and I am,' he replied. 'Sure isn't my mother a champion jockey and my father trained horses for the Queen and wasn't I born in a stable myself?'

'I'm glad to hear it, she said, because I have fields to plough and no-one to do it for me.'

So the man who always told lies got the job, even though if the truth be told, he hardly knew one end of a horse from the other, but he told himself that he would soon learn.

Now, the man who always told the truth took the other road and before long he too came to a fine farmhouse. He went up and knocked on the front door and the man of the house came out.

'I'm looking for a job,' he explained.

‘And I’m looking for a man who could pluck some turkeys. Have you ever worked with turkeys?’

‘In all honesty, I haven’t,’ said the man who always told the truth. ‘I’m allergic to feathers. They make my eyes water, and my nose run and my throat go dry.’

‘Well then, you’re no good to me,’ replied the farmer, closing the door in his face.

And at the next house the woman was looking for someone who could milk a goat.

‘Oh Ma’am,’ he says. ‘I love to be able to help you, but to tell the truth I have a terrible fear of goats because one day when I was seven years old I was coming home from school and this big billy-goat with big horns came after me and I could show you the marks he left on my backside.’

‘Oh no thanks,’ said the woman. ‘And be gone, for you’re no use to me.’

On he went, calling at every farmhouse along the road but each time when he was asked what he could do he always told the truth, and each time he was turned away.

By the end of the day he was cold, tired and hungry. He did not know what he was going to do, or even where he was going to sleep so he just kept going. He didn’t know where he was. He was away up in the hills somewhere where there was only rocks and bushes and there was grass growing up the middle of the road. And there were no lamp posts, or telegraph poles, no election posters even, that’s how remote a place it was. And not a house in sight. So he said to himself that he’d go up to the next house he saw and tell them the truth that he was just a poor labouring man looking for some work and he’d ask them if he could sleep in the barn and he hoped that maybe they might give him a drink of milk before he set off on his way in the morning. Eventually just as it was getting dark and the only light was a white cow and he was tired and hungry he saw a building in the distance and he decided to head towards it. However as he drew near to it he realised that it was in ruins, that there was no roof on it, and when he got closer

still he could see that it was an old church, an old ruined church with no roof on it, in the middle of a graveyard. This was where he was going to have to spend the night. It was getting dark, he was very tired, he had no other choice.

So he went into the church and he found to his surprise that the pews were still there so he lay down on one of them and even though it was cold and hard he soon fell asleep for he was very tired indeed

Around midnight his sleep was disturbed by something and he woke up. Startled, he thought he could hear voices. He lay motionless for a few minutes listening. Yes, definitely he could hear voices but he could not make out what they were saying. He was very afraid because he didn't know what sort of people would be talking in an old ruined church in the middle of the night. Thieves or brigands or murderers! Eventually he decided he'd have to take a peek over the top of the pew, and when he did what a surprise he got for it wasn't people who were talking but cats, hundreds of cats and they were having a conference. Because, believe it or believe it not, one night in every seven years cats can talk like humans, and this was the night. The rest of the time you'll hear them sitting out on the wall in the middle of the night practising. Mewling like a baby. And when they can talk they come from all over Ireland to this old church for the Cats' Parliament. And if you don't believe me remember the next time you hear the cats practising on the wall outside the next thing you'll notice is that they've disappeared for a couple of days and that's because they've all gone off to the Cats' Parliament.

There were all sorts of cats there on the cat walk:

Bob cats, top cats
Tom cats, alley cats,
Tabby cats, Van cats
Cat-fish, cat-mint,
Catnip, cat-nap, cat-gut,
Catalogue, caterpillar,

Cat burglar, cat-flap,
Cat's cradle, cat's eye
Cat walk, Cheshire cat
Cat on a hot tin roof,
Cat dragged in
Schrodinger's cat
Cat among the pigeons and the cat's pyjamas.
And the three little kittens who have lost their mittens.

Kit cats, cool cats, pine cats,
Scottish wild cats
Cat Baloo, Catweasel
The minister's cat
And a cat called Kalamazoo!

Go-Cat-Go

The owl and the Pussycat
And Pussy Galore
Catkins, Sea-cat, snow-cat
Skimbleshanks the railway cat,

The cat o' nine tails.
Puss in Boots, Pussy Willow,
Pussycat doll, and What's new,
Pussy Riot and Atomic Kitten

The cat that got the cream,
The Kilkenny Cat
The cat laughs
Catastrophic and Catatonic,
Cataract, catapult, catarrh
Catacomb and Katmandu

Cat Melodiams
Cat Stevens
Catcher in the Rye
Le Chat Noir

Go-cat, Fat cat,
A cat from Japan
Agus an Cat Mara!

Now, that's cat

And the King of them all was the finest big sleek black tom cat that you ever did see, with big whiskers and a beautiful tail, sitting upon a velvet cushion purring contentedly. He was explaining to his fawning audience that, as they knew, he was the top cat in the royal palace, that he slept on the end of the princess's bed, that he had butlers who brought him smoked salmon on golden platters, and warm milk in a silver bowl with his own name on it.

'But my friend cats,' he said, 'something happened this year that threatened my happiness. The Princess,' he said, 'became a teenager and she decided that she wanted a pony, a big-bellied, buck-toothed pony. And so they got her a pony and they put the pony in the stable and the pony started complaining about rats and mice and the King said 'Oh, take that old cat and put him in the stable.' *Moi*, the King of the Cats, *an old cat!*'

The cats all hissed in horror!

'But my friend cats,' he explained, 'I soon sorted them out! That night I sneaked back into the palace and I went into the scullery and into the larder where there was a big slab of Kerrygold butter on a silver platter and I got my beautiful hairy tail and I rubbed my tail across the butter and left hairs in the butter and when the Princess came to have her supper, bread and butter and a glass of milk, she swallowed the hairs and they stuck in her throat and made her cough and splutter and she couldn't eat a thing. And she coughed all night and she was no better in the morning. The

palace doctor saw her, gave her nasty medicine but that didn't do her any good. Then they called the best doctor in the town and he gave her more nasty medicine but that didn't do her any good either. Then they called the priest, and the minister, and the witch doctor, and the old woman who smoked the dudeen, and the man who said he had the cure for shingles, and the woman from the circus who throws knives, and the man who rides the bicycle on the high wire but none of them could do anything for her and she's coughing yet, lying helpless in bed coughing, coughing, coughing. And do you know why? Because there's only one cure for cat hair in the butter and that's to drink a bottle of water from the well at the bottom of the graveyard outside, and they'll never know that so I'm safe and secure where I am and the big-bellied buck-toothed pony may stay in his stable with the mice!

And the cats all purred and miaowed in delight.

The man who never told lies lay down again and tried to sleep.

In the morning when he awoke he wondered if it had all been a dream. To find out if it was true he went down to the bottom of the graveyard, and there, sure enough, was a well. So he filled up his little bottle and hurried off to the palace.

The trouble was of course, that when he arrived at the palace the guards would not let him in. They wouldn't even listen to him, he looked so poor and even when he persisted and they did listen to him they didn't believe him because they knew nothing of what had happened to the Princess.

'Is it true, he asked them,' that there is a big black cat in the palace that gets smoked salmon on a golden platter?

'Yes,' said the guard, 'there is a cat that gets better fed than I do.'

'And is it true that there is a big black cat in the palace that gets warm milk on a silver bowl with its name on it?

'Yes,' said the guard, 'And all I get is water.'

'Well, now do you believe me that I'm telling the truth? I'm the man who always tells the truth.'

'Perhaps,' said the guard, 'But I'm not letting you in.'

'Would you believe me if I could tell you all the people you have

let in?’

‘Perhaps,’ said the guard, ‘but I’ll still not let you in.’

‘I don’t want to come in,’ explained the man who always told the truth. ‘I only want to pass on an important message. Now, these are some of the people you have let in - the priest, and the minister, and the witch doctor, and the old woman who smoked the dudeen, and the man who said he had the cure for shingles, and the woman from the circus who throws knives, and the man who rides the bicycle on the high wire.’

‘Yes,’ said the guard, ‘I have let all those people in.’

‘You see, I am telling the truth. Now will you go and talk to the chief butler and tell him that there is a man at the door who has a cure for the Princess’s cough?’

So the guard went off and told the chief butler who denied there was anything wrong with the Princess but who nevertheless came back down with him to see the man at the door.

Once more the man who always told the truth told his story and the chief butler believed him because he knew that there was no way that this poor man could know this story unless he had indeed heard it from the King of the Cats himself.

‘Have you got the bottle of water there with you?’ he asked and the man showed it to him.

‘Very good,’ he said. ‘Come with me.’

And before he knew it the man who never told lies found himself in the Princess’s bedroom, at the Princess’s bedside, listening to her horrible cough. The King and the doctors were there as well and they asked him to tell his story. And as he told his story he held up the bottle and when he held it up the Princess grabbed it and before anyone could stop her she drank from it. And when she drank from it she coughed once more and suddenly she felt her throat was clear, the horrible hairy butter was out on the eiderdown. She took a deep breath and demanded:

‘Get me some porridge, and a cup of tea,’ she ordered. ‘And throw that cat in the moat!’

‘My dear fellow,’ said the King to the honest man. ‘I’ll give you

anything you want for curing my daughter. I'll give you a Rolls Royce, I'll give you a castle in Scotland – in fact, I'll give you Scotland!

'Oh, no,' your Majesty,' said the honest man. 'All I want right now is my breakfast.'

'Your breakfast!' exclaimed the King. 'At last an honest man. I've been king for twenty-six years and nobody has ever told me the truth except this man.'

And so it was agreed that the honest man should stay for a few days and then they found a job for him in the palace. And then, before long, as happens in all good stories, the Princess and the honest man fell in love and in due course of time decided to get married, and the King was delighted, because there is nothing better than an honest man.

And the Princess was delighted because she had a husband who always told the truth, which may or may not be a good thing!

Well, seven years went by, and the honest man did not forget the promise that he had made to his friend the liar. And when he said he was going out to meet a liar the Princess did not worry for she knew he was telling the truth. So back he went to Ireland, back out along the road home until he came to the fork in the road and he was not very long there until he saw the man who always told lies coming along.

They greeted each other and threw their arms around each other and each demanded of the other that he tell how he had got on, telling lies, or telling the truth as the case may be.

'Well,' said the Liar. 'You won't believe this but I had only gone round the corner and over the hill when this big helicopter came down out of the sky and landed in the field next to me and the door opened and out stepped Donald Trump! And he said he was looking for someone to manage his Hotel California and would I like to come back to America with him. 'Move over there, Donny Boy, says I, and let me in!' And we went back to America and I met this beautiful woman in the hotel and we got married and we have three beautiful children and they're all so clever that they're

all at Yale University studying astrophysics and ancient Greek, and doing really well at it too.'

But when the honest man looked down at his friend's shoes he saw that they were old and dusty, and he saw that his hands were calloused and that his nails were broken and dirty so he knew he was still telling lies.

Then he told his story about the old church and the cats' parliament and princess with the hair in her throat and by the time he was finished the liar was doubled up laughing.

'I win!' he declared. 'You've finally seen the error of your ways and joined the league of liars, for that is the greatest pack of lies I've ever heard. Talking cats and hair in the butter! You've seen the light and I win!'

The honest man insisted he was telling the truth but the liar would have none of it.

Eventually it was time to part. They shook hands and wished each other the best. Then the honest man turned and headed back to the palace as he had promised his wife he would be home for tea and the liar turned and started back the road he had come. But all the time he was thinking.

'That man,' he said to himself, 'that man couldn't tell a lie if his life depended on it. Therefore the story he told, even though it sounded like the greatest pack of lies must be true. And what did he say about the Cat's Parliament? That it met once every seven years. And how long is it since we last met at the fork in the road? Seven years! Therefore if I make my way to the old ruined church tonight I just might hear something that could be of use to me.'

And soon he found everything just as the honest man had described it, the rocks and the bushes, the road with the grass growing up the middle of it, and eventually as night began to fall there in the distance he spied an old ruin and when he got closer he saw that it was indeed an old roofless church in the middle of a graveyard.

When he got to the old church he went in and lay down on one of the pews and closed his eyes. In a few minutes he was fast

asleep. Then about midnight something disturbed his sleep and when he listened he could hear voices and when he looked up over the top of the pew – yes – he could see them, hundreds and hundreds of cats!

And there, in the middle of them, on a big velvet cushion, was the most scrawny, mangy, miserable old bag of bones of a black cat with a torn ear and a sore paw swishing its broken tail and spitting furiously.

‘Seven years ago,’ hissed the King of the Cats, ‘I was top cat in the palace, I had servants bringing me smoked salmon on golden platters and warm milk in silver bowls with my name on them.

‘Seven years ago,’ hissed the cat, ‘when we held our conference here someone overheard every word I said and ran straight to the palace and cured the Princess. And when the King heard what I had done he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and threw me in the moat and for the last seven years, I, the King of the Cats, have been wandering the highways and byways of Ireland, drinking out of puddles and eating skinny birds.’

The cats all hissed in horror and disgust.

‘So my friend cats, before I say another word I want you to search this church from top to bottom and when you find that man I want you to tear him to shreds!’ and he flashed his claws.

‘Yes, we will,’ hissed the cats, flashing their claws.

The man stood up in a panic.

‘Listen, it wasn’t me,’ he insisted. ‘You’ve got to believe me. I’m telling you the truth!’

‘No!’ said the cats. ‘We know you. You’re the famous Liar. You never told the truth in your life.’

‘Well I’m telling you now!’ he pleaded, running for the door.

And the last that was seen of the Liar he was running out of the church and down the road with four hundred and twenty-seven crazed cats running after him.

And that’s a true story. Not a word of a lie.

So, what would you do? Tell the truth, or tell lies?





The Lough Erne Pike

The Lough Erne Pike was collected by Michael J. Murphy from Terry Greene, April 1966. Murphy also got this fantastical tale from Tom O'Rourke (aged 70+), resident of Lisnaskea but a native of Lisbellaw. Murphy was from south Armagh. He was a full-time collector who worked in many different places across the north of Ireland.

The Erne water system dominates County Fermanagh and features heavily in the Fermanagh material held by the NFC. A collection of Fermanagh folk tales would be incomplete if it didn't contain some Erne related material. This was one reason for choosing this story: another was the way in the original material that a simple conceit was followed (as in a farce) to its logical conclusion. One has to admire material that has the courage of its own convictions

This story is one of many ascribed to a real person, Edward 'Ned' Noble (who died in 1950). Noble's stories invariably feature extreme exaggeration deployed for comic purposes, as is the case here at the end with the laundry drying on the bush.

NFC 1697: 34.

One winter's day the huntsman went out with his old gun to shoot duck on Lower Lough Erne. The conditions were perfect – dry, still and calm. Over the course of the morning and the early afternoon he drew his bead on several birds and loosed off many shots, but failed to make a single kill. Not one. He wasn't bothered though. Some days he was lucky. Some days he wasn't. And so it went. He took it all in his stride. His spirits remained buoyant.

Some time in the afternoon the huntsman ran out of shot, though he still had some powder left. Again, he didn't fret. What did it matter? Pretty soon the light would go and then he'd have to stop shooting anyway.

"Time to call it a day," he said quietly.

The huntsman set off along the path that wound along the lough's edge that would take him home. His heavy gun hung from his right shoulder by a ancient leather strap. The lough, stretching away from him, was smooth and dark. The sky directly above was a jumble of different coloured clouds. On the horizon there was a lot of frothy pink light. It came from the sun sinking towards the distant low hills.

The huntsman stopped and swapped his fowling piece from one shoulder to the other. There were some rushes growing in the water immediately in front of him. He liked to think of himself as a fellow who would stop and stare at the world, and so he took the opportunity afforded by having stopped where he had stopped to look at the rushes carefully. Their stems were long and capped with huge, heavy looking, hairy bulbs. They ought by right to be bending, both because they were so high and because they had so much weight at the top. But they weren't. The rushes were standing up absolutely straight in the water. They were like pokers. Of course he knew why. There was no wind. Absolutely none. Had he ever known a day so still? Not that he could remember.

He heard something out on the lake ... a heavy splash. What was that? A duck diving into the water? He doubted it. For a start he'd have heard the leathery creak of the duck's wings beating before it plunged in and he hadn't, plus no duck ever

made a splash as big as the one he'd heard. Then there was the quality of the splash and he was a good judge of these. After all, hadn't he lived by this lake all his life? What he'd heard wasn't something diving in from the air but something coming out of the lake and then going back in. That's what he'd heard. So what was it? A trout? A salmon. Whatever it was, it was a big fish, a very big fish.

He went on a few paces. The water here was rush free and on the lake's shore there was a hawthorn tree heavy with bright hard red haws. He had a clear view outwards from this place and, being a fellow as we know who liked to stop and stare, he stopped and scanned the water. At first there was nothing to see. Then, down in the murky peaty water, he saw something silvery and vast sliding about in front of him. What was this? He got his answer a few moments later when it leapt up into the air a few feet away. It was a huge pike, as long as he was tall, with a vast head and spiky fins. It hung in front of him for an instant and then fell back heavily into the water. The splash it made sounded exactly the same as the one he'd heard earlier. So he'd been right. What he'd heard before had been this very big fish that he was watching now.

"I heard you jump once," said the huntsman. "I saw you jump once," said the huntsman. "Will there be a third jump, Mr Pike?" said the huntsman.

In the shallows the pike was jerking this way then that.

"I'll have to be quick," said the huntsman, "if I'm going to be ready if you do."

He took his fowling piece from his shoulder, poured powder down the barrel, rammed it tight, stuck a wad down and rammed it tight on top.

"Now, what will I fire?" said the huntsman who at this moment remembered he'd no shot left.

"Oh I know," he said, and he recalled that an old man had once told him that hard red hawthorn haws would do at a pinch instead of shot.

"Haws," he said.

He reached out to the tree that by good fortune he happened to find himself standing beside, plucked haws off one after the other, dribbled them down the barrel and rammed another wad on top.

In the water, the pike still moved, its movements, jerky, erratic.

The huntsman primed the pan, raised the gun to his shoulder, cocked the flint ...

As if it had been waiting for this exact moment the pike now burst up through the surface and flung itself into the air, its spiny back towards him, its soft belly facing out to the lake. The huntsman's bead and the fish were as one. He squeezed the trigger. Bang! The recoil from the charge exploding pushed the stock back against his shoulder. A puff at the barrel's mouth. Ahead of him, the haws struck. The huntsman knew they had because he saw a flurry of scales and tiny puffs of blood scattering in the air. His first hit of the day. Then the pike sank. Splash. For a moment the fish was visible under the surface, and then it was gone, utterly gone and there was no sign it had just been there except for some tiny bloody bubbles floating on the lough's surface.

The huntsmen went home. He told his wife, who was his second wife, and his children, who were his second set of children, what had happened. They didn't doubt he'd fired on a pike. They could imagine that. It was just the size they weren't so sure about. A pike, as big as himself, really?

The huntsman returned many times to the hawthorn whose haws he'd fired at the pike. He had a vague idea, to which he clung even though he knew it was ridiculous, that the pike might return to this place where it had been injured and so afford him another glimpse. But it didn't ...

It was winter again, three years on. A good day, the sky clear, the sun shining, heat in the air. The huntsman was standing by the hawthorn gazing out at the lough, his gun propped beside him against the tree's trunk. Far away he saw something moving towards him, its progress, slow and stately. What was it? It looked ... it looked like a bush. He squinted. No. It couldn't be. But it was.

A bush, gliding towards him. Was it on a boat sitting so low he couldn't see the boat? No. Now it was closer he could see clearly. It was a hawthorn bush and it was sitting on the water, sliding towards him ... and what was more there were some clothes, a skirt, a blouse, a few other things, thrown over it to dry. He'd never seen the like.

Now the bush was really close he could see, besides the laundry, dark red haws, tight green leaves, spindly spiky branches, and, just under the surface, supporting the bush, silver and vast, the great pike itself.

"Ah," he said, trembling with astonishment, "so those haws I fired took root."

The pike came closer.

"Do you remember what happened here?" said the huntsman. "Is that why you've come?"

No answer came, nor would it though privately the huntsmen believed he was right to suppose, ridiculous though it had seemed, that this great fish would eventually return to where it was shot.

The pike was right up close to the bank and crawling along slowly in parallel to it, as if it intended the huntsman should help himself to one of the items drying on the hawthorn that grew out of its back.

"Yes, why don't I?" said the huntsmen. "A keepsake to remind me of this." He whisked away a cambric handkerchief. A lovely creamy colour it was and beautifully hemmed.

"I have it, Mr Pike, thank you," the huntsman said.

Did the pike hear? This is unknown. Had the pike felt the huntsman when he'd snatched the handkerchief? Again, who knows? What is certain is that now the pike turned and began to swim away, heading back towards the place in the middle of the lake from where it had come, and that the huntsman kept watching until he couldn't see the bush anymore. Then the huntsman took some haws from the tree, sprinkled these into the cambric handkerchief and put both in his pocket. He would keep these in a little box where he kept precious things, like locks

of hair belonging to his first wife who was dead, and their three children who were also all dead. One day, if the story got around of the pike with the bush growing out of its back, he might show them off. He might tell his story. He might. Then again, he might not. The truth, if too fantastical, was sometimes best kept secret because a truth that stretched credulity always led to unseemly accusations. “He’s made it all up... He just an attention seeker, that’s all ... He’s a liar.” The huntsman retrieved his fowling piece and padded on. A duck would be welcome now. Two would be even better. Something for the pot. He hoped he’d be lucky and, having just seen what he had seen, he had half a notion he would be.









The Ring

The Ring was collected by Michael J. Murphy from George Sheridan, Florencecourt, County Fermanagh, September 1974.

This squib speaks of an impoverished society where retailers are so routinely duplicitous that buyers long for a full proof way to know the truth before they buy. No doubt a ring with properties like the one in this tale would have been much valued. It might also have put a lot of people out of business.

NFC 1861: 211.

Night time, somewhere in the country, a lonely road. Andy McEntaggart was walking home. There was a full moon. He could see his pale shadow floating ahead of him as he went along. He had just turned twenty-one.

“Andy McEntaggart!”

The speaker was an old woman sitting at the side of the road. She was leaning against a milestone which indicated how many miles to Sligo in one direction and how many miles to Enniskillen in the other.

Andy McEntaggart hadn’t noticed this woman as he’d approached and so, understandably, he was very surprised to

encounter her now. Where had she come from? How was it he hadn't spotted her? His palms felt moist. His thighs felt watery. She might be old but still, he felt apprehensive.

"Andy McEntaggart," said the old woman, "I've something for you. Here!"

The old woman threw something onto the road. Andy McEntaggart heard a clink. Then he heard something rolling.

"Go on," said the old woman. "Pick it up. It won't bite you."

Andy McEntaggart started to search for whatever she'd thrown. Eventually he saw something glimmering. He crouched down and picked it up. It was a ring. It was made of some heavy metal.

"That," said the old woman, "is a magic ring and you are never to buy meat without looking at it first through the middle of that ring."

What was she talking about? He'd never heard the like. "Why would I do that?" said Andy McEntaggart. "That makes no sense at all."

"It will when you go to the butcher's tomorrow," said the old woman.

Hearing this Andy McEntaggart's palms felt even moister, and his thighs even more watery. How did she know? The next day he was indeed going into Enniskillen to buy meat for his mother to make stew. The money for the meat was waiting at home on the mantelpiece. Thruppence. He had also arranged a lift on a cart that was going to Enniskillen at ten o'clock.

"You take the ring tomorrow," said the old woman, "and before you buy any meat you put that to your eye and you look through it at what you might buy. You follow? You're in for some queer sights, I'm telling you, some real surprises and before tomorrow's out, you'll be wanting to thank me, guaranteed."

The old woman stood up and walked away in the direction he had come from. Andy McEntaggart watched her for a while, the ring still in his hand, then he turned and walked on towards home.

As arranged, Andy McEntaggart got his lift to town the next day and went to the butcher's his mother always dealt with. It

smelt of blood and sawdust. He joined the queue. On the slab he saw the stewing meat – it was cut into bloody cubes – some of which he had come to buy. He had the ring in his pocket. He took it out and looked through the middle at the bloody pile.

Inside the ring's circumference the meat trembled and vanished and in its place he saw a scrawny old donkey, sores and scabs all over his body, being dragged with a filthy rope into an abattoir, followed by a rapid succession of pictures which showed the donkey having his throat cut, his pelt flayed, his carcass dismembered, and, finally, his bleeding flesh being cubed. So this meat on sale was donkey? Clearly. Well he wasn't eating it and nor was his mother.

Andy McEntaggart lowered the ring and exclaimed, "Oh dear, how could I have forgotten?" He really did give the impression that he had just remembered something really important. Truly, it was an accomplished performance. Then he turned on his heel and slipped away.

Out on the high street Andy McEntaggart said to himself, "I'll have to try another butcher. I'm bound to have better luck in the next place."

He went up to the next premises and ducked in and joined the queue. The smell of blood and sawdust again. On the slab he saw stewing meat of the type he'd come to buy.

He put the ring to his eye and looked at it. Inside its bounded form the meat trembled and vanished and in its place he saw a carcass, crawling with maggots and green with rot, being scrubbed clean with a wire brush and then hewn into cubes. So this meat that was for sale was putrid? Clearly. Well he wasn't eating it and nor was his mother.

Again, Andy McEntaggart lowered the ring and exclaimed, "Oh dear, how could I have forgotten?" Then he turned and fled.

"I'll try the next butcher's," he said, when he was back out on the street again. "Third time lucky."

He walked up to the premises, slipped inside and joined the queue. More blood and sawdust. On the slab he saw cubes of

stewing meat. He looked through the middle of the ring at it. Once again the meat trembled and vanished and then it re-appeared, as it was, only now there was a man standing over it. He wore a bloody butcher's apron and he was directing a stream of hard, yellow, steaming pee at the heaped cubes. So this meat that was for sale was doused in urine? Clearly. Well he wasn't eating it and nor was his mother. No way was he taking thruppence worth of this home.

"Next," the butcher called.

Andy McEntaggart, whose turn it was, lowered the ring from his eye.

"Yes," said the butcher, "what can I get you?"

"Sorry," said Andy McEntaggart, "I'm in the wrong place."

He turned and fled to the fishmonger's. That night he and his mother ate eel.









Monday Tuesday

This story is well known across the country, and indeed internationally. The context for this particular version was given to me by Cahir McKeown of Enniskillen (1924-2015) who knew some of the old Enniskillen tailors in his young days. It appears in Irish Sagas and Folk-Tales by Eileen O'Faoláin (1954) and musician Rossa Ó Snodaigh tells me he heard a version of the story in Japan.

In the old days before there were any clothes shops people used to get their clothes made by tailors. Now, like hairdressers today the tailors didn't work on Mondays and that's because they worked late on Saturday nights so that people would have their clothes ready for Sunday morning. So on their day off all the tailors of Enniskillen would go for a walk together out the Dublin Road wearing their suits and their bowler hats, away out past what is now the Killyhevlin Hotel.

They really needed this walk because the poor tailors spent the rest of the week sitting bow-legged in the windows of their shops stitching and cutting cloth. There was no electric light those days, so they needed to sit where they could get the sunlight. And these poor old fellows as they got older they got very stiff and bent and

hump-backed, and not even a good walk could cure them.

Well anyway, there was one tailor who had been working very hard to finish a suit for a gentleman and as it had been a gloriously long summer day he had worked until almost eleven o'clock to get it done. And when he had it done he decided he needed to stretch his legs and so he headed out of town. He went out the Tempo Road and up Garvery Hill and when he was near the top he turned left and followed a country road for some distance. By this time night had fallen, but there was a full moon and all was quiet. After a while as he walked along he thought he could hear music. On he went and the music got louder. Eventually he thought that the music seemed to be coming from the field beside him so cautiously and carefully he peered in through the hedge and to his amazement he saw that there was a group of people dancing. But they weren't ordinary people, they were the little people. The tailor was very frightened but he could help watching them for they seemed to be starting and stopping again and again. They were singing a little song. It went:

Ó, Dé Luain, Dé Máirt, Dé Luain, Dé Máirt (Monday, Tuesday, Monday, Tuesday,)

Dé Luain, Dé Máirt, --- (Monday, Tuesday ---)

And they'd stop abruptly and look at each other in bafflement. This happened again and again and suddenly the tailor realised what was wrong – they had forgotten the words of their song so when they started again -

Ó, Dé Luain, Dé Máirt, Dé Luain, Dé Máirt (Monday, Tuesday, Monday, Tuesday,)

Dé Luain, Dé Máirt, --- Monday, Tuesday ---

He shouted out 'Dé Chéadaoin' (Wednesday) and the dance went on.

When they had finished the dance the little people turned to congratulate one and other, each thinking that the other had remembered the words. Gradually they realised that it was not one of their number but a stranger who had supplied the missing words and when they realised this they immediately spread out

across the field looking to see who it might be, because the little people really don't like ordinary people seeing them at all.

They grabbed the poor tailor and dragged him into the middle of the field and stood around him in a circle. He was all apologies, explaining that he was only a poor hump-backed tailor from Enniskillen, that it had never been his attention to spy on them but that he had been attracted by the music and that when he realised they had forgotten the words he wanted to help them.

The fairies stood in silence for a minute. Then the king of the fairies spoke.

'My good man, I believe you are telling the truth and as you have helped us then it is only right that we should help you.'

And with that they took the hump off his back and hung it on a tree and told him to go back to Enniskillen, but not to tell a soul what had happened.

Well the tailor kept his word, even though all the other tailors noticed that he was now walking as tall and as straight as an army officer when they went on their Monday walks. They all tried asking what cure he had used but he wouldn't tell anyone. Not for a year and a day until it happened that he was at a wedding and he had a few drinks and one of the other tailors was there and remarked that he was a good dancer now that his back was mended and sure before he realised it the tailor told his friend the whole story.

The next evening the second tailor decided to go for a walk out the Tempo Road and up Garvary hill. He turned into the left near the top and kept going until night had fallen and the moon was high in the sky. And then, sure enough, he thought he could hear music. On he went and the music got louder and louder until at last he knew he was at the right place. He looked in through the hedge and there they were, the fairies doing their little dance:

Ó, Dé Luain, Dé Máirt, Dé Luain, Dé Máirt (Monday, Tuesday, Monday, Tuesday,)

Dé Luain, Dé Máirt, Dé Chéadaoin (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday)

He waited until they had done it a couple of times, they were

really getting into the swing of things when he shouts:

Déardaoín! (Thursday)

And they all tripped over each other and fell in a heap!

He thought they looked very funny and he clapped and shouted 'Bravo!'

But the fairies were not amused. They came running and dragged him into the middle of the field.

'Who are you and what do you think you are doing?' demanded the King of the Fairies.

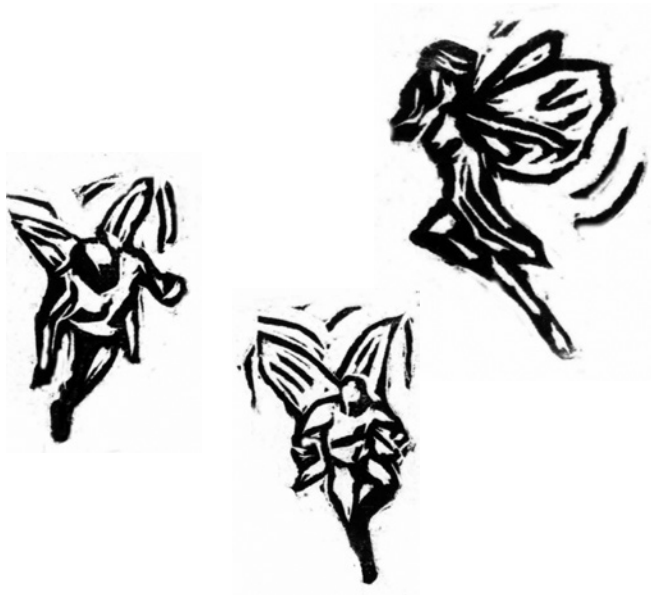
'I'm a poor humpbacked tailor from Enniskillen,' he said, 'and I just thought you needed a little bit of help with your dance.'

'That's the sort of help we could do without,' said the King of the Fairies.

'Even from a poor humpbacked tailor?' said the man smiling.

And the fairies smiled too.

And then one of them ran and got the first tailor's hump out of the tree and put it on this man's back and so the second poor tailor had to go back to Enniskillen with two humps on his back like a camel!









The Hungry Highwayman

The Hungry Highwayman was collected by Patrick Magee from John McManus, retired postman, Irvinestown, August 1938.

It's a familiar trope – words spoken openly to communicate hidden truths even while an enemy is listening.

John McManus's version courtesy of Patrick Magee, on which my text is based, gives no indication of why the servant girl can't speak out once the man of the house goes off to fetch the yeomen. So for this reason I added a third party, the wife of the man of the house, and introduced the notion that she's tasked with keeping the highwayman there, in the kitchen, until the yeomen arrive. Proinsias Dubh was an historical figure though this story may be apocryphal rather than true.

NFC 559: 303-4

A gentle evening. The air smelt vaguely of honeysuckle.

Somewhere near Irvinestown, set back from the road, a two storey house with pigeon coloured slates and a red front door.

In the kitchen the man of the house and his wife sat at a table. He was a strong farmer and unlike the spalpeens he employed, he could afford a table.

On the other side of the kitchen there was a huge fire with a high grate suitable for cooking. The live-in servant girl, her apron spattered with grease spots and her face hot and red, was frying herrings and boiling potatoes. The kitchen door was open and the lovely smell of hot butter and spud steam streamed out ...

On the road in front of the house with the grey slates and the red door, the highwayman, Proinsias Dubh, padded into view and stopped.

He sniffed. What was that he could smell? Proinsias Dubh sniffed again. This time he got it.

"Herrings and spuds," he said.

Scrumptious.

"I'm hungry ..."

Proinsias Dubh skipped to the red front door and knocked.

The man of the house answered. He recognised his caller straightway but he didn't let on that he had. With his big bland flat face the man of the house had always found it easy to deceive.

"Yes," said the man of the house, "what do you want?"

"I'm hungry," said Proinsias Dubh.

"You're in luck," said the man of the house smoothly. "And I'm in luck too," he added, but these words he spoke only to himself in his head. As he knew, a large reward had been offered for any information leading to the highwayman's capture. If he was clever that money would soon be his.

"You're hungry," said the man of the house to Proinsias Dubh, "and we're about to eat. Come in and share our supper."

The man of the house led Proinsias Dubh to the kitchen.

"We've a guest," said the man of the house to his wife, winking. The highwayman did not see this but she did. "He's going to eat with us."

"Oh," said the wife, winking back. Over the years she and her

husband had learnt to talk to one another with looks and signs that no one else detected. It was the secret of their cheating and trickery and it was cheating and trickery, in turn, that had made them so rich.

"Have we plenty of food?" shouted the wife of the man of the house over to the fire, sounding to Proinsias's ears like someone who genuinely wanted to be hospitable.

The servant girl who was working at the fire looked round and cleared the hair stuck to her damp forehead with the heel of a hand.

"We have plenty, surely," she replied and then she turned back to her blackened frying pan and her bubbling skillet. She shook the pan, shaking the herrings frying in it, and as the herrings tumbled and turned the butter sizzled.

"I'd better run that message then, hadn't I?" said the man of the house to his wife.

"You had," she said. She was as smooth on the uptake now as her husband had been a few moments earlier when he had opened the front door to Proinsias Dubh.

"I'll go then," said the man of the house. "You'll look after our guest won't you, dear?"

"You can rely on me to keep him happy," she said.

The man of the house slipped out the back door and a moment later Proinsias Dubh saw him pass the window as he headed for the street at the front.

"Will you sit?" said the wife of the man of the house.

Proinsias Dubh went to the stool by the fire where the servant girl was cooking. He sat down.

"Hello," Proinsias Dubh said to her.

She was turning the herrings in the pan with a wooden spatula. She ignored his greeting completely.

"Bold herring, that never was caught by its belly," she said. Over the sound of the butter spitting only Proinsias heard her words, which struck him as ... well, odd.

"Bold herring, that never was caught by its belly," Proinsias

Dubh repeated inwardly. Strange phrase. What did she mean? “Bold herring, that never ...” Oh yes ... he had it now ... his belly was about to get him lifted ... that’s what she meant. But she couldn’t say so. Not openly. Of course she couldn’t. If she did the wife of the man of the house would hear. And then, after the yeomen arrived, whom presumably, Proinsias Dubh now reasoned, the man of the house was away to fetch, and the yeomen found him gone, the servant girl would be charged with helping him to escape. She’d be hauled away to the barracks and then ... It didn’t bear thinking about.

“Bold herring, that never was caught by its belly,” said Proinsias Dubh quietly. The girl angled her head towards him but kept her face down so the wife of the man of the house, who was doubtless watching, wouldn’t know what was happening.

“And neither will I,” Proinsias Dubh continued. The servant girl nodded. The movement of her head was only just perceptible. Though they’d never met until now they understood one another as perfectly as if they’d known each other their whole lives.

“And neither will I,” Proinsias Dubh repeated. He stood and in three steps he was at the back door.

“A fish dies by its open mouth,” he shouted at the astonished wife of the man of the house, “but not this one.”

He flung the door open and jumped down the steps and by the time the yeomen appeared, he was long, long gone, the wife of the man of the house was raging, and the servant girl was waiting at the fire to serve the supper.









Granny's Prayer

A story told by subject's daughter Rose Howe, (80), April 1955 to Sandy McConnell, NFC 1403: 96.

Old Granny Nolan wrapped her shawl tightly around herself, she put on her heavy boots and set off to walk to Mass at Arney Chapel two miles away. It was a horrible stormy morning and there was a gale blowing in her face. She wrapped the shawl around her head so that only her eyes could be seen and she leant into the wind as she went, barely able to put one foot in front of the other and terrified of being lifted clean off the road and into the ditch which was full of frog-spawn. She felt like cursing the wind but she knew that would be the wrong thing to do, especially as she was on her way to Mass so she offered up her suffering for the souls in purgatory. But the wind was really holding her back and she was afraid that she would be late for Mass so she began to think what a difference it would make if only the wind died down a little. In fact wouldn't it be great if the wind turned and was at her back? And the idea that the wind might turn gave her the strength to continue.

Eventually, very tired and out of breath she got to Arney chapel just in time and took her seat with the rest of the people.

During Mass she continued to think about the wind for she could hear it howling around the church and she prayed that the wind might turn.

When Mass was over she wrapped herself in her shawl once more and when she went outside she found that her prayers had been answered, that the wind had turned, and that she would have it in her face again the whole way home.









The Wet Nurse

The Wet Nurse was collected by Patrick Magee from John McManus, retired postman, Irvinestown, August 1938.

The Archdale family originally came from Staffordshire. John Archdale (1578-1621) was an 'undertaker' in the Ulster plantation. He arrived in Ireland in 1612, received grants of land in Fermanagh and Tyrone, and built Castle Archdale near the shores of Lough Erne in 1615. John's son, Edward Archdale (1604-41) was killed along with his wife and family, probably when rebels took Castle Archdale in the Irish rebellion of 1641. Only his youngest son, William Archdale (c.1640-1722), survived, reputedly saved by his nurse.

There are several variants of this story in the NFC Fermanagh papers but I liked this one the best even though it departs from the facts the most (in this version the Archdale adults survive and it's not even clear if the Archdale heir is killed or just spirited away by the Irish rebels, which was certainly not what happened in real life) and is also quite implausible: a mother, even a mother who relies on a wet nurse would hardly mistake a baby of over a year old who is not her own for her own, I think. However, what you get with this version if you're prepared to overlook the violation of historical fact and the implausibility issue (which I am and which presumably early listeners also were) is the deeply comforting notion that an outlier, albeit by accident, can become a member of the ruling caste, or, if you prefer, that a Catholic can become a planter. Finally, in its indirect way, the story may also be a way of acknowledging that intimacy did occur between the different confessions without actually having to show any.

NFC 559: 346-7.

She had red hair, freckled skin and watery blue eyes. She was small, bony, wide hipped and heavy breasted. Her surname was McHugh. One day, a saddle-maker offered her a penny to lie with him in a field. She agreed. A penny was a penny. But after they were finished he ran off and never paid. Nine months later she gave birth to a boy.

She needed employment now if she was to support not only herself but her baby. In Castle Archdale, home of the Archdale family, she heard there was an Archdale baby, a son, just born, who would one day inherit the castle and its lands. She went to the castle and offered herself as his wet nurse. The baby's mother, Mrs Archdale, noticing this girl found breast-feeding easy – she was feeding her own new-born baby son throughout their interview – and that she seemingly had milk to spare, took her on as her own son's wet nurse even though she was a Catholic and had no English ...

Early winter. Sunday morning. In her place, by the fire, her own baby asleep in a crib by her feet and the Archdale heir clamped to her left nipple as he fed, the wet nurse, as she was now known, heard Mr and Mrs Archdale and their Protestant servants in the hall overhead, sidling out and then locking the front door behind themselves. They were going to church. She was all alone in the castle and once she got the Archdale baby to sleep, her plan was that she would creep into her mistress's bedroom, as she had often done before when everyone was at church, and try on her gowns, even though they were too big for her ...

A bit later, outside, the wet nurse heard, horses' hooves beating on the ground, the coarse cries of rebellious men and the wallop of hammers on the castle's doors.

The kitchen door burst open and two of Sir Phelim O'Neill's soldiers rushed in. Both carried shields and short swords. The wet nurse started up, intending to run, but before she could get away from them, the two soldiers had snatched the Archdale heir from her arms and rushed away with him to the hall where their fellow soldiers, having smashed the front door down, were pouring

in. Without thinking, the wet nurse grabbed her own child and slipped away out the door the two soldiers had come in through.

In the yard the wet nurse found Irish soldiers loading a cart with plundered tack. The looters were so busy they didn't notice the small, bony, quick-footed wet nurse. She melted away and fled to the woods where she hid all night among the trees with her son.

The next day the wet nurse returned to Castle Archdale. She found a carpenter at the back making a new door to replace the original which the Irish rebels had smashed to pieces. She went in. The kitchen was in disorder. The Irish had smashed everything when they ransacked the castle the day before. Mrs Archdale, her mistress, was by the fire. Because she and her husband and the Protestant servants were away at church when the Irish came, they had survived.

When her mistress saw the wet nurse come in, she jumped up.

"You saved him," cried Mrs Archdale. "You saved my child." She burst into tears, wrenched who she assumed was her son from the wet nurse's grip, and began to kiss him. "And in honour of what you did," she continued, "know that Castle Archdale will always have a McHugh about the place and no O'Neill will ever be allowed to work here, ever."

Having no English the wet nurse could neither understand what had been said nor explain what had happened, and by the time she did understand it was too late. Her baby was no longer a McHugh but an Archdale, and the heir no less, though she remained his wet nurse, and to all intents and purposes his mother as well.

Mr and Mrs Archdale had no more children and when they died the wet nurse's son inherited the castle and the lands. His mother was still there in the castle. Whether she ever told him she was his mother is not known for sure. There is a suspicion that she might have whispered the truth to her son when she was dying, but there again that might just be a story.





The Wolf and his Tail

Collected by Sandy McConnell from Tom Kellagher, aged 82, the Brook, Enniskillen April 1958.

NFC 1403: 65-8.

In the old days animals could speak just the same as we can. Of course, this was long ago before snow was invented and it was the time when old ladies wore their boots inside out. Well one day back then when a man was going through the wood a wolf called him saying 'Please Mr. Man, release me, my tail has got caught between two branches in this forked oak tree.'

The man took pity on the wolf and set him free. The minute the wolf got freedom he ran around the man saying 'I'm starving, I'm starving, I'm going to eat you.' The life was scared out of the man and he begged the wolf for mercy saying 'surely you are not going to kill me after me saving your life?'

'Very well,' said the wolf. 'Come along with me and we'll let the first three animals we meet decide your fate.'

So the wolf and the man walked on and the first animal they met was an old dog coming hopping along on three legs. Well they stopped the dog and told him the whole story.

'Well,' says the dog. 'I spent twelve years with my master. I guarded his house and land and collected his sheep and cattle and he said I was the best dog in the whole world and I believed him but this morning he hunted me from about the house saying 'away with you because you are no longer any use to me ' and here I am.' He then pointed his paw towards the man saying to the wolf. 'Eat him, eat him, for all the men should be eaten!'

'Number one' says the wolf, smacking his lips. And so, on the wolf and the man went and the next animal they met was an old grey muzzled horse and again the wolf and the man told their story.

'Well' says the horse, 'I worked hard for a farmer who lives at the edge of this wood for twenty long years. I ploughed his land, I sowed and I dragged and he said I was the best horse in the whole world and I believed him. This morning he brought me to the wood and told me not to come back to his house or land for I was no longer of any use. Worse still he lifted a great big stick and hit me over the back as hard as he could.' The old horse when his story was finished said to the wolf 'Eat him, eat him, for all men should be eaten.'

'Number two' said the wolf, again smacking his lips. So on they went and to the man's horror what did they meet next but a fox. Again the wolf and the man told their story and the fox listened with great attention.

'Well now,' says the fox when they had finished. 'I really could not give judgement until I see for myself the exact position you were in when this man released you.' So back they went to the crooked oak and now, says the fox to the wolf, 'put your tail in the exact place it was before.'

The wolf did so and the fox says to the wolf: 'Can you get out now?' The wolf tried but he could not. 'Are you quite sure you can't get out?' and the wolf after trying again said 'No.'

'Very good' says the fox and he handed the man a big heavy stick and then ran away some distance. He then shouted to the man 'Kill him, kill him, for all wolves should be killed.'







The Cat

The Cat was collected by Patrick E. Brady, Meenaghan, Bawnboy, Co. Cavan (student at Maynooth College) from Peter Donohoe (aged 65), Gortaneddan, Derrylin, July 1948.

Stories which describe how one neighbour shape-shifts into an animal (a cat, a hare or a badger among others) to steal milk from another neighbour, thus simultaneously gaining nourishment while impoverishing the victim (because lost milk means lost butter means lost revenue) are commonplace in Irish folklore. Presumably, in an impoverished and precarious agricultural culture (like that of the small Irish farmer) such stories were a way of safely ventilating anxiety about neighbourly malfeasance. This variant, however, attracted me because it goes further than others in that it allows us to know that the family of the culprit are in on the crime thereby magnifying the idea of neighbourly malfeasance. What also struck me about the source material was that nothing was explained to the young principal protagonist, which said something, to me at least, about rural Irish silence and its colossal capacity to inhibit communication.

NFC 1159: 106-7.

The townland of Corlough ... deep meadows ... hawthorn hedges ... a narrow track with grass growing up the middle ... a one-and-a-half storey house with a sloping roof and tiny windows ... the usual set of stone outbuildings ... This was the home of the McCaffrey's, who always had milk to churn and every Saturday had plenty of tubs of butter to sell at the Buttermarket in Enniskillen.

Beside Corlough, the townland of Ballyleeman ... the same deep meadows ... hawthorn hedges ... a narrow track with grass growing up the middle ... a one-and-a-half storey house with a sloping roof and tiny windows ... the usual set of stone outbuildings ... This was the home of the McTeague's, who never had enough milk to churn and every Saturday only had a few tubs of butter to sell at the Buttermarket in Enniskillen and sometimes had none.

Adjacent townlands, identical conditions, yet from one butter poured, and from the other, it didn't. A mystery ...

A morning in late May when the hawthorn was heavy with white blossom. Mrs McTeague was in the kitchen banking up the fire. Her turf box was low.

"Go out," she said to her son Tom. He was sitting at the table, eating a piece of dry bread spread with crab apple jelly. There was no butter of course. "Fetch some turf in."

"Why? I'm eating," said Tom. "Can't one of the girls?"

"No, you go," his mother said. "And don't annoy me."

Tom took the creel and went out. It was early but already warm. From the fuchsia bush at the back door came the sound of bees, dozens of bees nosing in the red trumpets.

He set off across the yard. Ahead of him their cows, which he had heard his father bringing in from the pasture a few minutes earlier, were standing around in the pen in front of their byre. They were making the low plaintive noises cows make either when their udders are full or when they are being emptied. There was no sign of his father though. Strange. He was obviously away on some important if mysterious errand.

Something moved at the side of the byre. What was that? A rat? There was a rat in the yard. Tom had been trying to get it

for ages. It was a big brown monster with a tail as long as its self. The tail was long and pink and ringed. Perhaps this was Tom's lucky day?

He dropped the creel, darted forward and, at the same time, he squinted ahead. No. Not the rat. It was a cat. They had two, scrawny things, one white, the other piebald, useless ratters the pair of them, but this was neither. It was pure black for a start, far bigger and fatter than theirs and, the biggest distinction of all, where their cats scuttled this one tottered, where their cats hurried this one trod with the slow deliberation of an animal bearing an incredible load, an idea reinforced by its clearly swollen belly.

"I'll have that cat," said Tom without thinking. He never knew why he made this decision, as he reflected later. He simply made it.

There was a stone sitting on a wall. Tom picked it up and sprinted on towards his quarry. The black cat continued on its way, blithe and seemingly indifferent to Tom's approach but also, because its stomach was so disgorged, unable to go any faster than it was going.

Once Tom judged he'd got close enough, he drew his arm back and flung the stone. It arced nicely through the air and smack! It hit the cat on the head behind the left ear. The cat's forward progress stopped. What would happen now? Would it survive the blow and manage to walk on? Or would it fall? It was a genuine instant of mystery when the future couldn't be known. Then clarification. Like a curtain falling, the creature keeled over onto its side. The question was answered. The stone had done its work.

Tom ran over and peered down. The cat lay on the ground on its side, its head smeared with bright red blood behind the left ear where the stone had obviously struck, its distended belly bulging out, and its tongue all white with milk hanging out too. On the ground, right under its mouth, more milk, a little pool of it, white and yellow and rich. Tom pondered. From where did that come? Then he got it. In a flash. That was their milk, surely? Yes. While their herd had been waiting in front of the byre for his father

to return and milk them, this cat must have sated itself, drinking straight from their udders. Of course. What other explanation could there be? None he could imagine. He'd heard about this sort of thing.

Tom retrieved the creel and filled it. Then he went back and looked at the cat again. The cat's eyes were open but blank. These eyes saw nothing. The animal's body, he noticed now, had a stillness beyond any stillness he had ever seen. Yes, its life spirit had fled. There was no doubt about it. The animal was dead and he had killed it.

Tom went back to the kitchen and told his mother about the dead cat with the milky tongue and little pool of milk on the ground in front of it. He didn't say where he thought the milk came from. He kept that to himself.

"Show me," said his mother.

They went out the back door. Tom saw his father, who had now returned from wherever he had been, was in the byre and milking was underway. He led his mother across the yard to the spot where the black cat's body had been, only when they got there the corpse was gone though the little pool of milk still lay on the ground. This told Tom he was in the right place.

"Maybe I didn't kill it," said Tom, although truth be told, he didn't really believe this. "Maybe it was just stunned and when I was inside in the house just now it got up and went away."

He indicated the way the black cat had been going, which was towards the little gate at the edge of the yard that opened on to the path to the McCaffrey's.

"Right, Tom McTeague," said his mother. "Go you and wash your face. You'll be late for school unless you get a move on. I'm away to talk to your father about what's happened."

"Am I in trouble?" said Tom.

"Not at all," said Tom's mother, though he wasn't convinced.

When Tom returned in the afternoon his mother was in her black mourning dress. The material it was made of was heavy and unbending. It was like tin, Tom thought.

"Mrs McCaffrey died," his mother said. "We'll visit the wake house later," she added, "to pay our respects." His mother struck Tom as nervous, even anxious. Why was that? It was what had happened that morning, wasn't it?

After evening milking, Tom and his siblings and his mother and father went through the gate and along the path and all the way to the McCaffrey's house. There were a couple of wake guests standing outside smoking pipes. The McCaffrey's front door was open. The McTeagues went in. The kitchen was to their right and it was jammed full of neighbours talking in low voices, and the good room, the parlour, was to their left. The parlour door was closed. Tom guessed that's where Mrs McCaffrey's body was. There was no where else for it to be.

The McTeagues went into the kitchen. They drank tea. They ate sandwiches. They ate seed cake. Meanwhile, a neighbour with strong religious inclinations took half-a-dozen wake guests at a time to see the body in the other room. Eventually, it was the McTeagues' turn to be taken over. The officious neighbour brought them across the hall and ushered them in to the parlour. The room was small. The curtains were drawn. Little lines of white sunlight showed around the edges. Candles guttered. Mrs McCaffrey's daughters were sitting on chairs, heads down, rosary beads in hand, murmuring prayers. Their murmurs sounded to Tom's ears like light summer rain falling on slates.

The coffin was pine and its resin smell left a taste in the mouth. It rested on battered trestles. The McTeagues went forward to look and to pray, Tom foremost. Mrs McCaffrey, he saw, lay within, dressed in a white shroud, hands on her chest, rosary beads threaded through her fingers. Tom looked at her face: it seemed still and serene to him. There were gold sleepers in Mrs McCaffrey's ears. The thought crossed Tom's mind that it was a waste to bury her wearing them. Weren't they gold and wasn't gold valuable? Mrs McCaffrey's hair was scraped back and coiled. It was very beautifully done. On the left side of her head, on the temple just above the ear, there was an ugly purple mark where a

blow had obviously been taken.

“Hey!” It was one of the McCaffrey girls who had looked up and seen Tom looking at her mother in the coffin. “You, Tom McTeague, get out,” the girl shouted.

The speaker’s sisters, hearing this, opened their eyes and jumped up.

“Yes, you, Tom McTeague” they shouted at Tom. “You killed our mother. Get out of here, get out of here ...”

The officious neighbour, who was still there, opened the door of the parlour.

“I think you should go,” the officious neighbour said.

Ashen faced and tight-lipped, the McTeagues hurried out of the parlour, went down the hall and left the wake house through the front door. They began to retrace their steps along the path to their farm.

“Mrs McCaffrey’s been stealing our milk,” said Tom’s father, “and who knows for how long? Anyway, now it’s out they won’t want to be friends and we won’t want to be their friends, either. You don’t associate with people who stole your milk. Are you all clear about that?” This was directed to his children.

Tom and his siblings nodded and mumbled. They understood. Tom’s mother squeezed her son’s shoulder then, just to show him that he wasn’t in trouble.

Once they were home, Tom’s father found a length of chain and a padlock. He chained up the gate that opened onto the path to the McCaffrey’s and then he closed the padlock shut. Then he went and hurled the key into the midden where they threw their night-soil.

Over the following days the McTeagues found they had much more milk than usual to churn and on the next Saturday, and all the Saturdays thereafter, they always had plenty of tubs of butter to sell.







The Travelling Hundred

The Travelling Hundred, supplied "From my own knowledge" by Alex McConnell, Toneyloman, Bellanaleck, Enniskillen, February 15 1956.

This story of uncharacteristic optimism (though I would like to believe it is true) illuminates a difficult truth about Irish subsistence farming. Because there was a lack of capital and because it was hard to wrest wealth from the land (the two problems were interconnected, obviously), marriage was a fiendishly complicated business. Those hoping or planning to marry had understandings to meet and obligations to discharge, and unless these matters could be resolved they couldn't marry. Twenty-first century house-buyers and sellers in a housing chain find themselves in a similar position but with one crucial difference. In the modern world, sales and purchases of real estate must happen simultaneously, whereas in the Irish rural matrimonial world, events unfolded sequentially. Thus, in this story, it is over several decades that a single cash parcel is able to work its magic for many people, though this is only possible (and presumably this is the story's message) because all parties accept their obligations and behave responsibly. If one greedy person

had kept "The Travelling Hundred", those further down the line would not have prospered. In other words, in an economically marginal society you have duties to those around you that you cannot shirk. What ever you might want to do, you must always meet your obligations first. This tale teaches and valorizes that principle.

Interestingly yet not unsurprisingly, this type of story (and its message) is still in circulation. One modern version, which I have heard told as an anecdote, goes as follows: An American tourist pays a \$100 deposit to book a room in a Mexican hotel. The hotel owner pays the butcher, the butcher pays the farmer, the farmer pays the farm supply shop, et cetera, et cetera, and the last man in the chain clears his slate at the hotel bar. Then the American decides he does not want the room and the deposit is returned to him.

NFC 1481: 226-7.

Mr and Mrs McManus lived on Inishmore island in Upper Lough Erne, where they worked a small farm and raised their two children, John and Kate.

When their children were in their twenties, Mr and Mrs McManus went on their Fermanagh cot, a long, shallow boat peculiar to Lough Erne, from Inishmore to the mainland. Their journey across was uneventful. Their return was not. A storm blew up and their cot sank. Neither parent could swim, which was typical in those times, and both drowned. The only consolation for their children, John and Kate, was that unlike so many who farmed Mr and Mrs McManus had made a will. In the settlement, John received the farm and Kate one hundred pounds reserved for her dowry ...

The obligatory year of mourning following the death of their parents had passed and now, at long last, John and Kate, were free to consider the future. Phil Lunny, a thirty-eight year old bachelor who lived on the shore opposite the McManus farm on Inishmore

island, had long had an understanding with Kate that they would marry. However, he could only do so if the means to settle his sister, Connie's future were to hand. Connie's hopes, in turn, were pinned on Vinnie Love, another Fermanagh farmer, but Vinnie had two sisters, Mary and Jane, and he, in turn, could only marry if the means to get them settled and ensconced safely somewhere else were in place. And if they weren't, he couldn't marry Connie. It was all quite a tangle.

So ...

Kate married Phil Lunny and became Mrs Lunny. Her hundred pound dowry went to her husband. He passed the money on to his sister, Connie. With this money for her dowry, Connie married Vinnie Love.

Vinnie split Connie's hundred. He gave fifty pounds to his sister, Mary, and he gave fifty to his sister Jane. Mary, now she had her dowry, married James Rooney, as she had always wanted to do, and James used Mary's money to buy his brother, Patrick's passage to New York, as he had always known he had to do.

Jane, who had no matrimonial plans, banked her fifty for a rainy day, and considered what she should do next. Now that both her siblings were married, Vinnie Love to Connie, and Mary to James Rooney, she decided she should leave home and let her brother and his new wife have the run of the place. But where could she go? She heard John McManus, back on Inishmore island, who'd been living alone since his sister married Phil Lunny, was in the market for a housekeeper. She made inquiries. Might he be interested in her? He responded immediately. Yes, he was interested but not only in her being his housekeeper. He needed a wife and she needed a husband too, and, as neither had either, he proposed they marry. Jane agreed and they married and the fifty she'd banked went to him as her dowry, which of course was half of the hundred that had originally been willed to John's sister Kate after their parents drowned, right at the start of this saga.

And the other fifty? Well, remember Patrick Rooney, who went to New York? He had a daughter, Veronica, and years later, when

she was a young woman, Veronica returned to Fermanagh, and married John and Jane's son (they only had the one son) and her dowry, which all parties thought highly amusing, was the other half of the original hundred pounds that had gone to Kate. And so, the whole of the travelling hundred, having done its sterling work all round the world, was finally back home where it started on Inishmore island.









One Fish Each

Collected by Sandy McConnell from Hugh Macken, 79, Drumbargy, NFC 1403: 28-9 (1955)

A man named Christopher Mulhern lived at Drumbargy at the time of the Famine. He had a wife and four small children. One day there wasn't a bite to eat in the house. 'Christy,' said his wife, 'you should go down to the river and fish and maybe you'd get a wee fish.'

'Nonsense,' said Christy. 'Whoever heard of anyone catching fish in this time of year.' But to please her he went to the river close by and began fishing. To his great surprise the first time he threw out he caught a lovely perch. Again and again he threw out and never quit until he caught six fine perch. But fish as he might he could not get another one. 'Ah well,' he says, 'it's one-a-piece.'

So Christy went to the river every day and caught six perch. Then one day his youngest child died and next day he only caught five, one-a-piece, and that was the way it continued until food became plentiful again.





The Champion Card Player

The Champion Card Player was collected by Liam Ó Briain (1895 – 1972) from Pat McGeever who personally experienced all the phenomena described.

Details of “The Dead Coach” itself are from Ó Briain, NFC #1710, pps 390-391, and were supplied to Ó Briain by Pat Carty.

Ó Briain, a native of Kilcoo, Garrison, was a national school teacher and folklore enthusiast who supplied the NFC in 1944 with a vast body of folkloric material which he’d amassed over his lifetime.

NFC 1014: 76-7.

A private room without a ceiling at the back of a shebeen. Below rough rafters several men, including the champion card player, sat at a table. Tonight was the first evening of their three-day tournament. The prize, a hundred gold sovereigns, was in a drawstring bag behind the bar. So that nobody could accuse anybody else of card tampering, it had been agreed each player would bring his own pack and that each hand would be played

with a different player's pack. The player's packs would be used in turn.

It was late. They were playing with the champion card player's pack. All evening his cards had been so-so. If he lost this hand he was done for. He had to win this hand if he was to have any likelihood of turning his situation around. But seeing as the cards he held in his hand at that moment simply weren't very good, this seemed unlikely.

"If only something would happen that would stop the game," thought the champion card player. "Then we'd have to start again, I'd have to deal a fresh hand, and then I might have a better chance of winning ..."

The phrase formed and he began to repeat it in his head. "Stop the game, stop the game ..."

"Do you hear that?" said one of the other players.

The iron bound wheels of a coach could be heard outside.

"What's a coach doing out here?" said another player. "We never get coaches out here, do we?"

Everyone heard the wheels rumbling, the reins jingling, and the driver's whip cracking except for the champion card player who was still repeating to himself, "Stop the game, stop the game ..."

Unseen by anyone below a cockerel now appeared, it was impossible to say from where, on the rafter directly above the players and their table.

"Cock-a-doodle-do," it screeched, which made everyone including the champion card player look up. Then the great bird jumped down and landed right in the middle of the card table. Bang!

The players recoiled, dropping their cards in the process. The cockerel was also shocked. The last thing he expected was to arrive where he now found himself, in the middle of a card table surrounded by men.

The cockerel began to charge around, crowing belligerently and scattering cards everywhere. The champion card player, who after all had asked for something to happen and therefore,

now something had happened, wasn't quite as shocked as the others were, swept the cockerel off the table, opened the door and chased him out. Then the champion card player gathered the scattered cards from wherever they'd fallen.

When he had a full deck assembled he addressed his competitors.

"I can hardly believe it, but that cock was sitting up there looking down on us the whole time we were playing," he said in a nonchalant voice. He had to seem nonchalant, seeing as he had wished for what happened. "What do we do now, do you think?"

"Well, we can't go back to where we were, can we?" said one of the others.

"You're right," said the champion card player. Of course they couldn't. The only option was to start anew, a fresh hand, a start for him, which was exactly what he wanted. But he couldn't make the decision on everyone's behalf. They had to. They had to believe they were in charge.

"So what's it to be?" asked the champion card player.

"Deal again," said one of the other players.

"Deal again?"

"Deal again," everyone chorused.

The champion card player dealt again and this time he had a much better hand. He won the round and with that his luck changed. He ended the evening the victor ...

It was the second night of the tournament. The same shebeen, the same table, the same men. They were playing with the champion card player's pack again. The champion card player had his cards arrayed in his hand. In the middle of the fan he could see the Ace of Hearts. This was not the card he needed at this moment. He needed the Five of Diamonds and if he had had that card he knew that he would win both the hand and the evening.

"I need the Five of Diamonds," the champion card player began to say inwardly. "Give me the Five of Diamonds."

"Do you hear that?" said one of the other players.

The iron bound wheels of a coach could be heard outside.

“What’s a coach doing out here?” said another player. “We never get coaches out here, do we? Except last night we did, and now again tonight we hear one passing. Strange ...”

Everyone heard the wheels rumbling, the reins jingling, and the driver’s whip cracking, except for the champion card player who was repeating, “Give me the Five of Diamonds.”

The champion card player stared at his hand as the words drummed in his head. His Ace of Hearts began to blur and waver. The red emblem and the red numbering dissolved. The card went white. From under the white something began to show. It was like something coming up from underwater. It was a red diamond, a red number five. This was the opposite of the dissolving he’d seen earlier ... redder, stronger, bolder and now there in front of him, in his hand, the card he needed, the glorious Five of Diamonds.

The coach had passed. Everyone else was watching the champion card player. It was his turn.

“Are you playing or what?” someone said.

“I’m not just playing,” said the champion card player. “I’m winning.”

He slowly pulled the Five of Diamonds out of the fan and laid it gently down in the middle of the table.

The other players moaned and groaned.

“The evening is mine,” said the champion card player ...

It was the third night of the tournament. The same shebeen, the same table, the same men. The champion card player’s pack was in play once more and it was the last hand of the night. It all hinged on this game. If the champion card player triumphed now, then he took home the gold sovereigns in the drawstring bag.

The champion card player began to deal. He dealt the cards slowly, deliberately and without any flourish. He didn’t want to give any of the other players the chance to accuse him of somehow fixing the game because of how he had dealt his cards. And as he dealt he repeated these words in his head:

“I must win, I must win ... I will win, I will win ... With this hand I will win ...”

"Do you hear that?" said one of the other players.

The iron bound wheels of a coach could be heard outside.

"What's a coach doing out here?" said another player. "We never get coaches out here, do we? Except we did two nights ago and again last night. Strange, very strange ..."

Everyone heard the wheels of the coach rumbling, its reins jingling, and its driver's whip cracking, except for the champion card player who was still dealing and still repeating, "I must win ... I will win ... With this hand I will win ..."

All the cards were dealt. The other players picked up their hands and began to re-arrange them into order, their faces immobile, unreadable, impenetrable. They were giving nothing away. The champion card player did not pick up his cards. Instead, he looked at his hand lying face-down on the table, just as he had dealt them. Somehow, though he didn't know how, he knew that he had got what he had asked for. He had a winning hand and there it was, lying in front of him, just waiting for him to pick it up.

"I'm going to win you know," the champion card player announced.

The other players stopped sorting their cards and looked at him.

"That hand," said the champion card player touching the cards in front of him, "that hand is deadly. It's going to wipe you out, the lot of you. I know it. I haven't seen the cards yet but I know I'm the winner. Oh yes, it's over, gentlemen, so take my advice. Throw your cards down, surrender, and spare yourselves a lot of pain."

"Oh stop it ... It isn't over yet ... Pick up your cards and play," the other players murmured.

The champion card player picked up his cards and looked at what he had.

"Oh yes," he said, "oh yes, I'm right."

And he was. He won the game. He won the night. He won the tournament. He won the gold sovereigns in the drawstring bag ...

With his winnings in one pocket, and his cards in the other, the champion card player left the shebeen and set off for home. A

moon hung in the sky, lighting his way. He followed the road. He climbed a gate and crossed a field. He came to a little river. His house was on the other side. A set of stepping stones stretched from one bank to the other across the water. All he had to do was to step on one stepping stone after the next and in a few moments he would be across. Then it was up the far bank and along a bit of a path and he was home.

The champion card player put his foot onto the first stepping stone and then the second stepping stone and then the third, and he was about to step onto the fourth, half-way across, when a table appeared, blocking his way. It was small. There was a candle on the table, its flame very small and pale in the darkness. And there was someone sitting on the other side of the table, though the champion card player couldn't see their face because it was shrouded by a hood.

"What do you want?" said the champion card player. The figure pointed at the table.

"You want to play?"

The figure nodded and as he did the champion card player had an intuition. He had to play. He had no choice.

The champion card player put his hand into his pocket. He felt his pack. The cards were familiar. He knew their feel, their worn frayed edges, their smooth backs and fronts. But then he would, having played with them for years. Indeed, they were so familiar he felt they were almost part of him, like his hands or his face.

He drew the pack out of his pocket. The dark figure extended his hand. He wanted the pack. He wanted to deal. "Ah," said the champion card player. He had his second intuition. He was never going to win against this adversary. He was going to lose. And then, having lost, he would die. That's how it would go. First they would play, then he would die.

The figure rapped the table with his knuckles. He wanted the pack. He wanted it now. That's what this meant. The champion card player knew that. Only he didn't want to play. Who'd want to play, knowing what he knew? The trouble was, he had no

alternative. He couldn't get by unless they played. He was stuck. Or was he? Maybe not. He had his third intuition. If he got rid of his pack, they couldn't play, could they? So there was his answer. The pack. He simply had to get rid of the pack. All he had to do was to throw it away. Once he did that, that would be that. The figure would vanish, the table would vanish, and he would be able to pass.

The champion card player dropped his cards into the river and the table and the dark figure vanished, exactly as he had known would happen.

The champion card player crossed the river by the rest of the stepping stones, climbed the bank on the other side and followed the path to the door at the back of his house. He grasped the handle and put his thumb on the thumb plate. He pushed down but the thumb plate wouldn't depress. No matter how hard he pressed it wouldn't move. He shook the door, thinking something had caught inside which agitation would rectify. But no, nothing. The plate wouldn't budge and because it wouldn't, he couldn't lift the bar inside to open the door. He was locked out of his own house it seemed.

The champion card player stepped back and rooted on the ground for a stone. He found one. He threw it at the window above and hit the glass. The noise made by the stone when it hit the glass was a sharp one. His bedroom was on the other side of the glass. His small plump wife was asleep in that room in their soft, downy bed.

A short pause and then the window opened and the champion card player's wife put her head out. Her shoulders were white. She was wearing a nightdress.

"Oh my God," she said.

"No, not him, it's me, your husband," said the champion card player. "There's something wrong with the back door. It won't budge. Will you come down and let me in?"

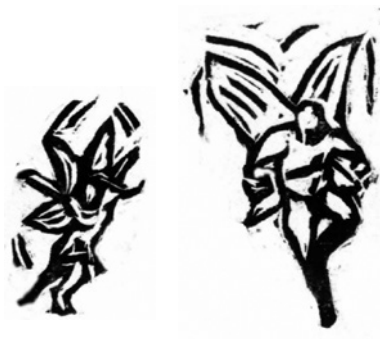
His wife came down. She opened the door. He went in. He bolted the door. He followed his wife up the stairs. She got into

bed. He got into bed. She put her arms around him and kissed his neck.

"I was having this terrible dream," she said, "when that stone on the window woke me. In the dream I was asleep, you know, how you can be asleep in a dream? But then I was woken. I was woken by sound of the Dead Coach rumbling past our house, its wheels rumbling, its reins jingling, and the driver's whip cracking. And in the dream I opened my eyes and I turned to where you lay in the bed beside me. And you were there, only I couldn't hear you breathing. You were completely still. I didn't like that one little bit. So I put out my hand and I touched your face. You weren't cold, you were still warm, but I knew that you were dead. I knew from the way your flesh felt, you were gone, the life force had left you. And I also knew you'd died beside me at the very moment I'd been dreaming of the Dead Coach. And that was the exact moment when your stone hit the window and woke me up."

The next morning the champion card player went back to the river to see if any of his cards were still there. There were still a few snagged against the bank and every one, where its face had been, was pure black. It was shocking to the champion card player to see this but he knew what it meant and he knew what he had to do and he did it all without demur.

He gave the drawstring bag full of gold sovereigns to the priest for the relief of the poor of the parish. He did not buy a new pack to replace the one he'd thrown into the river. He never touched a card again, and he never played cards again, either. Ever.









Sleepy Pendoodle

A version of this story was collected by Henry Glassie and children's author Malachy Doyle has also made a delightful book of it. This version of mine has grown and evolved through many tellings up and down the country.

There was an old man and an old woman who lived in a little house not far from here. They were happy and content for there was just the two of them and they had a dog a big black dog, a sleepy old thing that lay quiet and content under the kitchen table.

One day they started to notice that there was something wrong with the dog. She started climbing up onto the chairs and going in under them. She'd be chasing her tail and rolling on the hearthrug. There was definitely something wrong with the dog and they thought that maybe she had fleas. So they gave her flea powder but that didn't settle her. Indeed she seemed to be getting worse so they decided that they would have to bring her to the vet in Enniskillen. So they got on the bus and they brought the dog into the vet and the vet put the dog up on the table. He made the dog open its mouth and put out its tongue. He shone a light in one ear and out the other. He felt the dog's stomach and he lifted the dog's tail and looked at the bits we don't want to see.

Then he stood back and announced 'I've got news for you.'

The old man and the old woman were all in fear and trembling lest it be bad news. 'It's good news,' said the vet. 'There's nothing wrong with the dog. The dog is going to have puppies!'

'Oh that's wonderful,' said the old man and the old woman.

'That's fifty quid,' said the vet, which wasn't so wonderful.

So they went home and they made a more comfortable bed for the dog under the kitchen table and every morning the old man would get up out of bed, he'd go one, two, three, and sit up, and then he'd put his feet in his slippers and he'd go down to the kitchen and look in the dog's bed to see if there were any puppies. And every day he looked there were no puppies and the old couple stopped being excited, and soon they were disappointed, bitterly disappointed and soon they were angry for they had given the vet fifty quid and there were no puppies, no puppies at all.

But then one morning the old man got up and when he went down to the kitchen he thought he saw something moving in the dog's bed and when he lifted the blanket what did he see but a puppy, one tiny little black puppy, oh the cutest thing you ever did see, with a wee pink tongue and a little tail wagging like mad. The old man and the old woman were overjoyed. It was only one puppy, but one puppy is so much better than none. They forgot all about their fifty quid, I'm tellin' you.

Now, the thing is, when all puppies are born their eyes are closed and they stay right beside the mammy dog the whole time, and this puppy was born on Monday and it kept its eyes closed. On Tuesday the eyes were still closed and on Wednesday. By Thursday the old man was thinking 'isn't it about time that this wee puppy opened its eyes?' And by Friday he kept annoying the old woman by asking her the same question. By Saturday he was convinced that the dog would never open its eyes and by Sunday he was lamenting the fact that the poor wee dog was blind.

'Blind! Blind! What can you do with a blind dog? You can't throw a stick for a blind dog? It'll never bring me my slippers. Fat lots of use as a guard dog. And no good as a sheepdog either.

Imagine a blind dog trying to herd sheep!

The old woman didn't say very much but she was thinking the same.

Anyway Monday came round and the dog still hadn't opened its eyes. Now every Monday the old man went into Enniskillen on the bus to get the groceries and because he was very forgetful they always sat at the kitchen table and made out a shopping list that was as long as a toilet roll before he went and this week they added dog food for puppies to the list.

So off he went into town, but as I have said the old man was very forgetful and sure didn't he forget the list! He forgot the list!

But you know, it didn't really matter, because he went to the same shops every week and he bought the same things. First he went to Asda, then he went to Tesco, then he went to Dunnes and then he went to Lidl and when he had done that he had two big bags of shopping. And since he was in town he thought he might as well have a wander up the middle of the town and see who he might meet. Well he went up town but there didn't seem to be anyone about that he knew. And he went on up until he saw a pub, a pub called Blake's and he decided to go inside and have a drink because he was tired and thirsty.

Now if you ever see ads for drink on TV you'll think pubs are all ceol agus craic and banjos and people yahooing and having a great time but I'm telling you if you ever land into any of the pubs in Enniskillen before lunchtime it's all oul fellows with long faces moaning at each other. And our friend went in and he was more miserable than any of them.

'Me poor dog's blind! Me poor dog's blind!'

Well he got a drink and he sat down and he wasn't there very long until a friend of his appeared all full of the joys of spring.

'Ah how are you doing? Be God, you look awful! Is there something wrong? Is there somebody dead?'

'Aw no, it's worse than that! Me poor wee dog's blind!'

'Blind? Blind? What do you mean blind?'

And so he told him the whole story and as he did a big smile

broke across his friend's face.

'Ah listen, that dog's not blind. Do you see that sheepdog I have, that could see a sheep on the far side of Knockninny rock, well that dog was blind when it was born and I was very worried about it. And there came a woman round the doors selling tickets for a raffle. First prize a week in Kinawley. Second prize two weeks in Kinawley! And I told her about the dog. Well I didn't win the prize but she told me what to do with the dog. She says take the dog up in your arms and cuddle it like a baby. Then you have to say 'Open your eyes, Sleepy Pendoodle, three times, and I guarantee that your wee dog will open its eyes.'

'Will that really work?'

'Not a word of a lie. Sure hasn't my dog won prizes at the County Show. Wasn't she in the Impartial Reporter?'

'Well that's marvellous. 'Open your eyes, Sleepy Pendoodle.' But, there's just one thing. How on earth am I going to remember that. Me head's like a sieve.'

He turned to the other old fellows in the bar and asked, 'Has anyone got a pen?'

Now this is the second myth about Irish pubs, that they are full of poets and writers and intellectuals scribbling on beer mats as inspiration strikes them. That's another pack of lies. Not one pen in the whole place, not one pen. Well, actually, the barman had one, but he decided he was going to have a bit of fun with the old fellow.

'Listen,' he says. 'Do you know what you'll do? All you need to do is keep repeating it out loud over and over the whole way home and you'll not forget it.'

'That's a great idea,' said the old man finishing up his drink, lifting his two bags of shopping and stepping out into the street.

'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle, open your eyes sleepy Pendoodle,' the whole way up the street until he gets near the townhall and the first person he meets is an American.

'Howdy, old timer,' says the American. 'I was wondering if you could direct me to the city hall of Enniskillen? You see, old timer,

my ancestors they left the emerald isle at the time of the great potato famine when all the potatoes died and they sailed across the wild Atlantic in a coffin ship and when they reached the New World they done good, they done real good, and here I am back to search for my ancestors in all the old records in the City Hall. You know, the Births, Marriages and Deaths, or as we call them in the United States, the Hatched, Matched and Dispatched! So tell me old timer just where is the City Hall?’

And the old man turned and pointed at the townhall and said:

‘Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle!’

‘I beg your pardon, old timer?’

‘Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle!’

‘Oh you mean that quaint little building over there? Well, thank you Sir, and have a nice day!’

And the American went over to the Townhall and the old man continued on his way, all the time saying ‘Open your eyes, Sleepy Pendoodle.’

And the next person he met was an actor.

‘Excuse me, my dear fellow, I wonder if you could possibly point me in the general direction of the Ardhowen Theatre. I’m here for the Beckett festival, you know.’

‘Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle,’ said the old man, pointing in the right direction.

‘Pardon, what was that?’

‘Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle.’

‘Oh, I see, you mean it’s over there. Jolly good. Thank you.’

And the actor hurried away, thinking what a strange old fellow, and the old man hurried on thinking what a strange old fellow the actor was too.

So he went down Eden Street and crossed the main road and got to the bus station and just as he did so in came one of those big Bus Éireann buses with the picture of the red setter on the side which had come all the way from Dublin. And on this bus was a little French lady who had come over to Ireland to learn English and she had been on the bus for three and a half hours

because the bus had stopped at every hole in the hedge, Navan, Dunshaughlin, Butler's Bridge and Cavan and all sorts of other places you've never heard of. When we go on long bus journeys we eat crisps and drink coke and sicken ourselves but the French people don't do that. They drink water, mineral water, and this little French lady had been on the bus for three and a half hours and she had been drinking mineral water, and if you'd been on that bus for three and a half hours, and if you'd been drinking mineral water the whole time, there's somewhere you'd need to go pretty urgently and as soon as she got off the bus the old man could see what her problem was.

'Excusez moi, ou est la toilette, s'il vous plait?

Now, of course the old man didn't speak any French but he could see what the problem was by the way she was standing so he turned, pointed and said:

'Open you eyes, sleepy Pendoodle,'

'Merci beaucoup,' said the French lady and she hurried inside.

When she was finished she took out her notebooks and wrote:

'The English for 'The toilets are over there' is 'Open your eyes, Sleepy Pendoodle.'

Well, the old man got on his own bus and the bus driver said 'Where's your ticket?'

'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle,' said the old man, showing his pass.

'Go sit down at the back of the bus,' said the bus driver, for he could see that he was getting agitated. The old man was worried that with all these interruptions he would forget the words. So he sat on his seat muttering 'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle,' and all the people were looking at him thinking he was a bit mad.

And the bus was going bumpity-bump along and all the old songs started coming into his head:

'The wheels of the bus go round and round, round and round' and he'd shout 'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle.'

And then it would be 'Stop the bus I want a wee, wee, stop the bus I want a wee, wee ...' and again he'd shout 'Open your eyes,

Sleepy Pendoodle.'

And then it would be 'Oh ye cannae shove yer granny off the bus, oh ye cannae shove yer granny off the bus,' and again he'd shout 'Open your eyes Sleepy Pendoodle.'

He thought he'd never get home and all the other passengers were wishing he'd get off but eventually the bus driver called out 'That's you stop now.'

So he grabbed his two bags of shopping, got off the bus, opened the gate, went up the lane, opened the front door, went into the kitchen and plumped the two bags of shopping on the kitchen table.

'Well,' said his wife, 'did you get the marmalade and the cheese and the tomatoes and the sardines and the puppy food?'

'Open your eyes Sleepy Pendoodle,' he shouted in desperation.

'No need to talk me to like that,' she retorted, turning away and leaving the room.

He old man bent down and gently picked up the puppy. He cuddled it and rocked it in his arms like a baby. Then he said the magic words, three time:

'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle.'

'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle.'

'Open your eyes, sleepy Pendoodle.'

And with that the wee dog opened its eyes and began to lick the old man's face. He was overjoyed and he called his wife.

She stomped into the room wondering, what's wrong with him now, but when she saw the wee dog running about the floor and its beautiful big eyes open she grabbed the old man by the arm and the two of them started dancing, and if the two of them had been on Strictly Come Dancing they easily would have won it!

So the moral of the story is if you every have a little puppy that's blind you know what to do, cuddle it in your arms like a baby and say 'Open your eyes, Sleepy Pendoodle,' three times and the dog will open its eyes.

And you know, it works for kittens, rabbits, white mice and gerbels, guinea-pigs and hamsters. But it doesn't work for ponies.

And do you know why? Because you can't lift a pony and cuddle it like a baby. And I wouldn't try it with a parrot, because it might take your eye out, and if you've got a goldfish whose eyes are closed, well, I'm afraid cuddling it is going to do no good at all, because I'm afraid it's dead!









The Curse of Saint Ita

The Curse of Saint Ita, *Liam Ó Briain*.

I don't know if Saint Ita ever visited County Fermanagh though I think it's highly unlikely. What I liked about this story was its engagement with a quirk of topography. The Sillees river, to which this story refers, does indeed rise just south of Lower Lough Erne (it flows from Bunnahone Lough) but then it goes, not north to the Lower Lough Erne as it ought (or as one might imagine it ought), but south, away from Lower Lough Erne, until eventually it flows into Upper Lough Erne some twenty or more miles away. For an explanation for the Sillees' counter-intuitive progress we should look to hydrography, for there, surely, we would find an answer: but if you don't have access to this branch of science then a Saint's curse must suffice as the explanation for the river's unlikely course and behaviour. The original story specifies a deer but I made the animal a stag: if Saint Ita can change a river's direction she can surely get a stag to carry her books, I reasoned.

NFC: 1014: 78.

Saint Ita was making her way through County Fermanagh. She was heading north and west. Lough Erne was glinting away to her right.

Saint Ita had no persons to keep her company on her journey but she did have her stag with her. He had bone coloured antlers and a brown pelt and he carried two creels on his back crammed with her many books. The creels were tied at the top to a wooden saddle and to one another. They were also tied at the bottom, one to the other, by thick ropes which ran under the stag's belly. The creels were tied like this to ensure they didn't slip and spill Saint Ita's precious books onto the ground.

Apart from the creels, of course, the stag was unencumbered. The stag did not wear a halter. The stag was not led with reins by the saint. There was no need for that. Wherever Saint Ita went, the stag simply followed, just like that. They had been travelling together like this, saint and stag, for many years.

Saint and stag were nearing the bank of a river now, the Sillees river, though the saint didn't know its name yet. The water was deep. The water was black. From somewhere behind them a hare came racing up with two hounds chasing after it.

The stag, startled by the hare and the dogs, lurched sideways, slipped off the bank and pitched into the river. The water was deep. The water was black.

The hare and the hounds, meanwhile, ran away on into the country.

In the water the stag was weighted down by the creels, both piled to their brims with Saint Ita's books.

In the distance the hounds could be heard baying.

The stag tried to shrug the creels off but because of how they were tied he couldn't. So down he went, down he went, down into the deep black water.

Now, from the Sillees' murky depths, bubbles floated up. First they were big. Then they were small. Finally, they stopped altogether. A moment later the stag rose to the surface, eyes open, tongue hanging out, unmistakably dead.

The saint stared in the direction that the hare and the hounds had gone. The saint was raging. The hare and the hound had scared her lovely stag and he had gone in and drowned. The

creatures ought to have taken care and now, seeing as they hadn't, she would teach them a lesson. That the hare and the hounds had not intended to scare the stag and had not intended he should drown, the saint did not take into account. She saw no reason why she should.

The saint closed her eyes.

"You hare, you will never know what it is to escape your pursuers," she said. "And you hounds, you will never know what it is to catch your quarry."

The barks again, much further off this time.

"You three creatures who put my stag in the river, I curse you, I curse you, I curse you," said the saint.

The hare and the hounds immediately turned into three little faraway hills.

The saint opened her eyes. Where no hills had been before she saw the three little hills her curse had made. The sight gladdened her.

Two huntsmen searching for their hounds and the hare their hounds had been chasing – of course they didn't yet know they'd been turned into three little hills – now ran up.

"Have you seen a hare and two hounds following after?" one of the huntsmen asked.

The saint pointed at her stag lying in the river, his face in the water, a few swollen books bobbing around him.

"Yes, they ran past here," she said, "and frightened my stag and didn't he jump in on account of the scare they gave him and drown?"

"It wasn't the hare's intention or the hounds' either that your stag should go in," one of the huntsmen said.

"But even so," said the other, "we're still very sorry."

The saint shook her head. Their explanation and their apologies were not only of no interest but they made no sense to her.

"What do you call this river?" the saint asked.

"The Sillees," said one of the huntsmen.

"My beloved helpmate now lies dead in your Sillees river," said

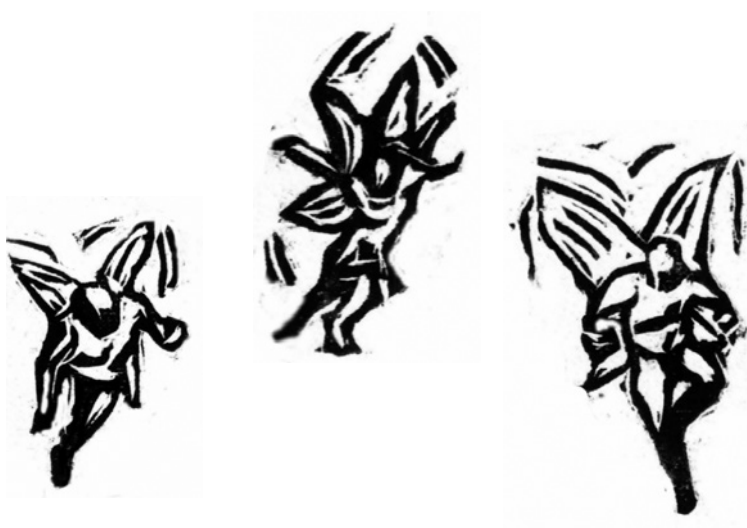
Saint Ita. “Well, because it killed my stag, I now curse your Sillees river.”

Until that moment the Sillees had always flowed north and emptied into the lower lough. But now it was cursed it reversed direction, literally, in front of the saint and the two huntsmen at that exact moment, and it started running south.

And there was more, there was worse. Until this moment the Sillees river had always been generous to fishermen and hospitable to bathers and swimmers. But now it was flowing in the opposite direction all that ended. It stopped yielding fish and it became inhospitable to bathers and swimmers. Anyone who entered its waters it buffeted and tried to drag under, as if it wanted to drown them.

Word of these new circumstances spread quickly. The result was predictable. Fishermen gave up fishing, bathers gave up bathing and swimmers gave up swimming in the Sillees river. Some months later, news of what the Sillees was now like reached Saint Ita in her convent.

“Excellent,” she said brightly. “Now no one goes near it, no one can drown in that awful Sillees river.”









What the Cat told

Collected by Sandy McConnell from Hugh Macken, Drumbargy. NFC 1403: 28-9 (1955). This story is well known across the country. There is a version of it from Co. Cork in chapter six of *The Tailor and Ansty* by Eric Cross.

About one hundred and fifty years ago a man called James Hultaghan was walking over to call on the Maguires who lived at Carna and in the distance he saw a great big cat coming towards him. When it was only a few yards away the cat stood on her hind legs and said 'When you go to Maguires of Carna tell Jane Torry that Tom Torry is dead.'

And away she went leaving Hultaghan standing there wondering what was going on.

When he went into Maguires Hultaghan saw a big cat sitting facing the fire washing her face.

And the woman of the house asked him if he had any news and he said 'no, not a haet'.

'And do you mean to tell me, that you went into Enniskillen today, that you went to the market and wandered about town today and met no-one nor heard any news from anyone?'

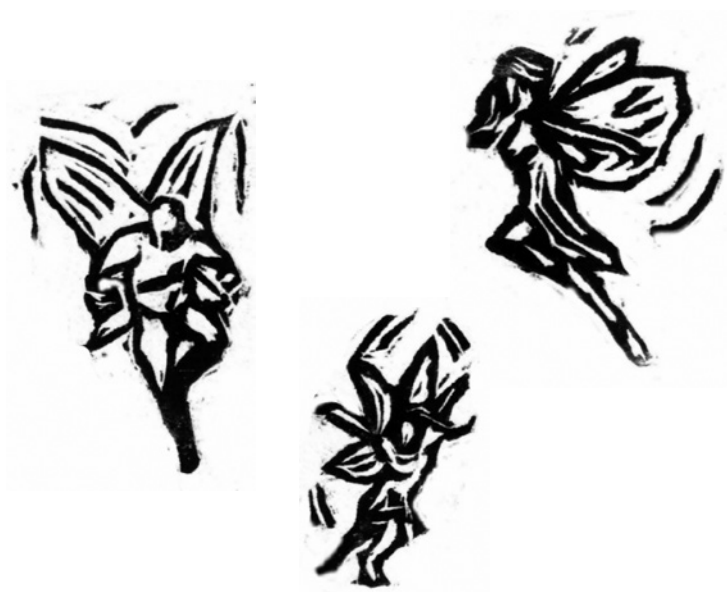
'No, not a haet.'

‘And I’ve been here all day, washing and scrubbing, cooking and baking, and you come in here expecting to be fed and watered and you haven’t the slightest scrap of news or crack back with you!’ Hultaghan sat watching her putting out the cups on the table for a few minutes and then he said:

‘Well there was one thing, as I was coming along the lane I met a great big cat, and I wasn’t going to tell you this because it doesn’t make any sense to me, and I’d be afraid of yous all laughing at me, but the cat told me to tell Jane Torry that Tom Torry is dead.’

With that the cat gave two or three piercing screams and said ‘That’s my poor man, that’s my poor man.’

In her grief she leaped into the fire and scattered the coals all around the hearth. She then leaped onto the back of the kitchen door still screaming ‘My poor man, my poor man.’ At length they got the kitchen door open and away she ran still screaming and was never seen again.









The Old Blanket

The Old Blanket, collected by Liam Ó Briain (1895-1972) from Pat Cullen.

According to the source this was a true story and the old woman was a Protestant and so it's entirely possible personal animus against Protestants (or a particular Protestant) was the hummus from which this sprung. On the other hand, it's also a story with a universal Christian message. So perhaps those who encountered this tale when Christianity was dominant took that away from it ("Be charitable ...") rather than the idea that Protestants were uncharitable per se. The story may also be a way of addressing the famine and the relationship between Ireland's different communities at the time without actually mentioning the famine.

NFC 1104: 135.

Winter. An Irish cabin, tiny, neat, and very clean. There were just two rooms: one was a small kitchen – this was where the hearth was – and the other – it was on the far side of the chimney breast – was a still tinier bedroom. The householder was an old woman, scrupulous, pious, frugal, and this midday she was sat by her fire. Half a dozen sods, carefully heaped, burned quietly on the hearth.

A knock at the door.

"Who's that?" the old woman called across to the door.

"A poor, bare, forked animal," said a voice, clearly female.

The old woman rose from her stool and clumped in her boots across the hard earth floor. She opened the door. The person on her step was a woman with filthy matted hair, a grubby face and green lips from eating grass. She was naked.

"What happened you?" said the old woman.

"I sold all my clothes," said the woman on the step. "I sold everything to buy food and now I'm cold and I'm hungry again."

"Well, you should have thought of that before you sold your clothes," said the old woman.

"Have you anything I could cover myself with?" said the woman on the step. Her voice trembled and she spoke very quietly. She seemed very tired.

"You mean a coat?" said the old woman. "No, I don't have a coat."

"Have you anything at all," said the woman on the step.

"I'll have to see. Wait here."

The old woman closed her door and slipped the bolt across. With vagrants you could never be too careful.

She stamped into her bedroom and lifted the lid of her clothes box. The sour smell of damp wool and old linen rose up.

"Let's see," she said.

She rooted down. She found some blankets, heavy items. She pulled them out. She looked at them. No, she wasn't giving these to the woman on the step. These were far too good for the likes of her. She went back to the box and began to search again. Right at the very bottom she found a grey horse blanket hemmed coarsely with red thread. It had been her father's, when he was a dragoon, and was fifty or sixty or even seventy years old.

The old woman pulled her father's dragoon blanket out, opened it and held it up to the window. A few holes ... actually a lot of holes ... and through the holes she could see the light behind.

"It'll have to do," said the old woman. "Beggars can't be

choosers, can they? No, indeed they can't. She'll just have to take what she gets and be grateful she's got anything."

The old woman carried the grey blanket hemmed with red thread back to her front door and slid the bolt back. She pulled the door open.

"Here," the old woman said, "This is all I have."

The woman on the step took the blanket, threw it round her shoulders and then caught it at the front in her muddy hands.

"Thank you," said the woman on the step.

She turned and crept away, her steps small and feeble. The old woman watched her as she went, the blanket tight around her, her skin showing through the holes in all sorts of places. Now she saw the blanket in use the old woman had to concede there was very little material and a lot of holes. It was in fact worse than she'd realised when she'd looked at it in her bedroom.

"Oh well, it'll have to do," she said aloud. "Something, anything, has to be better than nothing. Isn't that the truth?"

She closed her door and went back to her fire.

Some years later the old woman died and woke up in Hell. A small devil with bad breath cut off all her clothes with a special scissors adapted for this purpose.

"You can't put me into Hell like this," said the old woman. "I have to have something to cover myself."

The little devil nodded and smiled. He went away and came back. He carried a folded grey blanket hemmed with coarse red thread. It looked suspiciously like the blanket that had belonged to her father, the one she'd given to the woman who called herself a bare, forked, animal. The little devil handed the blanket to her. The old woman opened it. It was indeed the one she'd given away to the woman who'd come to her door and begged for something to wear and it hadn't changed since she last saw it. It was still mostly holes and not much material.

The little devil opened a door and jerked his head at the room on the far side. It was huge and dark and full of fire. The old woman covered herself with the blanket and walked through. The

door closed behind.

The old woman was now in a world of terrible heat. The skin which showed through the holes in the blanket immediately began to blister, whereas the skin that the blanket covered did not. Was there a way to have the whole of her body covered and so not burn anywhere?

She began to shift the blanket around but there were always holes somewhere and so some part of her was always exposed and in agony.

And that's how she spent eternity, moving the blanket endlessly about in the hope of a miracle but never managing because there were always holes somewhere.

After she'd suffered for a good while like this, the old woman was allowed to go back home to Kilcoo for a night's respite. When she got there she met a woman on the road who recognised her.

"How's the next world?" the woman asked.

"I'm lost," said the old woman, "lost entirely. I'd the chance once to give away a good blanket to a poor woman and if I'd done that I'd have a way to keep the heat of Hell off my skin. But I gave her this old blanket of my father's, which as you see is full of holes, and every way I swaddle me up there's always bare skin showing somewhere, so there's always a way for the heat to come at me. I'm never out of pain but there you are. Isn't that what Hell is? Isn't it the place where you go to suffer for every wrong you've done here in this world?"









The Dogs

In Fermanagh when we say that someone has gone to the Dogs it does not mean that they have become disreputable. It simply means that they have gone into the mountains near Derrygonnelly where there is a district known as 'the Dogs.' The Dogs are two summits named after Finn McCool's two favourite hunting hounds, Bran and Sceolán.

The Irish name Sliabh Dá Chon (two dog mountain) is mentioned in Dolan's History of Fermanagh (1718) and by Tomás Ó Caiside (An Caisideach Bán) in his memoir c1740. An LP of local traditional music released by Claddagh Records in 1989 called Dog Big and Dog Little featured Ben Lennon, Séamus Quinn, Gabriel McArdle and Ciarán Curran.

The following story explains how the place got its name.

It happened that Finn McCool was travelling through this country when his two dogs raised a hare and gave chase. They chased the hare through hill and dale but they could not catch her. And they chased her up Knockmore and she kept running right to the edge of the cliff and the dogs were running so fast that they couldn't stop when she turned away and they went straight over the cliff and were dashed to bits on the jagged rocks below.

Now Finn McCool was furious when he saw what had happened

to his dogs and he lifted a stone and threw it at the hare and hit her on the head and knocked her cold. He went over to get her but the hare came round and started staggering away with blood coming from a wound on her head. He followed her across the fields, up a lane and into an old cottage and when he went inside he found an old woman lying stretched dead on the hearth with a big gash on the side of her head where the stone had hit her. She wasn't a hare at all but an old witch and before she died she had performed her magic on the two dead dogs, turning them into rocks under the shadow of the mountain, a big dog and a little dog, and you can still see them there today at a place called The Dogs, Dog Big and Dog Little, Sliabh Dá Chon, near Derrygonnelly.









The Alibi

This unusual story combines sharp critique of the 'fit-up'² with ghoulish content about a graveyard, the bodies of the dead that lie there and having to meddle with these in the dead of night (themselves also well-known tropes). In the original the murder is to happen in Boho, County Fermanagh, while it is in Glenfarne, County Leitrim, that Rattler the robber creates his alibi by performing the gruesome task he performs. I've reversed this, so the murder is in Glenfarne and it's in Boho that Rattler the robber forges his cover story. The shebeen details I've lifted from William Carleton.

NFC 972: 484.

² And who'd have thought this practice, which we associate with Irishmen and women convicted in England of crimes of which they were innocent during the 1970s, has such deep roots in Anglo-Irish history?

Rattler the robber, whose real name was John Meehan, was in a wood beyond Boho, County Fermanagh. It was evening and he had built a fire and he was sitting smoking his clay pipe and listening to the birds murmuring in the trees. It was warm, the birdsong was lovely and the tobacco he was smoking had put

him into a mild trance. He was happy.

"Rattler," he heard along with the crack of a piece of wood underfoot. Rattler the robber recognised the voice. It was one of his associates. He looked up and watched the fellow pad towards him. Turk was plump and slow and carried a cudgel.

"What brings you?" said Rattler the robber when Turk got up to the fire.

"Bad news," said Turk.

"Don't bother to sit then," said Rattler the robber. "Spit it out."

"There's a man to be killed later in Glenfarne." This was in County Leitrim.

Turk supplied the details: the name of the men who were to do it (there were four) and the name of their victim, a farmer who had informed against them, or so the four men who were to carry out the murder believed.

"They'll go the house when your man is asleep," said Turk, "break the door down, run in, pull him out of his bed, smash his teeth, rip his ears off, slice his tongue out, dock his ears and nose, break all his bones, chop off his head and burn him in the fire."

"Is that all?" said Rattler the robber. He pulled on his pipe but it had gone out.

"What do you mean is that all?" said Turk. He was loyal but slow.

"I need to have a think now," said Rattler the robber, "but I find when you're around, Turk, I can't think. So would you do me a favour? Would you just go?"

"Oh." Turk padded away. Rattler the robber re-lit his pipe and stared at the flames.

"This murder will be left on me," he said. "I know it will. I need a cover."

Dusk fell. The birds stopped singing and the light became inky blue. Rattler the robber got up and went to the hollow tree which doubled as his store. He found a silver shilling and put it in his pocket. Then he fetched out his reaping hook and a whet-stone. He sat back at the fire and rubbed the stone up and

down, and up and down.

S ... h ... ue ...s ... h ... ue ... s ...h ...ue ... The malicious sound of the whet-stone on metal filled the air.

Once he had the cutting edge gleaming nicely, Rattler the robber sliced his hook at a tall grass stem beside him to test its mettle. The blade cut cleanly, effortlessly and the grass length fluttered downwards.

“Oh yes,” said Rattler the robber. “She’s as keen as she’ll ever get.”

He stowed his whet-stone, re-tied his neckerchief and combed his hair with his fingers.

By now it was pitch dark. There was no moon showing through the leaf canopy. The night would be a dark one. A very dark one.

“And that’s why it’s been chosen by those murderers as the night they’ll do their killing,” Rattler the robber said. “If ever there was a night to do a murder this is the one.”

Rattler the robber set off. The darkness didn’t matter a bit. His bare feet found their way along the twisting narrow path through the trees and out onto the road that led to Boho. Here, now he was out of the wood, it wasn’t quite as dark as it had been in the wood. He could see his bare feet, the reaping hook, and later, when he came to Boho, he could make out the gable ends and the eaves of the houses. There was no one around and no one stirred as he went on. He heard a dog bark. He heard a door open and close. He heard a child laugh. He reached the shebeen. He heard the soft susurrus of talk peculiar to men when they are drinking coming from inside.

Rattler the robber opened the shebeen door and peered in. The shebeen keeper stood opposite the entrance at a table with his flagons of whiskey and a heap of empty eggshells in which he served the drink. There were a couple of candles guttering beside him, their light wavery and yellow. The drinkers sat around the edges of the room on forms and stools. There was a fire. Its turf embers glowed orange and red.

“God bless this house,” Rattler the robber called. All talk

stopped. All the drinkers knew Rattler the robber and they were all a bit frightened of him. They were all a bit in awe of him too. He stepped in. The door closed behind. A second step, a third step. Under foot, flattening to smithereens, an eggshell. There were eggshells all over the floor, everywhere. This was because, once they'd finished, it was the custom for drinkers to throw their empty shells on the floor. When they got their next drink they got a fresh shell and who was to say but it mightn't be bigger than the last and so hold more whiskey. In point of fact the shebeen keeper was careful to supply the same measure every time so the shell size didn't matter. The shebeen keeper said nothing though about this. Of course he didn't. Let them the drinkers think what they wanted, he thought. What did he care?

"Who here is up for a wager?" called Rattler the robber.

"Not with you," said someone, "seeing what you're carrying."

"You mean this, my hook?" Rattler the robber raised his reaper and swiped the air with it a few times. The hearts of several of the men in the shebeen raced a little faster. This didn't bode well. What was Rattler the robber up to?

"Hey, Rattler," called the shebeen keeper. "Put that away. This is an orderly house. No fighting in here."

"You weren't listening," said Rattler the robber firmly, "which doesn't surprise me because you don't as a rule. Let me run this past you again. Did I say anything about a fight? No, I didn't. I said, 'Who here is up for a wager?' Got it? And here it is ... the wager ... which of you will go to the graveyard, now, get into a grave, pull up a coffin, fetch out the skeleton and cut off the skull with this reaping hook?"

"Are you serious?" said a voice in the darkness. "That's what you're asking one of us to do?"

"I certainly am," said Rattler the robber. He took out the shilling he had earlier put in his pocket and held it up. "And here's the proof that I'm serious about this wager. I'll pay a shilling, this silver shilling, to the man who will cut the skull off a skeleton and bring it back here."

Around the shebeen various voices sounded:

"I wouldn't do that ... Me neither ... He's up to something ... It's a trick ... Of course it's a trick ..."

"It isn't a trick," said Rattler the robber. "It's a wager. A shilling for a skull. So who of you wants this lovely shilling? All you have to do is go to the graveyard, cut off a skull, and bring it back. Any takers? It'll be the easiest shilling you'll ever earn."

Nobody spoke.

"So no one wants to take the challenge?" said Rattler the robber. "Well I never. I had you gentlemen down as stout hearted fellows. It turns out I was completely wrong."

"Don't you get it, Rattler?" said the shebeen keeper. "They're not biting. They don't want to take your wager."

"No, we don't," agreed a voice.

"And Rattler ..." The speaker was an old man sitting near the fire. "Tell us this. Would you do it? Would you go to the graveyard and cut the skull off a skeleton?"

"Of course," said Rattler the robber. "Give me a shilling old man and I'll do it."

"And where would I get that kind of money?" said the old man. "I don't have a shilling."

"Nobody has," said the shebeen keeper who suddenly feared good money was about to be wasted on this nonsense which would be better spent buying his whiskey.

"If you all put a ha'penny or a farthing in a hat, you'll make a shilling easy," said Rattler the robber.

The various voices again:

"Oh right enough, if we all chip in ... I'm game, are you? ...

Come on, let's do it ... This I want to see ... Let him bring a skull back ... This'll be a tale to tell our grandchildren ..."

A hat went round. The clink of coins. The old man counted.

"Here's your shilling then," he said.

"Well, you hold that and you hold my shilling too," said Rattler the robber.

He strode across to the old man and slapped his shilling into

his hand.

“So, who wants to come and watch?” shouted Rattler the robber. “Any takers?”

There were no takers.

“Well then, I’ll just have to dragoon someone.”

He grabbed the drinker closest to him by his collar and lifted him to his feet.

“You’ll do,” said Rattler the robber.

“Ah now, leave me out of this,” said the man. He had dark eyes, round shoulders and a timid disposition. He was a dung collector by profession.

“Quit complaining,” said Rattler the robber.

He pushed the unfortunate dung collector across the floor and out the door.

“A nice skull, gentlemen, will be coming back shortly.”

Rattler the robber followed his witness out and the door closed behind him.

Once again the whirl of talk:

“Will he do it? ... Will he really get a skull do you think? ... Some evening this has turned out to be ...”

Some time later, Rattler the robber returned with the dung collector and not one but three skulls. They were old and yellow and grimy with earth.

“Have a look at these,” said Rattler the robber.

He handed the skulls to different men and then went to the old man who held the wagers.

“I believe I’m due my shilling back plus the same again.”

“That’s right,” said the old man.

“Well, just so you know the cut of me, you take my shilling and you take your shilling and you give both to the shebeen keeper and we don’t stop till we’ve drunk two shillings out.”

“Oh yes,” whooped the shebeen keeper who’d been feeling low at the thought of a shilling that could have been his being lost but who now realised he was about to have two shillings he hadn’t counted on, which made him very happy.

Rattler the robber and the shebeen customers drank through the night. Sometime, in the very early morning, a party of yeomen flooded in.

"Right," shouted the yeoman captain. "Rattler, out. We know what you done in Glenfarne last night. You butchered a poor fellow, so you did. Don't say you didn't. You didn't. Those are the facts. So come on, come quietly, you know what happens now. You murdered a man, so you're going to swing for it."

The voices started:

"Take your hands off Rattler ... He done nothing in Glenfarne ... He was never in Glenfarne ... He was here in Boho all night ... He came here yesterday evening, offered a wager ... A shilling for any man who'd dig up a skeleton and cut off its skull ... No one accepted the wager so he went to the graveyard himself with the dung collector here and lookee, didn't he dig up these three skulls ... The dung collector will tell you about that bit... Then he and the dung collector came back and didn't they bring the three skulls back?... Since when we've spent the night drinking the wagers ... No, no, the Rattler, he were never in Glenfarne, so he couldn't have this murder you say he done ... No, no, he couldn't done that ... He was here all night either in the graveyard or here in the shebeen ..."

The yeoman captain asked a lot of questions. At first he was disinclined to believe what he was told but the voices were so emphatic and so unanimous that in the end he had to accept Rattler the robber had been there all night like everyone said. So as dawn broke and the cocks started crowing, he took his detachment back to barracks empty handed.





Maguire and The Devil

This story was collected by Andrew Farry of Bigh, Tempo from his 80 year old mother who lived at Carnaguiltagh in 1949. It appears in NFC 1253: 386-7.

Lord Maguire of Tempo Manor sat in his study every day going through his account books to make sure every penny was accounted for. He was determined to accumulate great wealth so that he could enlarge his castle and his estate. In the evenings when his day's work was done he retired to his library and did a different sort of reading, strange old books that told dark tales of the black arts. And as he studied these bad books he came to realise that there were ways of making money that would not be approved of by priest or parson. He learned that the devil himself would give out money but that there would be a heavy price to pay, especially if one did not keep the bargain. And the more he thought about this the more he thought it would be worth the risk for if he had the money he could add a tower to his castle and lay out beautiful gardens and build new stables for his horses. And one evening when he was sitting in his library in the candlelight he noticed that there was someone sitting in the armchair opposite. It was the devil himself, well dressed and with a big smile on his face.

‘I’ll give you a thousand pounds for twenty years’ said the devil. ‘But after that you’ll come with me.’

And the man thought of all that he could do with one thousand pounds and he did not think about how quickly twenty years would pass or what he would do when the devil came to take him away. So he shook hands with the devil and signed an agreement and the very next day he received a letter telling him that he had been left one thousand pounds by a long lost relative.

Well the twenty years went by in a flash, and although the man had made many improvements to his castle he still wasn’t happy with it and one evening when he was sitting in his library in the candlelight reading one of the black books he looked up and there was the devil sitting in an armchair opposite him with a great big smile on his face. The devil put his hand inside his coat and pulled out the agreement.

‘It’s time for you to come away with me,’ he said. ‘Remember we have an agreement.’

‘Of course,’ said the man. ‘Just let me go and get my coat.’

So the man went out into the hall and told his servant to run and fetch the parish priest as the devil was in the library.

The man was still talking to the devil, telling him how he had spent the money and offering to show him around when the parish priest came in.

‘What business have you here?’ demanded the priest.

‘I have an agreement with this man’ said the devil. ‘I have only come for what is my due.’

‘Let me have a look at that document,’ said the priest, handing the devil a sally rod. And the devil put the agreement on the sally rod and passed it to the priest. The priest took one look at it, folded it and put it in his pocket. Now once the priest had the papers the devil lost all control over Maguire.

‘I cannot go away from here empty-handed,’ said the devil. ‘I must bring a life back with me.’

‘You may take the sheepdog for all I care,’ said Maguire.

‘Yes,’ said the priest. ‘Take the sheepdog and go back to where

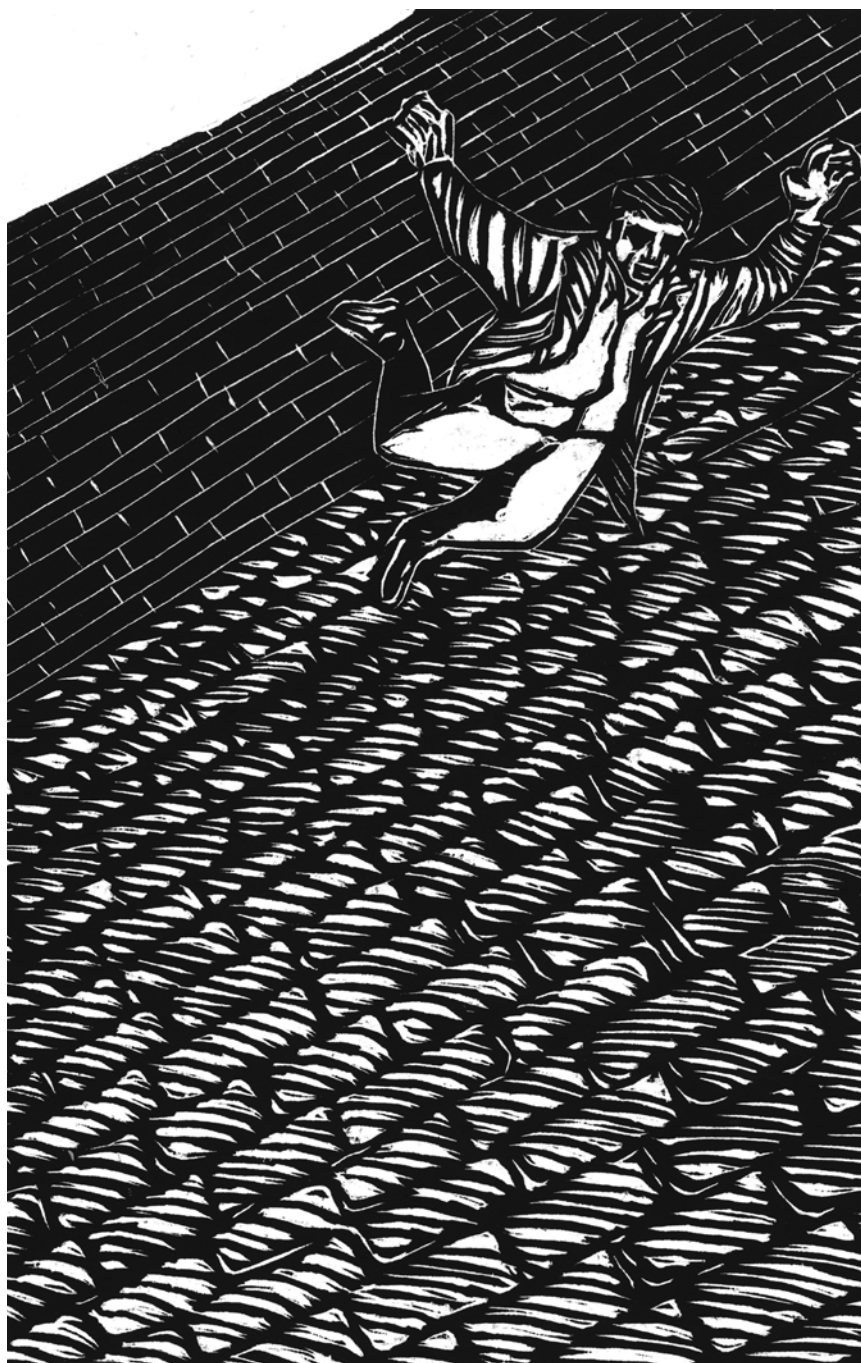
you came from.'

So they got up and went out to the front door and Maguire whistled for the dog which came running up to them. But when the dog saw the devil he turned and ran away and the devil ran after him and the dog ran right into the lake in front of the castle and the devil went in after him and right at that moment there was a flash of lightning that lit up the pale faces of the priest and Maguire standing on the doorstep and there was a great crash of thunder that made them tremble with fear.

They turned and went back into the library.

'Now,' said the priest. 'I think you owe me some money.'







The End of the World

Liam Ó Briain got this from his father. This strange allegorical story speaks (at least to me) of the way a rural community can thwart itself just as much as the forces that oppress it.

NFC 1014: 168.

On long summer evenings some of the older villagers liked to sit in the sun near their graveyard and talk. This evening their talk was of the end of the world. As far as they knew, the end of the world was some way west of their village.

"We've always known the world has an end," said one of the villagers. The speaker's name was Peter. "Yet why have we never gone looking for it? Can anyone tell me?"

"Because we're frightened, if we ever found it, of falling off," said another. This man's name was Paul.

"But really, when you think about it, what have we to be frightened of?" said Peter. "If you went looking for the end of the world, and then you found it, you'd know to be careful, wouldn't you? You wouldn't walk up to it and go, 'Oh, here's the end of the world' and then fall off. Of course you wouldn't. So to be frightened of falling off like we are is ridiculous. We just wouldn't fall off. Surely we all know that?"

This made a lot of sense to those sitting around listening and they all said, "You're right."

"In which case," said Peter, seeing an opportunity here now he'd persuaded his listeners they wouldn't fall off, "let's convene a village meeting, and I will propose as a motion that we organise an expedition to find the end of the world. What do you say?"

Everyone thought this was a splendid idea. So a meeting was convened and Peter's motion was put to a vote. The response was unanimous. The village would send an expedition to find the end of the world. Now all that remained to do was to select who'd actually go. Peter stood up.

"Who'll put their name forward?" he asked.

Every hand in the room shot up.

"Right," said Peter, "I'll write the name of every villager on a bit of paper and put them all in a hat and then I'll pick out twelve," he said. "They'll be the party we send out. Twelve apostles to find the end of the world."

Everyone agreed. Twelve villagers were selected to be the twelve apostles. Six were women, six were men. As it turned out, Peter was one the men selected to go, and Paul was another.

The next morning the twelve apostles got themselves ready. They all polished their boots until they shone. You can't go to the end of the world unless your boots are shiny. Everyone was agreed on that. Then the men put on their Sabbath suits and their long black coats and their wide brimmed hats and the women put on their Sabbath frocks and their black coats and their straw bonnets. You can't go to the end of the world unless you're in your Sunday best. Everyone knew that. Then they gathered what they needed for the expedition – ropes, axes, knives, spades, blankets, oatcakes, cheese, honey and whiskey. You can't go to the end of the world unless you have the right necessities. Everyone knew that. Then the twelve apostles gathered at the westerly end of the village with their tools and their provisions. Everyone else from the village was there to see them off.

"Goodbye twelve apostles," everyone shouted, "and good luck

with your search for the end of the world.”

“And good luck to you also,” the twelve apostles replied, and then they walked into the west and vanished from sight ...

The twelve apostles walked and walked. After three days they reached a wall. The wall was made of brick held fast with yellow mortar. As far as everyone could see it was about as high as four apostles arranged head to toe in a line, and the top was wide and flat and easily broad enough for someone to stand on.

“I say we build a ladder,” said Paul, who was a tailor and even an occasional tent maker, and therefore handy and good at making things, “and then we send someone up to see what they can see.”

The apostles agreed to this plan unanimously.

Two tall trees, as tall as the wall was tall, were located. They were chopped down and trimmed. Next, footrests were made and lashed on and then the ladder was carried to the wall and set in place. It reached nicely to the top.

“Can I be the one who goes up,” asked Paul, “seeing as it was not only my idea to make the ladder but I also did most of the ladder making?”

There was truth in what Paul said. He’d done most of the work.

“All right,” said the other apostles. “You go up then, seeing as you put it like that.”

Paul climbed up. At the top he got off the ladder and stood on the wall and stared at what ever was on the other side. From below, the apostles looking up could see that Paul had the most extraordinary smile on his face. None of them had ever seen a smile like the smile they could see on Paul’s face.

“What do you see?” the apostles at the foot of the ladder clamoured.

“What do I see?” said Paul dreamily. He shrugged and jumped and vanished from view.

“What? ...” the eleven apostles below shouted. “He’s jumped onto the other side ... what’s he playing at ...?”

For the next while the eleven remaining apostles shouted and raged and fulminated. Then, inevitably, they tired and Peter saw

his chance.

"Listen to me now," said Peter. "This expedition was my idea in the first place. And I was always clear from the start. We would go out, we would find the end of the world, and then we would go back and tell the village what we'd found. That was always the plan as far as I was concerned. The plan was never to go to the end of the world and keep going.

"So here's what I propose. You send me up now. I'll see what's on the other side. Then I'll come down. And how do you know I will? Simple. You've known me all your lives. Have I ever not done what I've said? No, never. I've always done what I've said, because I always do what I say I'll do. You all know this. You know I'll come down and I'll tell you what I've seen. You know I'll tell you the truth. Of course, if any of you want to see for yourselves, well then you can have a look after me. You can all have a look after me for that matter. And then we can all go home to the village and tell them what we've found. What do you say?"

"Seems reasonable," the other ten apostles murmured. "We do know Peter ... we know he's a man of his word ... we know we can trust him. All right ... good plan ... send Peter up."

Peter climbed up. At the top he got off the ladder and stood on the wall and stared at what ever was on the other side. From below, the apostles looking up could see that Peter had the most extraordinary smile on his face. The only other time they'd seen a smile like this was when Paul was at the top looking over.

"What do you see?" the apostles at the foot of the ladder clamoured.

"What do I see?" said Peter dreamily. He shrugged and jumped and vanished from view.

"What? ..." the ten apostles below shouted. "He's jumped onto the other side ... what's he playing at ...?"

Next the ninth apostle went up and jumped ... then the eighth ... then the seventh ... then the sixth ... until finally only one apostle was left, a small old woman with brown eyes who carried an umbrella and who was called Bridget.

"If I go up," she said, "I'll end up jumping off. Well, everyone else has so of course I'm bound to. And then where will we be? If nobody goes back, the villagers will be heartbroken. They'll go, 'Why did none of the apostles come back and tell us what they found?' Then some clever clogs will say, 'Shouldn't we send out a search party?' And everyone else will go, 'Oh yes, that's a good idea.' So they'll send another twelve. They'll come. They'll find the ladder. One after the other they'll all climb up and then one after the other they'll all jump. And then, because the second search party doesn't return, the village will get up a third search party and they won't come back either. So then they'll send a fourth search party who won't come back of course, and on and on it will go until at last there'll be nobody from the village left because everybody will have come and climbed to the top and jumped off. No, no, no, we can't be having any of that so here's what I'll do. I'll chop this ladder into smithereens so nobody else can climb up and jump from the top. And then I'll throw everything away so nobody can build another ladder. I'll throw the provisions away as well. I'll just keep what I need for the journey home. And then I'll walk back and tell them ..." Bridget stopped. "What will I tell them?" Bridget pondered and after a few moments she knew what she'd tell the other villagers once she got back. "Yes, good plan, Bridget," she said. "That's brilliant."

Bridget chopped up the ladder, threw everything away and walked home. When she appeared in the village everyone tumbled out of their houses and crowded round her. Then the shouting started.

"Bridget, what happened? ... where's the other apostles? ... Did you get to the end of the world? ... What did you see?"

"No, we didn't," said Bridget. "We didn't get to the end of the world."

"What happened?"

Having prepared her story it only remained for Bridget, who'd been rehearsing it on the walk home, to trot it out.

"It was night and we were all in a wood," she said. "We built a

fire and lay down on the ground, wrapped in our blankets. The other eleven fell asleep quickly but I couldn't get off to sleep for some reason. Perhaps I knew what was coming. I don't know.

"Anyhow, I got up and I began to walk about. I could see the flames of the fire flickering in the distance. Then I saw these shapes, big and black, lumbering out of the trees. They swarmed around the fire where everyone else was sleeping, then they pounced on the sleepers, snarling and slashing with their paws and biting with their teeth. They were bears. The screaming was terrible. The apostles hadn't a chance. I climbed up a tree so the bears wouldn't see me and watched as they then killed everyone, then ate them. It took them the rest of the night, and all of the following day to do this, and throughout this whole time I stayed up the tree where I was. Then the bears left and I came down. The fire was out. Apart from a few bones, nothing of the apostles was left. Nothing. I buried what there was and fled. And now, here I am."

In the crowd the relatives of the dead began to wail, while at the same time an orphan child, who had no connections with the dead, had thoughts racing through his head.

"How come," he said to himself, "Bridget just happened to be away from the fire when the attack happened? That doesn't seem likely. And then, what's this about her hiding up a tree? Can't bears climb trees? Yes, they can. And how far away was she? Well, not that far. Wouldn't the bears have smelt her? Or seen her? Of course they would. And yet she wants us to believe no bear came along and climbed up after her? No, this story of Bridget's, it sounds made up ..."

But of course he wasn't going to say it sounded made up. No way. So he decided to say something else instead.

"You never got to the end of the world, then?" he said.

"No," said Bridget, "we never got to the end of the world. And what's more, I doubt if we'd kept walking for the rest of our lives that we ever would. The truth is, which now I know because I've been out and I've seen what I've seen for myself, there is no end of

the world. It doesn't exist."

The orphan child doubted this even more than he doubted the story about the bears killing the apostles. In fact, having just heard what Bridget said, the orphan child was now absolutely certain there was an end of the world, and what's more he was certain that Bridget had seen it but wasn't going to say anything about it because of whatever had happened out there. However, because he was only a child, he was never going to say what he thought because he knew that if he did he'd only get a clout and then he'd be sent to bed without his supper, and he didn't want to get a clout and go to bed hungry. So the orphan child said nothing. What he did instead was he thought to himself what he'd have liked to have said, which nobody heard because nobody can hear the thoughts of children.

"When I grow up," he said to himself, "I'm going to leave here and I'm going to go out and I'm going to find the end of the world."



About the Authors & Illustrator

Séamas Mac Annaidh is a bi-lingual writer and storyteller who lives in Belcoo, Co Fermanagh. He has been writer-in-residence for Queen's University, University of Ulster and NUI Galway. He has published six novels in Irish and a best-selling *A History of Ireland* in English. Active in local history circles in Fermanagh he keeps up a busy schedule of lectures, storytelling, writing and editing. He has been researching and recording Fermanagh folklore and oral history for many years.

Carlo Gébler lives outside Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh. His most recent publications (all from New Island) are *The Projectionist*, *the Story of Ernest Gébler*, a biography of his father, *The Wing Orderly's Tales*, and *Aesop's Fables: The Cruelty of the Gods* (a collaboration with the artist Gavin Weston). He teaches at Trinity College and the American College Dublin, and until April ran The Saturday Club for young male and female prisoners in Hydebank College (formerly Hydebank Young Offenders' Centre). He is a member of Aosdána. His play, *The Hydebank Testimonials* (based on the personal testimonies of prisoners), will be performed in Hydebank later in the year.

James Killian is an artist from Boher, Co Westmeath. He graduated from Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology with a First-class honours in Art in 2019. His illustrations are created using the traditional medium of woodcut printing. This is James' first commission.



Folk Tales of Fermanagh pierces the dark heart of the Lakeland county. These local stories ooze with bloodlust, vengeance, magic and a host of strange characters.

Séamas MacAnnaidh and Carlo Gébler have reimagined stories originally collected by the Irish Folklore Commission, published here for the first time.

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