

FAIRY PATHS IN IRELAND & WALES
A Literature and Field Study of Cognised Landscapes
in Two Celtic Countries

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INTRODUCTION

Today we rarely think about the nature of roads in terms other than their being mundane features usually travelled by motor vehicles that connect one place with another. It was not always like this. In the pre-modern world, as far back as we can detect, there were ordinary, everyday roads and tracks along with other *special* routes that had symbolic, ceremonial, spiritual or magical attributes – and sometimes all these properties combined. Even the meeting and parting of ways, what we dismiss as “crossroads” or “intersections”, were regarded as being important locations freighted with supernatural significance. This study looks at a particular example of these special types of route, “fairy paths”. They represent a cognised landscape or “psychogeography” that was laminated onto the physical topography by the folk mind up until Early Modern times.

Several long field trips in Ireland between 1999 and 2003 were required for this work, in two of which I was greatly aided by the Irish field folklorist Eddie Lenihan and in one by folk expert Bob Curran. The fieldwork was also based on literature research (over a number of years longer than the fieldwork), especially in the remarkable Irish Folklore Commission archives in the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin. The main bulk of this material was assembled by full-time collectors working for the Commission, each familiar with the dialect and lore of their respective districts, as well as by many part-time and special collectors. A large proportion of the archive material consists of verbatim transcripts of field recordings made on Ediphone machines and in later years on tape-recorders. In 1937-38 much folklore was brought in by the “Schools’ Scheme” in which schoolchildren throughout most of Ireland obtained lore from family members and friends using specially-prepared guidelines. In total, these archives form a formidable body of data, much of it handwritten, and much of it in Gaelic. It represents a kind of memory bank of oral lore handed down from generation to generation – a situation now rapidly in decline.

Even with access to all these various sources, the finding and geographical plotting of fairy paths proved to be a huge problem. Fairy paths were rarely if ever fully described by folklore sources, and there are naturally no signposts pointing out the courses of these invisible features! Much detective work was required, and it is a fact that more instances were investigated in the field without success than found their way into this study. Apart from the difficulty caused by the vague nature of the references to the course of fairy paths in the available lore, the vast bulk of what information there is came from people now deceased. More than once we had whole neighbourhoods out trying to help us identify specific houses that had been said to be on fairy paths, and it usually ended up with us all scratching our heads in befuddlement. I came to the conclusion that as far as fairy paths were concerned I was making this study a generation too late. So it is that these pages can offer no descriptions of magically glittering spirit highways hovering over the Irish countryside, commencing at clearly defined locations and ending at equally certain destinations; rather, this study contains geographical information on a few rare fragments.

Ontology

I must address a frequently asked question: do I actually believe in fairies and ghosts and spirits, or am I just treating the material simply as folklore? Well, it *is* folklore, and by and large that is how I handle it. It is folklore-in-the-landscape, lore with geographical corollaries of one kind or another. We are dealing with cognised landscapes. They all represent the mapping of mindscapes that were projected onto the physical landscape in past times. Indeed, one of the reasons for conducting research into such features is to gain a glimpse of worldviews that existed long before our modern culture, for it is always a good idea to look at our world from different angles lest we slip into the dangerous belief that our present worldview is the only true one.

Even though my interest in the kind of material contained within this volume is primarily of a folkloric, archaeological and anthropological nature, it does not mean that I think there are no strange, “otherworldly” aspects to the land. In keeping with our venerable ICRL President’s demand for a “science of the subjective”, I suspect that there were probably mysterious

sightings and experiences that formed the specks of grit around which the pearls of lore and belief grew. The reason I think this is because of my own experiences. I remember one summer twilight seeing totally inexplicable yellow-white luminous orbs flickering on treetops at the foot of the Brecon Beacons in Wales, and an overcast late afternoon in Ireland when my wife and I were driving along a lonely country lane: our attention was simultaneously caught by a “something” that materialised on a broad grass verge to our left. It stood about three feet in height and was vaguely anthropomorphic, but there were no details. It looked like one of those densely and repetitively patterned pictures (stereographs) that reveal a three-dimensional image if looked at in a certain way. In this case the thing was a discrete, three-dimensional form that seemed to visually emerge from the texture of a bank of foliage that was many feet behind it. And then it was gone. We were convinced that we had seen something objective, however strange and fleeting it may have been, because we both caught sight of it out of the corners of our eyes at the same moment. All these sightings would fit the description of “spirits” in one form or another. And I have witnessed other, equally odd phenomena, so I would not be so arrogant as to claim that we know absolutely everything about the natural landscapes that surround us. It is just that today most of the human race is removed from such natural environments by urban development. And due to the way we now travel, our artificial lighting that brightens the night, and the culture we dwell in, we rarely if ever see anything strange – though reports of spectral happenings in the great outdoors do still come in from drivers travelling along lonely highways at night. But if we were to spend long periods of time far from city lights in mountains, deserts or forests, especially if in the company of people of a cultural background that allowed spirits into its worldview, our experience might be very different. Many anthropologists, mountaineers, desert walkers and lone seafarers have tales to tell of experiencing phenomena that are inexplicable in a mundane context. Any worldview is very dependent on the cultural context to which it belongs, which makes reality a moveable feast.

GLOSSARY

bier	Framework or cart for carrying a corpse, either in a coffin or in a canvas bag.
bridleway	Pathway used by horse-riders. Usually wider and better defined than a footpath.
churchway	A footpath used by parishioners specifically for attending church in Medieval and Early Modern times. Commonly known in Ireland as a "Mass Path". Churchways were also often used as corpse roads , for carrying the dead to burial in the cemetery of the Mother Church of a parish. These types of paths became associated in the folk mind with ancient, possibly pre-Christian, spirit-lore and in Western Europe were used by specialist diviners for a particular form of necromancy. The folk concepts behind these kinds of paths were very similar to, and often interchangeable with, fairy paths, and with the invisible spirit ways (<i>Geisterwege</i>) of Germany, and the visible straight paths known as <i>Spokenwegen</i> (ghost roads) and <i>Doodwegen</i> (death roads) in Holland. (For more detailed information, see Devereux, Paul, <i>Fairy Paths & Spirit Roads</i> , London, 2003.)
cairn	Heap or mound made up of small rocks.
corpse roads	See churchway .
cup-markings	Artificially-carved round hollows usually appearing with other markings in prehistoric rock art.
Doodwegen	See churchway .
Geisterwege	See churchway .
hamlet	A group of buildings too small to comprise a village.
henge	Neolithic monument comprising a circular area defined by a bank and outer ditch.
hollow road	Track sunk between pronounced earthen banks, usually dating to the Medieval period. Also known as a "sunken road".
megalith	Literally large ("mega") stone ("lith"). Megalithic monuments are therefore those built from large stones. The term is usually applied to structures belonging to the Neolithic era of prehistory.
metalled road	Hard-surfaced road, usually with tarmac or concrete.
motte & bailey	Remnant of a Norman (Medieval era) castle mound (the motte) surrounded by a defensive earthwork (the bailey).
necromancy	Divination by means of communication with the dead.
shamanism	Trance-based system of divination, healing and spirituality. The shaman would use any of a number of methods for entering trance (drumming, chanting, dancing, using mind-altering drugs, etc.), in which he or she would experience "spirit flight", an ecstatic or out-of-body journey to the spirit world (often accompanied by animal spirit helpers). One of the earliest religious expressions, shamanism typically belonged to tribal societies, though more sophisticated versions of it also occurred in structured societies too. The shaman might visit the spirit world to gain supernatural power, to guide the souls of dying tribal members, to rescue the souls of sick people, to divine the future, to communicate with spiritual beings, or to conduct magical battles with enemy shamans and sorcerers. The shaman was healer, priest, conjuror, trickster, magician, entertainer, tribal historian, and storyteller. Versions of shamanism can be found in many parts of the world ("shamanisms"), the ecstatic state being a universal feature of human consciousness, but "classic" shamanism belongs to central Asia. Shamanism still survives in some cultures around the world.
Spokenwegen	See churchway .
stranded track	Poorly-defined track in open country; specifically, the route of a track that has developed into more than one parallel course.
tor	Natural, often heavily eroded, rock summit of a hill. Sometimes applied to a distinctive, solitary hill.
unfenced road	One without hedges or fences running along its sides, so open to the surrounding countryside.

CHRONOLOGICAL GUIDE

[This is a guide only, not an exact chronology.]

Neolithic	c.4000 - c.2000 B.C.
Bronze Age	c.2000 - c.800 B.C.
Iron Age	c.800 B.C. - historical era
Romano-British	Period of Roman occupation of Britain: A.D. 71 - c.410
Anglo-Saxon	c. A.D. 400 - 1000
Medieval	c. A.D. 1000 - 1550
Early Modern	c. A.D. 1550 – 1800
Modern	c. A.D. 1800 - present day

Fairies and their Paths

The spirits we refer to as fairies haunted the countryside in many lands throughout the world, though the best-known tradition in the West is that belonging to the Celtic countries on Europe's western fringe where belief in fairies was strong until a few generations ago, and still lingers among the older population. In the Celtic tradition, fairies were entities who were barred from paradise. They inhabited a middle kingdom between the human world and the Otherworld of the dead – though as we shall see, that was frequently a somewhat blurred distinction. They lived in and moved around the land, but were invisible most of the time to the human inhabitants. Contact between the human and fairy races was most often indirect: fairies would be heard and not seen, their effects felt (such as good/bad luck, illness), and changes they made to house, farmyard or field noticed. The places that they were believed to inhabit or haunt were treated with fear and respect because it was known that interference with them could cause misfortune. Certain protocols had to be followed for humans to keep on good terms with the fairies, who at the best of times could be mischievous and were nearly always a little touchy. All in all, sharing the land with the fairies was a delicate and at times dangerous business.

The Fairy Races

The fairies of old folklore were not the sweet, butterfly-winged creatures of the Victorian fairylore revival. "The metamorphosis from savage nature spirits to the twee sprites of Victorian fancy was the artistic counterpart of the taming of the wild, natural world by industry and human rationality," David Sivier perceptively observes.¹ Medieval and Early Modern fairies flew by means of casting spells, or by riding on twigs, straws, stems of ragwort, or butterflies or moths, and so had no need of gossamer wings.

There was a multitude of types making up the fairy races, and though most were essentially anthropomorphic, there were also fairy animals such as black dogs (which could also occasionally be other colours) and even a few shapeless horrors. The humanoid kind appear in the folkloric record variously as tall men known as the "Gentry" in Ireland, as beautiful human-like maidens or wizened old crones, as dwarf-like creatures and even smaller beings from a few to several inches in height, and as elemental sprites. Fairies could be exquisitely-formed creatures or misshapen, grotesque beings. In European traditions fairies came to have many names covering the whole spectrum of types: sprites, piskies and pixies, sylphs, undines and dryads, the *sidh* of Ireland, the usually kind *glaihtigs* of the Scottish Highlands, the Welsh *Tylwyth Teg*, the wailing banshees of Ireland, and a host of other entities. In Cornwall there were underground spirits such as spriggans and knockers that the tin miners had to keep on the right side of. Certain fairy entities were distinctly sinister, such as water kelpies that sought to devour humans, the redcaps of the Scottish border (their headgear coloured by the blood of travellers they had killed), the ugly yarhkins of the Lincolnshire fens, and the child-eating Black Annis of the English Midlands.

Strange lights were almost always interpreted as fairies, or lanterns held in their small and invisible hands.² For instance, in County Mayo, Ireland, the earthwork of Crillaun was said to blaze with small, winking white lights from time to time, and these were naturally assumed to be fairies.³ By the same token, lights seen flickering on marshland were known as Will-o'-the-Wisp, traditionally interpreted as being a mischievous land spirit ready to lead travellers astray – as was said in Devon, to "pixy-lead" them.⁴ In Wales, mysterious lights were called "corpse candles" (*canwyll corfe*) and were thought to forewarn of a death.

There was also a specific class of fairy creature that the folklorist Katharine Briggs referred to as "hobmen"; these were mainly solitary beings and were called such names as hob, hobgoblin, brownie, boggart, elf, Robin Goodfellow, and, of course, Puck. A hobman could be a wild, country spirit, or a house fairy "That doth haunt hearth and dairy".⁵

One term for a house fairy in England was the charming lob-lie-by-the-fire. In Wales the being was known as a *bwbach*, and described as being brown and often hairy. An old Cornish account of a brownie offers a similar description: "...a little old man, no more than three feet high, covered with only a few rags, and his long hair hung over his shoulders like a bunch of

rushes... His face was broader than it was long... He had nothing of a chin or neck to speak of, but shoulders broad enow for a man twice his height. His naked arms and legs were out of all proportion, and too long for his squat body; and his splayed feet were more like a quilkan's (frog's) than a man's".⁶ In Scotland, by contrast, the brownie was thought of as being a tall man. The relationship between farmer or householder and the domestic fairy had to be a carefully controlled one – the spirit would do certain chores provided it was treated well, but was capable of causing harm if it felt it was not being respected.

Country hobmen or land spirits haunted wild, uncultivated locations. In his *The Faithful Shepherdess*, the playwright John Fletcher manages to mention several land spirits and make an allusion to fairy lights as well:

No Goblin, Wood-god, Fairy, Elfe or Fiend,
Satyr or other power that haunts the Groves,
Shall hurt my body, or by vain illusion
Draw me to wander after idle fires.

Puck is known in various lands and regions by cognate names such as the Irish animal spirit – often taking the form of a black dog – known as the *Pooka*,⁷ the Welsh *Pwca* and *Bwca*, and the French *Pouque*. It is of course also the root of the term “pixies” or, in Cornwall, “piskies”. Puck is a generalised personification of all the land spirits; he is an aspect of Robin Goodfellow, he is hob, he is Will-o’-the-Wisp. He is a prankster who “oft out of a Bush doth bolt, Of purpose to deceive us” as Drayton warns in his *Nymphidia*.

An intriguing factor concerning fairies is that they tended to share virtually identical characteristics with witches’ familiars (the spirits who aided and abetted their supernatural activities).⁸ “There had been a clear connection between fairy-lore and at least some forms of witchcraft from very early times,” Katherine Briggs has acknowledged.⁹ A Cornish folktale, for example, combines witch-lore and fairy-lore in its account of how the infamous Cornish witch, Madge Figgy, would fly out from the sea cliffs at night on a stem of ragwort.

Puritans considered fairies to be devils, and fairies, witches’ familiars, and demons merged and mixed in a late Medieval and Early Modern conceptual merry-go-round.

Fairy Etiquette

In spite of the variety of types, fairies displayed fairly common traits. They had superhuman powers such as flight, invisibility, and shape-shifting – as the seventeenth-century Scottish minister and collector of fairylore, Robert Kirk, put it: “Their bodies of congealed air are sometimes carried aloft, other whiles grovel in different shapes”. All of them could be tricksters, ready to play pranks on mortals, while many were able and willing to punish human beings who annoyed them with quite serious ailments or cause cattle and domestic animals to become sick or die. They could also *take* – that is, abduct – mortals whisking them off to fairyland never to be seen again, or lead them astray out in the night. So how people behaved toward them was considered to be a crucial matter.

In Celtic tradition, a key rule of fairy etiquette was to be indirect in talking about such spirit beings, and then to use a complimentary term. So fairies would typically be referred to as the “Good People” or “Gentle Folk” Ireland. In Wales, the *Tlywyth Teg* means “the fair family”, and other euphemistic terms included *Bendith y Mamau*, “the mother’s blessing”, and even the bizarre *Plant Rhys Dwfn*, “the children of Rhys and the Deep”. If fairies happened to be directly encountered one had to be courteous towards them, and above all to politely decline eating or drinking fairy food, otherwise enchantment – the Rip Van Winkle effect – was bound to ensue.

Fairies abhorred untidy manners and it was considered advisable to leave the house neat at night, with the hearth swept and the fire made up in case *they* visited nocturnally. It was also a good idea to leave a piece of cake or other morsel overnight to keep the fairies happy, and a suit of clothes should be left to repay a helpful domestic fairy such as a brownie. Fairies particularly liked milk, which could be left in a saucer by the hearth or poured over the ground

outside the house; fairies were known to draw blood from hapless hosts who had not otherwise provided for them. Because fairies disliked human beings who interfered with their orderly ways, humans were wise not to obstruct their paths and to warn fairy folk before throwing out dirty water or the night's ashes.

If relations between a human household and fairies deteriorated despite all the appropriate diplomacy, there were various actions usually inimical to fairies that could be tried. These included uttering special prayers or sayings, using iron, wielding a black-handled knife, hazel stick or fire-ember, or sprinkling a fairy or its haunt with holy water. Fairies could also be banished by the crowing of a cock (which had a similar effect on witches and vampires) and, like most spirits, they could not cross running water.

Fairy Places

In Ireland, locales haunted or frequented by fairies were referred to by such euphemisms as "gentle" or "airy" (eerie) places. Major among them were circular earthworks known variously as "fairy forts", *raths*, or lisses (*lios*) among other appellations. Over two thousand of these ring-forts are to be found scattered across the Irish landscape, and usually take the form of circular areas defined by a bank and ditch, often on a knoll or rise in the ground, and now often fringed by thorn bushes or surmounted by a copse. They originated in the Iron Age as fortified dwelling sites, but many of the visible enclosures today date to between 500 -1200 A.D., and a few were in use up until the seventeenth century. Certain ring-forts have underground stone-built chambers or passages thought by archaeologists to have been for dwelling or storage. To generations of country people these forts – or "forths" as they are often pronounced – were seen as one of the most important types of place where the fairies dwelt, living underground, and from which they emerged at night. A fine and famous example of such a site is Lios Ard ("High Fort"), near Kiltimagh in County Mayo. A fellow called Martin Brennan told the Irish historian and folklorist, Dermot Mac Manus, that one summer evening he was working in a field below Lios Ard called "Outer Blackground" when he noticed a score or more human-sized fairy folk on the fort's slopes. The women had their heads covered by shawls while some of the men wore conical hats. Their coats were red or brown in colour. These strange people were good-looking but had startlingly noticeable "penetrating, staring eyes".¹⁰

There is also an old spreading oak at the foot of Lios Ard around which the fairies are said to dance at certain times of the year, and where the blind folk poet, Anthony Raftery, is said to have been offered the gift of poetry and music by the fairies.

This highlights another key kind of fairy site in Ireland: certain trees or bushes. The Irish tradition of sacred trees, *bile*, goes back into dim prehistory: archaeologists found that the Iron-Age hilltop site of Navan Fort in Armagh, Northern Ireland, for instance, had once sported a ritual post thirty-nine feet (11 m) tall that had been fashioned from a two-hundred-year-old oak tree.¹¹ The association of fairies – and sometimes spirits of the dead – with certain thorn bushes is probably an ancient variation on the sacred tree theme. Being such a common tree most thorns were not considered to have fairy associations, so what made one stand out? Typically, fairy thorns are those that are "conspicuously alone" (see Sampler entry 37), whether in the middle of a field or in a hedgerow, or that grow near wells or in fairy forts. Otherwise, it was usually because fairies or shadowy figures had been seen near a bush, or because someone had suffered bad fortune after damaging one. (It is worth remarking here that the old beliefs underwent a resurgence when catastrophe struck the luxury car-maker John DeLorean because it was widely rumoured that a fairy bush had been uprooted during the building of his Belfast factory.) Various other beliefs concerning fairy trees include that they scream or bleed if cut, their wood will not burn, treasure is buried beneath their roots, and many others. Milk was sometimes poured around the roots of identified fairy trees for the Good People.

A third important category of fairy place in Celtic tradition involves the "airy mountain": fairies were thought to dwell inside certain hills and mountains. The singular conical peak of Glastonbury Tor in England was considered a major fairy site: the striking, solitary hill was said to have harboured the fairy king himself, Gwynn ap Nudd. At least it did until St. Collen

banished him and his glittering entourage by throwing holy water over them. A prevailing folkloric theme associated with fairy hills (and prehistoric burial mounds) concerned human beings who happened across the fairy entrances to them and discovered a glittering fairyland within. The mortals concerned would never be seen or heard of again, as exemplified in the folktale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, or else they would become enchanted, and return only decades or centuries later. A parallel strand of lore (particularly in northern lands such as Iceland) maintained that the spirits of the dead also lived within hills. In fact, even as far afield as North America some Indian societies believed spirits inhabited the interior of hills and cliff-faces.

Apart from fairy forts (in Ireland), trees, and hills, other natural locations favoured by the fairies included springs and certain pools and lakes, caves, and wild spots like rock outcrops and small valleys. Some of these places can still be identified by their names. To take a few examples in England, there is Goblin Combe in the Bristol area, and also Goblin Ledge on the Severn Beach. A large natural rock in Dorset is called the Puckstone.¹² On and around Dartmoor, there is Pixies Parlour, a tumble of boulders near the Fingle Gorge, a huge boulder called the Puggie Stone near Chagford, and the Pixies House, a granite grotto with a narrow cleft as an opening on Sheepstor where offerings of pins or pieces of rags used to be left for the pixies.¹³ The fading laughter of Puck echoes in all these place-names, as it does in many others around the country.

Apart from these types of selected natural places, fairies also became associated with some of the prehistoric earthen and stone monuments to be found in Ireland, Britain and Continental Europe. It was believed that prehistoric burial mounds, barrows, were inhabited by fairies, so there is in Wales, for example, a barrow known as Bryn-yr-Ellyllon, "Hill of Elves", or in Dorset there was a Puck's Barrow near Winfrith Newburgh. In Norse lore elves typically lived in ancient burial mounds. A classic piece of English folklore originating in the twelfth century attaches itself to the large Neolithic mound of Willy Howe in Yorkshire. It tells of a horseman passing by it on his way home one night. On hearing singing coming from within the barrow he stopped to investigate and discovered an entrance. Peering in, he saw men and women in the glowing interior enjoying a feast. A goblet of wine was offered to the traveller, but he realised he was encountering fairies so he snatched it, poured away its contents, and rode off with it at such speed that the outraged fairies could not catch him.

Between Aldershot and Farnborough in Hampshire, there is a traffic island with the curious – and ancient – name of Cockadobby Hill. It has been analysed as meaning "major hobgoblin": "cocker", as in the Cockney "My old cocker", means boss, and "dobby" is a term for goblin.¹⁴ The traffic island stands on the site of a Romano-British or later barrow, but various inconclusive excavations have suggested that this surmounted a prehistoric mound. In former times the mound had four tracks leading to it, and these eventually became the motor roads that now meet at it. In the late nineteenth-century, a soldier at a nearby army camp was standing on guard duty facing toward Cockadobby Hill when something struck his sentry box. Gripping his rifle, he peered into the night to see a dark, flitting figure taking huge leaps. Perhaps it was a hobgoblin still playing its pranks...

The idea of "hollow" hills inhabited by fairies extended to prehistoric burial mounds, and there are legends of spirits coming out of such mounds to advise the living, or of shepherds falling asleep on the mounds and having inspirational dreams. These legends doubtless stem from the necromantic tradition of "sitting out", mentioned in the previous chapter.

Stone sites were also associated with fairies. For instance, it was believed that the prehistoric cup markings made on (usually horizontal) rock surfaces in many parts of Atlantic Europe were for libations to the elves, perhaps explaining why sun-wheel carvings common in Scandinavian rock-art were sometimes referred to as the "glory of the elves". In Normandy and the Channel Islands megalithic sites are sometimes referred to as *Pouquelaie*, and name hints similarly survive in England. One of the stones in the Hordron Edge stone circle in Derbyshire, as one example, has been known as the "fairy stone" for unknown generations. It is only one of several "fairy stones" in Britain.

Fairy Paths

When travelling, fairies either flew or else trooped along special paths that belonged to them. They could fly on winged insects or plant stalks, as mentioned earlier, or they could simply fly through the air of their own volition. Robert Kirk stated that fairies could “swim in the air near the earth”.¹⁵ A specific instance was described by an eighteenth-century Welsh witness:

Edmund Daniel of the Arail, an Honest Man, and a constant speaker of the truth, and of much observation, told me, that he often saw them [the fairies] after Sun-set, crossing the Keven Bach, from the Valley of the Church, towards Havodavel ... leaping and frisking in the Air, making a path in the Air...¹⁶

Terrestrial fairy paths – what Kirk called their “secret paths” – connected fairy places generally, and, in Ireland, the fairy forts in particular. Fairy thorns were typically markers or stations along these invisible routes. The paths were usually used by “trooping fairies”, often on their way to battles with other groups of fairies, but other times just by fairies generally to go about their fairy business, about which mortals need not enquire.

But what exact form were fairy paths understood to take? People very often fail to describe roads or routes, omitting to mention whether they were winding or straight, or exactly where their courses ran, concentrating solely on where they originated and went to, and this is usually the case with folklore sources concerning fairy paths. My father who was a rural Irishman always assumed they were straight, and collectors of fairy-lore like Dermot Mac Manus made a similar assumption (see below). Indeed, virtually all the (admittedly sparse) evidence suggests that fairy tracks were straight, but controversy has arisen about the subject and one case in the literature had been cited to indicate that fairy paths were crooked. It is mentioned in the famous book *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* by the American folklorist, W.Y. Evans Wentz, who in the early years of the twentieth century visited all the Celtic lands and collected fairy lore verbatim from people who were elderly at that time. The case in contention concerned an account Evans Wentz was given to the effect that fairies from Rath Ringlestown in Ireland would form a procession, march forth across the land, and “pass round certain bushes which have not been disturbed for ages”.¹⁷ But did this actually describe a crooked route? It could have been the opposite, that the fairies were following a direct course marked by fairy bushes which they had to circumvent in order to proceed along it. This is clearly indicated by the folklorist Patrick Kennedy writing in 1870:

It is known that the hill-folk [the fairies], in their nightly excursions, and in visits of one tribe to another, go in a straight line, gliding as it were within a short distance of the ground; and if they meet any strange obstacles in their track, they bend their course above them or at one side, but always with much displeasure.¹⁸

It would seem that fairy paths, like the invisible or “virtual” spirit routes mentioned in the previous chapter, were perceived to be straight, or at least straight for sections before changing direction. Fairy paths seem to belong to a widespread and deep stratum of spirit lore, parts of which became attached to corpse roads.

The routes of fairy paths – also known as “passes”, “passages”, “avenues”, “runs” – were said to coincide with lengths of old roads and lanes on those occasions where their respective courses agreed. Jimmy Armstrong, an informant of Clare folklorist Eddie Lenihan, explained that one reason people today do not see the strange things at night that folk long ago witnessed was because modern people “are goin’ everywhere in cars these days and they have no time to see anything”.¹⁹ He continued: “But the real reason, I think, is the paths; no one is usin’ the paths an’ short-cuts through the land now compared to the gangs o’ people that were usin’ ’em years ago. There wasn’t hardly a field where people didn’t use to travel, day an’ night ...”. Among the several eerie accounts Jimmy then told Lenihan included an encounter he had in the 1930s with the mysterious figure of a man dressed in jet black. Jimmy was cycling along an unsurfaced country lane near a fairy fort at Ballyroughan, south-east of Sixmilebridge in County Clare, in the early hours of the morning. The strange figure appeared from amongst thick whitethorn bushes, crossed over the road only a few feet in front of Jimmy’s bicycle, and walked down into a hollow in the road containing a puddle of

water without making any sound nor taking any notice of Jimmy, and disappeared into the darkness. Later, Jimmy Armstrong learned that the priest from Sixmilebridge had also seen this curious dark figure on that road when returning from making parish calls late at night. In reply to Jimmy's enquiry as to who or what the "black man" was the priest replied that he came "from the other world". Jimmy also learned that on the same road his grandfather used to have occasional early morning encounters with a black dog that padded along for a few hundred yards before vanishing at a small stream trickling across the road from a little spring. The folklore of Ireland and the British Isles tells that old roads and tracks were typically the haunts of spectral black dogs (see below).

Building Lore

Traditional building practice in Ireland was intimately related to fairy paths, for it was considered dangerous for a building to obstruct or impinge on one. The Irish writer and folklorist Lady Gregory found locals in Clare and Galway using the phrase "in the way" when talking about houses that had unlucky reputations. It became clear to her that the phrase referred to the obstruction of fairy paths.²⁰ Other terms often used for houses thought to block fairy paths was to say that they were "in a contrary place" or "in a path".

Dermot Mac Manus recorded several such instances personally known to him in western Ireland. One case he cited involved a fellow called Michael O'Hagan whose children were being taken ill and dying for no reason the doctor could identify. O'Hagan sought advice from the local wise-woman. She came to his house, and immediately saw that an extension that the man had built to the dwelling "obtruded into a straight line between two neighbouring fairy forts".²¹ The extension was demolished and it was said that the man's remaining child grew up healthy. In another case, Mac Manus describes the problems that beset Paddy Baine's house near the Ox Mountains. The Baine household was plagued with poltergeist-like disturbances and Paddy had to seek advice from the famed wise-woman, Mairead ni Heine. She inspected the building and told Paddy that a corner of the house was interrupting a fairy path. So he brought in a stonemason and had the corner flattened off, after which the disturbances ceased. (There are numerous houses in the western counties of Ireland with their corners modified supposedly in order to correct problems resulting from encroachments onto fairy paths.) Even when care was taken problems could arise, it seems: Mickey Langan had identified a spot for his dwelling not far from the Baines' place and he carefully "looked at a few fairy forts", Mac Manus recounts. "He was not in a direct line between any two of them, and therefore his new home would in no way hinder the progress of the fairy hosts as they swept back and forth on their nightly expeditions."²² But when he started digging the foundations, Mairead ni Heine cautioned him not to continue.

Lore regarding doors and fairy paths was universal in Ireland, and, it seems, throughout Europe. "When the house happens to have been built on a fairy track, the doors on the front and back, or the windows if they are in the line of the track, cannot be kept closed at night, for the fairies must [be allowed to] march through," Evans Wentz was told by Irish informants.²³ Similarly, Moll Anthony, a wise-woman in County Laoise, informed a family suffering disturbances that "the cause o' your troubles are the big dures [doors] – the house is built on a fairy pass".²⁴ "Build up them dures, an' break out the other one," she went on to advise. In other words, fill in the two side doors (that were opposite each other) and open up a new one at the end of the house. Other examples of door lore will be found in the Ireland section of the Sampler.

There were traditional ways of finding out if a planned building would obstruct a fairy path other than by consulting wise women. One was to warn the fairies of an intention to build at a spot. This was accomplished by placing four stones at what would be the corners of the intended building. A smaller stone was then placed on top of every one of these and left overnight; if they were in place in the morning then work could proceed, but if any had been knocked down then work had to be abandoned. A variant on this procedure was to insert sticks in the ground at each of the intended corners of the proposed house or barn, and if they were found knocked down the next morning then it was a sign that the fairies objected. Another fairy-friendly building practice was to select a site by standing in the designated field and throwing a hat into the air and building where it dropped out of the wind. Apart from

identifying a location the fairies approved of, it had the happy side-effect of identifying a sheltered place.

General building lore in Ireland included the rule to avoid using white quartz in stonework when building anything, be it a field wall or a house, because quartz is a fairy stone. (Intriguingly, the Neolithic monuments in Ireland – and elsewhere – made great use of quartz, and seemingly in a ritualistic way.) Another general – and rather curious – piece of lore warned not to extend a house in a westerly direction unless into space already artificially enclosed, such as a garden or yard. “To extend a house into a field or any open ground or across a path lying to the west is fatal,” Mac Manus observed.²⁵

Fairies and the Dead

Fairies share an ambiguous relationship with spirits of the dead. “Ever since the first traceable beginnings of fairy beliefs the dead have been curiously entangled with fairies in popular tradition,” Katherine Briggs noted.²⁶ The Hungarian folk scholar, Eva Pócs, similarly observes that there is a characteristic fairy mythology connected with the dead, and that in some examples of folklore “the fairies and the dead ... are practically the same creatures”.²⁷ Lady Gregory noted that there was a belief in the west of Ireland that the dead and fairies were different kinds of spirit, but that they mingled with one another, so that when the fairies pass by in a blast of wind we should say some words of blessing, “for there may be among them some of our own dead”. Evans Wentz was informed in Armagh that fairies were the spirits of dead friends, while in Brittany he was told that there the dead were believed to continue inhabiting the same landscape as the living.²⁸ The American folklorist noted “how much the same are the powers and nature of the dead and spirits in Brittany, and the power and nature of the fairy races in Celtic Britain and Ireland”.²⁹

A way this ambiguity between fairies and the dead is shown in Celtic tradition is the relationship between fairies and funerals. Robert Kirk recorded that Scottish Highland people gifted with “second sight” can see fairies assisting humans in the carrying of the coffin to the grave. And Celtic fairy tradition tells of the fairy funeral, exemplified in a Cornish folktale that tells of a man returning home one evening from St. Ives who saw a light in Lelant church, in the sandhills near to the entrance of the creek at Hayle. He approached the church and peered in through a window. Amidst the glow inside he saw a fairy funeral taking place. This motif is quite probably a reflex of the phantom funeral, the *toeli* of the Welsh described in Chapter Two. In Wales it was said that the *Tylwyth Teg*, in the form of small lights, “never fail going the way that the Corps will go to be buried”.³⁰ All this presupposes a fairy link with corpse roads and churchways, a factor hinted at in an Irish tradition of lowering the funeral cross should the cortege pass a fairy thorn, or the already mentioned practice of encircling a thorn en route to the cemetery. The nineteenth-century Irish folklore collector, Thomas Keightley, recorded an account that probably related to this link: an informant told of seeing a procession of fairies travelling “across the High Field, in the direction o’ the ould church”.³¹ An account given to Dermot Mac Manus by a Mrs. C. Woods concerning an experience she had on Haytor, Dartmoor, may also have been predicated on this connection between fairies, the dead, and corpse roads. She claimed that as she was toiling up the path toward the tor she became weary, because it was a hot day. Mac Manus takes up the story:

She sat to rest on a “coffin” stone each time she came to one. The path is lined with large stones on either side, set at intervals up the steep incline ... She was at least three-quarters of the way to the top when she saw a little man standing against one of the large boulders. He moved out from the rock and seemed to be watching her ... She felt a little afraid because, while sitting on the various stones, she had wondered whether once people had lived on the moor and if they really had rested the coffins of their loved ones on the stones, and if so, whether this little man resented her using them as resting places too.³²

The woman got to within forty yards of the little man and was able to obtain a good look at him – “It was no momentary sight,” she insisted. She said the figure was wearing a brown smock tied with a cord around the waist and his legs were covered with brown material. He was between three and four feet tall, and seemed elderly rather than young. The little figure

disappeared, and when the woman got to the spot where he had been there was seemingly nowhere for anyone to hide. So what was this? A hallucination caused by heat exhaustion? A tall tale? An actual paranormal event? Whatever, the account reflects the linkage between fairies and the dead through association with an old corpse road – a connection few are aware of.

As a footnote to this fairy-and-the-dead motif, it can be noted that one regional name for the fairy black dog is “barguest”, and Sir Walter Scott felt this term derived from the German word *bahrgeist* meaning the spirit of the bier. This would make a definite link between the black dog, known to generally haunt old roads and lanes, and corpse roads.

From Sea to Shining Sea?

It is difficult not to liken the lore concerning fairy paths and the placing of buildings in relation to them to the ideas surrounding the old Chinese landscape divination system of *feng shui*, in which houses and tombs had to be kept clear of straight roads and other straight features in the landscape for fear of interference by spirits passing along them. In Ireland, Britain, Holland, Germany, Russia, even Albania,³³ land spirits and ghosts had their special routes it was believed dangerous for humans to obstruct. In fact, probably all the lands between China and Ireland had versions of such beliefs. Is it possible, then, that the same basic spirit-lore motif extended from one end of the landmass containing Asia and Europe to the other? This may seem to be a heretical notion, but there is subtle evidence nagging away in a number of contexts in addition to the startling similarities between the lore concerning fairy paths and *feng shui*.

Take, for example, the case of “Otzi”, the deep-frozen Neolithic man found high in the Otztal Alps on the Italy-Austria border in September, 1991. His remains now lie in carefully-controlled conditions in the South Tyrol Archaeological Museum in Bozen, Italy. This remarkably well-preserved survival from prehistory has supplied much fascinating information, but one particularly intriguing fact concerns his tattoos. These take the form of small dots arranged in linear groups either side of his lower spine, and on the right knee and both ankles, close to joints. X-rays showed bone degeneration in all these areas, and it seems likely that the tattoos were part of a pain-relieving treatment. The idea that tattooing can help in alleviating joint and muscle pains is old and widespread, being found in folk medicine traditions from the nomads of the Eurasian steppes to Tibet, and in ancient medical literature. In a fascinating parallel, another “ice man” was found preserved in a frozen tomb at Pazyryk in the Siberian Altai mountains. In addition to magnificent decorative tattoos, he also had a vertical line of pinpoint tattoo punctures on each side of his lumbar spine and an arc of pinpoints on the right ankle.³⁴ As this nomadic chieftain at Pazyryk belonged to the much later Iron Age period, it appears profoundly similar folk traditions could span thousands of years and thousands of miles. An intriguing additional factor is that the places on the both the frozen bodies which had been tattooed with the small dots *correspond to acupuncture points* and specifically those associated with the treatment of spinal deformation and joint pains.³⁵ This ancient and highly developed system of Chinese medicine was seemingly known to Stone Age Europeans.

Another fortuitous find similarly hints at a prehistoric traffic of ideas and beliefs across the continents of Asia and Europe – the Gundestrup Cauldron. In 1891, peat cutters uncovered a silver vessel in a bog in Jutland, Denmark. The object, which is twenty-seven inches (69 cm) across, and over fifteen inches (40 cm) deep has been dated to the second century B.C. Its sides are built up of plates decorated with hammered reliefs showing religious images and ritual scenes. These provide a rare snapshot of what was considered meaningful in a religious way in that part of the world during that era, and it has provided interpretive headaches. It belongs to the pagan Celtic era, and some of its imagery does indeed depict objects known to belong to that time (such as animal-shaped trumpets known as *carnyxes*), as well as figures who seem to relate to those in ancient Irish and Welsh mythology, yet other images show Asiatic, specifically Indian-like motifs. It was not a votive offering like those known to have been made by pagan Celts at lakes and bogs, because what became the Gundestrup bog was dry land when the vessel was deposited or lost there. Further, this part of Denmark was not culturally part of the pagan Celtic European scene, being inhabited by

Germanic peoples. Moreover, neither the European Celts nor Germanic societies carried out the type of silversmithing displayed on the vessel: analysis of the object suggests skills and influences went into it that range as far eastwards as south-eastern Europe and the Black Sea region.

The workmanship of the vessel and the content of some of the visual decoration on it seem at first glance to be at odds with where it was found, but archaeologist Tim Taylor has observed that the pan-Indo-European nature of the vessel's imagery, its craftsmanship, and the place where it was found could be explained by known historical events and archaeological evidence. He draws attention to a depiction on the cauldron showing a human figure sprouting or wearing antlers, in the company of animals, seated in a yoga-like posture, and appearing to levitate. Taylor comments that this imagery along with evidence from other sources suggests "that druidism, steppe shamanism, and tantric yoga may have developed as interlinked systems of ritual specialisation in the Eurasian later Iron Age".³⁶

Yet another sign of an archaic trans-continental passage of ideas and beliefs can be found in the distribution of folklore motifs. Elsewhere I have given an account of Franz Boas, a noted late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropologist whose studied American Indian societies, linguistics, legends, and traditions.³⁷ One of the things he noted was "a series of complicated tales" which were common to myths in both the Old and New Worlds. One example he gave was a fairy tale belonging to the Samoyed-speaking tribes of north-west Siberia. In this, two sisters were running from a pursuing cannibal witch. One girl threw a whetstone over her shoulder which transformed into a canyon that delayed the witch while she crossed it. She had almost caught up again with the two girls when the other sister threw a flint over her shoulder which transformed into a mountain, blocking the witch's way. For good measure, the girl then threw a comb over her shoulder, which changed into a thicket. Boas found the virtually identical story among Indians of America's North Pacific coast: in this version, the child threw a whetstone which became a mountain, a bottle of oil which became a lake, and a comb which became a thicket. Boas felt that this motif had survived a five-thousand-mile migration journey to the Americas; what he did not know was that the recognisably same motif can be found far in the other direction – in Wales to be precise. There, the foundation legend of the spa town of Llandrindod Wells tells of a man called Pengrych who snatches a beautiful maid from the clutches of three elves, who pursue him. He has with him a bag of objects given to him earlier by a mysterious old woman, and as the first elf closes in on him he finds a lump of salt in the bag which he throws over his shoulder at his pursuer, who promptly turns into a pool of water. Pengrych finds another object from the bag, a ball of sulphur, and throws that at the second elf, who also dissolves into a pool of water. Finally, as the third elf gets close he fumbles for a chunk of iron in the bag but drops it. So he turns and stabs the elf with an iron-bladed knife. The creature screams, falls to the ground and becomes a system of water spouts.³⁸

A final observation relates specifically to an odd type of artefact. The American Indians have "dreamcatchers", which are hoops supporting a net of threads. These are made in order to snare evil spirits that can approach a person while sleeping. Usually, a small hole is left in the middle of the net to allow good dreams to reach the sleeper. Travelling westwards from the Americas to Tibet, we find a very similar tradition, one that is thought to date to pre-Buddhist times. It involves thread crosses (*mdos*) which were made as spirit traps.³⁹ These objects consisted of a pair of cross-sticks supporting coloured threads so their appearance was similar to a spider's web or even a modern radio antenna. They could be as much as eleven feet (3.5 m) across. Weather magicians used them to catch evil spirits flitting through the atmosphere, people placed them on the roofs or at the entrances to dwellings to prevent the entry of unwanted spirits, and very large ones were used by monks to protect monasteries and their surrounding area from similar entities. Nepalese tribes deploy spirit traps of a similar nature to the Tibetan ones. Continuing westward to Europe, there existed a widespread tradition of making spirit traps that were also web-like features made of threads supported by hoops or cross-sticks. A trap might be large and placed on a staff to prevent ghosts passing along old paths, especially ones leading to or from cemeteries (therefore corpse roads), and might also have a protective rune emblazoned on it, or a trap might be small and attached to a door frame or ceiling beam to protect a house from bad spirits coming in through the door from the dark night air outside.

These various examples seem to indicate that that there was conceptual traffic between Asia and Europe. But it might not be the case that it travelled from one end or the other of the Eurasian landmass: genetic evidence is showing that early humanity as it emerged from Africa developed first in central Asia, so it could be that the ideas and concepts outlined above (and doubtless many more) spread out east and west from there. If that is true, it would mean that some of the spirit lore referred to in this study has very old origins indeed. Subjects as apparently diverse as virtual spirit roads like fairy paths or the German *Geisterwege*, the physically actual Dutch *Spokenwegen*, and the spirit lore attached to corpse roads are all modified aspects of a deep substratum of spirit beliefs that once existed across the conjoined continents of Europe and Asia.

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FIELD EXAMPLES OF FAIRY PATHS IN IRELAND AND WALES

[Map grid references are given. Rights of way are not to be automatically assumed.]

IRELAND

CAVAN

MONEYGASHEL ROCK to GOWLAN CROSS. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.26 ("Parts of Cavan, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo"). This beautiful area hard by the border with Northern Ireland is very much off the beaten track to the south of Lough Macnean Upper and the N16 highway. Access is via a country lane leading east off the R206 road which itself runs south out of Blacklion. This village is on the Irish side of the border with Northern Ireland and its "twin" village immediately on the other side of the border, in Fermanagh, is Belcoo, situated on the A4 approximately 12 miles south-west of Enniskillen. (Refreshment and lodging is available in Belcoo and Blacklion, and the museum of the Belcoo and District Historical Society in Railway Street, Belcoo, is recommended.) Gowlan Cross is just a few houses and a church clustered around a tiny crossroads 3 miles south-south-west of Blacklion, and is on the modern long-distance leisure route known as the Cavan Way. Moneygashel is simply a hill and the general area around it (the "Rock" being a rocky tor on the hilltop).

An invisible fairy path supposedly ran from Moneygashel down to Gowlan Cross (H 066.335). The fairies came down to the crossroads in the form of foxes, and a man living at Gowlan had his chickens killed by them. He went up to Moneygashel and found a hole and smoked them out. The fairy foxes were never seen again, but they had their revenge because the man accidentally shot and wounded himself in the process of expelling them.

The whole area around Moneygashel was thought of as a powerful fairy locale – lights were seen on the rocky summit, and people kept their doors closed at night – but the key fairy point seems to have been being the cashel – an Iron Age fort of the kind typically considered a fairy dwelling in former times – on the summit slopes. It is marked on map as a small red ring at H 059.339. Though a ruin, its white, labyrinthine drystone walls still fully enclose its circular, grassy interior, and the entranceway is extant. The walls stand quite high in parts, and a local man climbing on them was cast down "by fairies" and was injured.¹

The hill of Moneygashel was an important place for thousands of years, as is evidenced by a Neolithic tomb a short distance to the north of the cashel at H 0605.3415. Inside a low drystone wall abutting the monument stands an old, lone thorn tree, and it would almost certainly have been considered to be a fairy tree. Such a prehistoric heritage at Moneygashel could be one reason why it was a noted fairy haunt, along with the fact that it overlooks the source district of the River Shannon.

[This fairy haunt was brought to my attention by Dr Robert Curran,² who learned about it from local oral sources.]

CLARE

ATTYQUIN LOUGH Banshee Path. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.52 ("Parts of Clare, Galway"). The track leads off the left (west) side of the N18 highway opposite Attyquin Lough, 11 miles north of Ennis town.

The term "banshee" is the Anglicised version of the Gaelic *bean sí* which literally means fairy woman, though some academics translate it more broadly as "Otherworld woman" and even as deriving from a folk version of the mythical Earth goddess or a nature spirit. Banshees are harbingers of death, fairy beings who for some unknown reason have ancestral connections to particular families.³ When a person is dying it is said the ancestral banshee is heard by family members to wail somewhere in the vicinity of the house (though it is commonly held that the person who is dying does not hear it). She cries more often for male members of a family than its female members, and only at night or when daylight is fading. One description of a banshee cry by a claimed witness was that it was "the most awesome, unnatural sound". Generally, it is variously described as a drawn-out wailing, a roaring, or a lament or "keening". "In genuine folk tradition the wail of the banshee is imagined to consist of inarticulate sounds

and isolated interjections only, unlike the lament performed by the human keening woman which contained *ex tempore* verses in praise of the deceased to express the sorrow of the relatives and community at his demise,” informs Irish folklorist, Patricia Lysaght.⁴ The banshee is rarely seen, and so descriptions of her appearance are sparse and varied. She can be described as both young and old, though the image of a small, old woman predominates. There is general agreement that she has long hair – usually white or grey – which she combs when conducting her eerie calls. Her most commonly described apparel is a white and often hooded cloak. (Lysaght suggests that among other death associations, white relates to spirits or ghosts.)

The banshee path off the N18 road opposite Attyquin Lough north-east of Ennis is marked on the map at R 4185.9070, but its status as a right-of-way has not been confirmed. It is now largely re-worked as a farm track, and there are new metal farmgates at its entrance off the N18. It can be followed a short distance to and through a further gate, where the course of the track continues alongside the hedgerow before crossing a more open area. At the end of the track is a now derelict house amidst trees. It possesses a distinctly sinister aura. The building is close to a small lake or pool (at R 417.910); this is marked and unnamed on the map but was once known as Katie McGuane’s Lake. Although probably having once simply served the now-derelict house, the path can also be seen as connecting Attyquin Lough (known locally as Anna Griffey’s Lake) and Katie McGuane’s pool.

The association of this path with a banshee was recovered from old belief in the district by the County Clare-based folklorist and traditional storyteller, Eddie Lenihan. There is, or was, a banshee’s rock in the vicinity of the path, though its precise position has not been identified at the date of this writing. Why banshee associations with this area should exist is not known; it could be because a banshee was heard when someone was dying in the now-derelict house, but the fact that the pathway passes a *cillin* could be another, or additional reason: a *cillin* (literally a “cell” or chapel) can be a burial place for unbaptised infants. Although one is marked on the map adjacent to the path (at R 4180.9075) there is nothing to see there now except an open area of undulating ground with some exposed rock surfaces.

[This banshee path was identified for me by Eddie Lenihan.⁵]

CAHERHURLY CROSSROAD. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.58, (“Parts of Clare, Limerick, Tipperary”). The few, scattered buildings comprising Caherhurlly are in a remote part of eastern Clare 28 miles east of Ennis town and 4½ miles south-south-west of Scarriff (at west end of Lough Derg, itself a noted fairy area). Caherhurlly is on the East Clare Way, a modern long-distance leisure route.

A house that was “in the way” of a fairy path at this location was recorded from oral sources by folklorist Meda Ryan.⁶ Her elderly informant, Sonny Walsh, told her about the time Bidy Early, the famed Wise Woman of Clare, came to visit a sick person at Caherhurlly. She was travelling on a horse and when she came to the crossroads at Caherhurlly (R 619.797) she noticed a house in a field nearby. She commented that the house would not survive long, for it was “in a path”. “But,” protested one of her companions, “that’s a new house.” “I don’t care,” Bidy replied firmly, “that’s in a path. That can’t be there long.” And after some years the house was indeed “knocked”, an event witnessed by Walsh when he was a young lad. It was at this time he heard the Bidy Early story about the place. Sure enough, he and his friends were able to trace a row of whitethorns running south-east from the house: “The whitethorns were the mark of a fairy path”.⁷

Difficulties were encountered in field-researching this field example. To begin with, Ryan mistakenly refers to the place-name as “Cahirburley”. When this was resolved and the location visited, no remains of a house could initially be found near the crossroads. Fortunately, it proved possible to meet Jimmy Walsh, son of Sonny Walsh, and he kindly explained the whereabouts of the site of the former house. It stands to the north-east of the crossroads, and is approached by a farm track at R 619.798 (not a right of way). All that remains of the house itself is a ruined stone wall forming one end of a much more recent cowshed. No sign of the row of whitethorns could be found, but it was noted that a line extended south-east from the house site could have led to a roadside fairy fort at R 628.795, a bare half-mile distant (and marked as a red circle on the Ordnance Survey map).

The proximity of the house site to the isolated crossroads was also of interest because such places were notorious for being haunts of spirits, fairies, ghosts, witches, magicians, and even the devil throughout old Europe.⁸ They were typically where outcasts such as executed criminals or suicides were buried. From general enquiries made during fieldwork in the immediate district, a curious tale emerged by chance. We spoke to a woman who had lived in a house less than a mile to the north of the crossroads. She had become ill and depressed while living there. She was restless one night and got up. In the living room at one end of the cottage she saw a line of small, shadowy figures materialise out of one wall and disappear through the opposite one. They seemed to be involved in a procession, and took no notice of her. She left the dwelling some time afterwards. We visited the building, which at one end was a small old cottage (in which the apparition had occurred) with modern extensions. We spoke there to the woman's former partner, and he confirmed that she had told him of her experience, which he had thought might possibly have been some hallucination resulting from her ill-health. These individuals were not truly native to the district and were not to know that the old end of the building stood on a line that could be drawn from a nearby fairy fort to the crossroads. The course of a fairy path? In my enquiries into fairies and ghosts over the years I have on several occasions found what should be considered simply as old folklore manifesting in modern accounts of claimed actual experiences.

DRUMLINE. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.58, ("Parts of Clare, Limerick, Tipperary"). On private ground close to the hamlet of Drumline which is east of the N18 highway and 3 miles north-east of Shannon.

Drumline resident Mick O'Dwyer, one of Eddie Lenihan's local folklore sources (he insists that his claim of a chance contact with fairies when he was a young man is the memory of a real event and not a folktale), pointed out a physical path on his property that approximates the course of a fairy path connecting a local hill with a nearby fairy fort. There are prehistoric standing stones on land flanking the path's course. "The only things that fly over this path nowadays are those," O'Dwyer commented wryly during our fieldwork visit to him, pointing upwards to an aircraft coming in to land at nearby Shannon airport.

The area around Shannon is rich in potential fairy forts, as the numbers of red rings marked on the Ordnance Survey map of the district testify. Lenihan showed me the sites of two such features set short distances back on either side of a road crossing the countryside between Drumline and Shannon. There is much mechanical earth-moving going on in this area, and one of the fairy forts was under threat of nearby workings while the other had been completely bulldozed away. One of the sites yielded another of those curious conflation of folklore and actual events: during the earth-moving operations there had been several accidents to workers on the site, including a fatal one, and an archaeologist involved also died. Naturally, all this could be simple coincidence, but nevertheless it uncomfortably fulfils the deeply-held superstition that it was bad luck to interfere with or destroy fairy places. These two sites fall in line with the Drumline fairy fort half a mile away, but there is no known lore that specifically connects them.

LATOON Fairy Tree. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.58, ("Parts of Clare, Limerick, Tipperary"). The fairy tree stands 5 miles south of the town of Ennis by the N18 highway, within the major roundabout and flyover complex at Latoon near the turning for the Clare Inn, between Newmarket-on-Fergus and Clarecastle.

Once upon a time there was a solitary and venerable old whitethorn tree that stood prominently in the raised centre of a field, and though its branches slanted to the north-east in response to unnumbered years of exposure to the prevailing winds it still managed to signal springtime with a crown of white blossom. Folklorist Eddie Lenihan knew it to be an important marker on a fairy path because the elder folk of the district whose living oral folklore he often tape-recorded had for many years told him so. It was where trooping fairies from Kerry were said to stop on their way to and from doing battle with the Connacht fairies to the north. Here, on their return, the fairies would rest, revel and rejoice if the battle went well, or mourn and lick their wounds if it had gone badly. Any human being approaching the tree at such times would risk being cast into an enchanted sleep, to awake only many years later.

The fairy tree (*sceach*) was a major co-ordinate in the psychogeography of the region, but the seasons rolled by, the generations passed, and mythic time almost imperceptibly faded into calendar time. In 1999, men came to build a major highway intersection all around where

the little tree stood. Gigantic earth-moving equipment strode the earth, transforming the local lie of the land so that the old fairy tree no longer stood proudly up on high within a field but was left down in a machine-hollowed depression surrounded by the emerging structures of the intersection flyover. Worse was to come: the thorn tree was in the way of the planned route of the widened and re-organised highway. It would have to go. Alarmed, Lenihan lobbied public opinion locally, across Ireland, and further afield – even across the broad Atlantic. His efforts paid off, for though some laughed at him many more were concerned. The thoughtful Clare County Engineer made sure to work with his council and the road contractors to see that the tree was spared. So it was that by the end of 2001, though the old tree stood next to the refurbished highway and within the shadow of the flyover, it was surrounded by the protection of a stout wooden fence. The kind County Engineer had even arranged that an advisor be appointed to look after the tree's future welfare. At last, all seemed well. But dark forces were afoot...

In the nighttime hours of an August weekend in 2002,⁹ someone with chainsaw or slash-hook came and hacked off the fairy tree's blossom-bearing canopy and all its branches. Most people reacted with disbelief, horror, or anger when they heard of the deed. The kind County Engineer called it "wanton vandalism". Lenihan described the perpetrator in various stern ways, but he had presciently articulated the matter best in lines from a poem he had written many years earlier:

Above the driving chainsaw's steely shriek
Who can hear the whispering of a tree?¹⁰

Although severely damaged, the fairy thorn did show some blossoms in the spring of 2003. It lives.

FERMANAGH (NORTHERN IRELAND)

GORTAREE to LEGALOUGH (aka LEGOLIALOUGH). Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.26 ("Parts of Cavan, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo"). Accessed via a narrow lane (starting at H 101.368) signposted as a scenic route to the Marlbank Plateau off a country road running east from Blacklion (see entry 33) and to the immediate south of Lough Macnean Lower. After about a mile up this at times steep, narrow, winding lane, take a cement-surfaced track off to the right (west) and follow toward Gortaree (ask at the occasional farmhouse if unsure of route). A bare half-mile before Gortaree a dirt track at gate goes left (south) off the cemented track. This track leads down to Legalough. Legalough and Gortaree are marked on the 1:50,000 map (without which these remote places are difficult to find). The lough is on private land and there is no automatic right of way; while no one will probably mind occasional visitors, permission should ideally be sought locally. Ask at the Belcoo Heritage Centre for further information – see entry 33.

Legalough is a small, circular body of water in a hollow up on the Marlbank Plateau. The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, between Fermanagh and Cavan, passes through the middle of it. The Marlbank Plateau is a secluded, remote area which is as close to fairyland as one can nowadays find, for there are many places associated with fairies dotted across and around it. The late George Sheridan, an educated man extremely knowledgeable about local lore, took the author and folklorist Bob Curran to visit the little lake there in 1995. He told Curran that the lough (at H 088.347) was always considered a particularly powerful fairy locale, and "until recently" traditional storytellers, the keepers of lore like himself, held gatherings down at it because they were always so inspired by the spirit of the place. Sheridan himself lived for part of his life at Gortaree above the lough (at H 088.352); this handful of buildings has now largely fallen into disrepair. As they walked down to the little lake, Sheridan advised Curran that they say "By your leave" as they proceeded.

Sheridan maintained that a fairy path came off the plateau, past Gortaree, and down to the lough. Only a few clues were given as to its exact course: it lay "in a fold of the land" and a part of its course approximated a segment of the border line. The only way this description can be accommodated is by assuming that at some point the fairy path must have run alongside the lower part of a stream that enters Legalough from the east.

HANGING ROCK, Blacklion. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.26 ("Parts of Cavan, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Roscommon, Sligo"). This is a scheduled natural heritage site 2 miles east of Blacklion, Cavan, on the

country road running along the south side of Lough Macnean Lower, a short distance beyond the turning to the Marlbank Plateau described in the previous entry. There is a pull-in for a car and an information board (which gives natural history information, and some lore, but does not mention the fairy connection).

This site is a fairy glen if ever there was one, with its gurgling, tumbling stream amid the green gloom of the dense trees clustering at the foot of the dramatic cliff of Hanging Rock (H 110.365) which forms part of the northern edge of the Marlbank Plateau. It is a landmark when being approached from either direction along the country road that passes beneath it.

The glen is known as the Claddagh Glen and the stream is the Claddagh River. The fairy path was said to run along one bank of the river (fairies could not cross running water) which emerges in an obscure fashion from rocks at the base of the Hanging Rock cliff-face. A pool has formed where the water emerges, and this was considered a particularly haunted spot to be avoided at night. A few feet above where the little river emerges is a cave through which the fairies disappeared into and reappeared from the cliff face. The fairies came and went along their riverside path, and among their usage of it would be fairy funerals, a spectral phenomenon the area in general was noted for.

Legend states that an ancient chieftain, Donn Bin Maguire, rode his horse into the cave and was never seen again. Peering into the mouth of the cave the waters of the river can be seen stretching back into the interior darkness. This river is in fact the same one that flows through the spectacular Marble Arch Caves a few miles away and passes underground to this point of emergence. It is this subterranean characteristic that imbues the River Claddagh with its Otherworld associations.

KERRY

KNOCKEENCREEN, Brosna. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.72 ("Parts of Kerry, Cork, Limerick"). Knockeencreen is an isolated former farmhouse (and now a cowshed) 6 miles south of Abbeyfeale. The N21 highway runs 1½ miles to its west, and the village of Brosna lies 3 miles to its east.

The old farmhouse of Knockeencreen (R 0834.1760) stands on a fairy path. The place can be glimpsed in passing through a farm gate on a sharp corner of a narrow dirt track. There is little to see, for the old building is now being used as a cattle shed and is in any case on private land and should not be visited or approached.

The last inhabitant of the place, when it was a dwelling, was Tadhg Horan, who died early in the 1980s. Fortunately, Eddie Lenihan managed to interview him and record on audiotape the story of the house before the old man's demise. The house had been built by Tadhg's grandfather after the Potato Famine (1846-50), and his father had been born there, as had Tadhg himself. When grandfather Horan lived there a curious and unfortunate phenomenon presented itself. About every three years he would be awoken in the night by a hissing sound rather like meat frying in a pan. Apart from locating it near the ground in the general area of the back door he could never find anything tangible. On the morning after each such occasion, Horan would discover that one of his cows was dead.

One day an old travelling man – a tinker or gypsy – stopped by and fell into conversation with Horan, who mentioned his recurring, costly problem. The old tinker looked around and informed Horan that his house was situated "in a fairy path". Knockeencreen was "in the way", "in a contrary place" or whatever other term one wanted to use. The house is oriented to the compass points, and the front faces north. The front door is exactly opposite the back door. It transpired that the building stands on a north-south line between two hills, a line that forms the course of a fairy path. The old travelling man advised Horan to keep the doors slightly ajar at night. This he did, and the trouble ceased.

Tadhg Horan was at pains to emphasise to Lenihan that the house was truly situated between two fairy hills and so on the direct course of the fairy path joining them. At the time of his interview with the old man Lenihan did not get round to checking whether this was simply a general notion or a geographical fact, but during field and map research for this Sampler entry we were able to confirm that the building does indeed sit precisely on a line drawn between

hilltops to its north and south. The spot height of the nearly seven-hundred-foot (215-metre) summit of the northern hill is at R 0840.1940 near Knockbrack, and that of the eight-hundred foot (254-metre) high hilltop to the south is at R 0830.1580 near Lackbrooder. Furthermore, a part of the northern segment of the fairy path's course falls along a length of dead straight track that leads up to the farm gate which the north front of Knockeenreen faces. If this was in old China it would be said that the building's *feng shui* was bad, and that there could only be misfortune for anyone living in it. As observed earlier in this study, there are curious similarities in spirit lore from one end of the landmass that is Europe and Asia to the other.

KNOCKNAGASHEL. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.72 ("Parts of Kerry, Cork, Limerick"). The village of Knocknagashel (sometimes spelled as "Knocknagoshel", and both anglicised versions of Cnoc na gCaiseal) is located a mile to the west of the N21 highway, 5½ miles south-west of Abbeyfeale.

A local informant told Eddie Lenihan about the building of a particular public house just under three miles north-east of Knocknagashel. When work was under way on it the builder was warned by a passing stranger, "You're building the house on a path. Don't build it there...". The builder took little notice and the work continued. When it was finished and the man and his family moved in, but strange things began to occur: blankets would be pulled off beds by unseen hands, and strange, shadowy figures were seen around the house at night. "The fairies were all the time at the same house," Lenihan's source told him. In the end, the house owner called in a priest to bless (exorcise?) the place. As the priest went round the house "a bit of a closet" was found in a wall, and the priest stated that was where the disruptive entities lodged themselves.

The building was actually on the line of a "Mass path". Mass paths are, essentially, the Irish version of churchways. They are popularly associated with "Mass rocks" which were natural rocks in isolated locations used as altars for secret Catholic worship during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when attempts to suppress the religion were made by English Protestantism. After the worst of the suppression, Mass paths went to Catholic chapels or "Mass houses". In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Mass paths were used by people effectively as thoroughfares to not only get to church but also to school and shops, and for visiting friends. The walk to and from Mass was typically a social event as friends and neighbours met and talked en route. The linkage in this case of a fairy and a Mass path highlights the recurring and deep-rooted confusion in folklore between fairies and the dead, similarly exemplified in some of the Welsh field examples (below).

The locations of both Mass rocks and Mass paths are rapidly being forgotten and lost, but some local history groups are attempting to catalogue them where possible.¹¹

[This example was fieldworked by Eddie Lenihan.]

MAYO

CLOONAGH. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.32 ("Parts of Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo"). Cloonagh is a scattered hamlet 3 miles north-west of Charlestown, which is on the N5 highway between Swinford and Ballaghaderreen. Access to the hamlet is via country roads out of Charlestown, passing through Cully Cross Roads (G 453. 055).

The starting point for this entry was a reference in the Folklore Commission Archives at University College, Dublin, to "an ould fairy passage" that affected "Billy Brennan's house" at Cloonagh. Brennan found that his cattle were getting sick and dying. The matter grew worse until a disembodied voice told him to stop throwing out dry ashes and to shift the position of his gable (roof end). This account had been written down in the 1930s, and referred to a claimed incident of unknown earlier date. It was not a lot to go on, especially as Cloonagh is a spread out place with no clear centre. Field enquiries fortunately led to Sean Haran, a born-and-bred local man who knew the tradition of the fairy path. It seems that it was understood to run in a roughly east-west direction through the area and was associated with a local fairy fort (marked on the map as a red circle at G 4465.0530). Mr Haran stated that the path ran from this fort to another one which is considerably smaller and is unmarked on the map. Subsequent fieldwork failed to identify this second feature. Part of the course of the

otherwise invisible fairy path was supposedly once marked on the ground by a physical pathway running east from the main fairy fort. As far as the informant knew, this track had now disappeared.

“Billy Brennan’s house” was securely identified and, unlike other buildings said to stand on fairy paths studied during this fieldwork, it is in good order, having been well refurbished. Because it is a family’s private dwelling it is not to be visited or approached by inquirers, and for that reason specific information on its location is not being released.

WEXFORD

KILCOWAN. Discovery Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.77 (“Part of Wexford”). The course of the fairy path approximates that of a track off the south side of the R736 road between Bridgetown and Duncormick at grid reference S 962.101. The locale is just a few miles from the south coast, and about 9 miles south-west of Wexford town.

A 1935 account in the Folklore Commission Archives at University College, Dublin, tells of a fairy path that supposedly ran alongside “the old mill race” in an area of southern Wexford known as the Barony of Bargy. No further geographical information was given in the report, so there was even less to go on as a basis for fieldwork than was the case for the previous entry. Fortunately, a few hours’ work at the public library in Wexford resulted in the location being identified as Kilcowan.

Kilcowan is little more today than an old mill and a farm. The mill (S 961.099) is no longer used, but in its day it was the only one around that could grind maize. It is on a track that has obviously been widened and improved in recent times. During fieldwork, Mr. John Codd of Kilcowan was able to show us the mill race, which now is but a trickle running in a ditch along the side of the road. If the line of the mill race (and thus the fairy path) is extended through the mill it passes onwards through a mound (marked as “Motte”) behind an ancient ruined church less than half a mile distant. Mr Codd confirmed that during his long life the mound was always considered to be a rath, or fairy fort.¹² More or less on this line, between the rath and the mill, lies another ancient, moated earthwork that Mr. Codd said also had always been known as a rath. The track leading to the mill continues on to pass all these sites.

Mr. Codd had not heard of a fairylore association with the mill race but mentioned that there was a bridge over the adjacent river that was said to be the haunt of a banshee. The 1935 report also referred to ghostly figures seen down by the nearby river.

REFERENCES

1. This site is on private land and there is no automatic right of way. If visited at all, it would be best to ask permission and directions – during fieldwork I was kindly shown an otherwise unknowable route to the cashel by local people.
2. pers comm.
3. “Devereux” being one of those...
4. Lysaght, Patricia, *A Pocket Book of the Banshee*, O’Brien Press, Dublin, 1998. (26)
5. Lenihan, Eddie, pers comm., and it is also indicated in Lenihan’s “Otherworldly Clare”, a six-part series published in the *Journal* of the Clare Archaeological & Historical Society between 1985-1990.
6. Ryan, Meda, *Biddy Earl y- The Wise Woman of Clare*, (1978), Mercier Press, Dublin, 1991. (79-80)
7. Ryan, *ibid.*
8. Puhvel, Martin, *The Crossroads in Folklore and Myth*, American University Studies, Peter Lang, New York, 1989; see also Devereux, Paul, *Haunted Land*, Piatkus, London, 2001.
9. Some dark hour between 9-11 August, 2002.
10. Taken from the poem “Portait With Chainsaw” in Eddie Lenihan’s book of poetry, *A Loss of Face and Other Poems*, Inchicronan Press, 1984.
11. The efforts of the St. Colman’s Heritage Association in Conahy, County Kilkenny, is a noteworthy example of this. It has researched numerous Mass paths leading to churches in Conahy and elsewhere, and give information concerning them on its website. (This can be accessed on the World Wide Web by reaching the Local Ireland website and keying in “Conahy” in the Search window.)
12. On the map the identification of the church and the motte is erroneously reversed.

WALES

BLAENAU GWENT

BLAINA. First Series 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.161 ("Abergavenny & The Black Mountains"). The village of Blaina is on the A467 about 3 miles south of Brynmawr, which is in turn approximately 8 miles west of Abergavenny.

A curious case of a claimed fairy funeral relating to the old church in Blaina (formerly known as Aberystroth) was recorded by Edmund Jones in the eighteenth century:

It was told to me that Mr. Howel Prosser Curate of Aberystroth seeing a Funeral going down the Church lane, late in the evening, towards the Church, imagined it was the Body of a Man from the upper end of the Parish towards Brecon-shire, whom he heard before was sick; and thought was now dead; and going to be buried; put on his Band in order to perform the burial office; and hastened to go to meet the burial: and when he came to it ... putting his hand on the Bier to help carry the Corps, in a moment all vanished; and to his very great surprize and astonishment, there was nothing in his hand but the Skull of a dead Horse.¹

The church site is in the centre of the village at SO 201.078, and it is now occupied by the modern church of St. Peter, replacing the "old church" of the same dedication.

[I was first alerted to this fairy funeral case by the work of Frank Olding.²]

HAFOD-y-DAFAL to LANITHEL, Aberbeeg. Landranger 1:50,000 O.S. map, no.171 ("Cardiff & Newport/ Caerdydd a Chasnewydd"). The village of Aberbeeg is 5 miles west of Pontypool and 1½ miles south-west of Abertillery. It is situated on the A467 road about 12 miles north of junction 28 on the M4 and approximately 6 miles south of Brynmawr.

Several instances of old Welsh lore binds fairy paths and churchways together, pointing up the spirit association with corpse roads discussed earlier in the study. It was said of Welsh fairies "very often they appeared in the form of a Funeral before the death of many persons, with a Bier, and a Black Cloth, in the midst of a Company about it, on every side, before and after it". This was said to be quite a common sighting and was viewed as a death omen for it was "past all dispute that they (the fairies) infallibly foreknew the time of Men's death". It is possible that this was a vestigial memory of churchway seership. An instance of such a claimed sighting near Aberbeeg was recorded again by Edmund Jones:

Isaac William Thomas... seeing, as it appeared to him, a Funeral coming down the Mountain; as it were to go towards Aberbeeg, or Llanithel Church. He stood in a Field by a wall which was between him and the high-way leading to Aberbeeg. When the Funeral, which came close to the side of the wall, was just over against him, he reached his hand and took off the black veil which was over the Bier, and carried it home with him. It was made of some exceeding fine Stuff, so that when folded it was a very little substance, and very light. He told this to several. I knew the Man myself, and in my youthful days conversed with him several times.³

There was some local wonderment that the said Isaac Thomas survived this encounter.

Heritage Officer and County Archaeologist, Frank Olding, has determined the route implied in this account. The fairy funeral was seen at Hafod-y-Dafal (SO 2010.0364) on the top of the Cefn yr Arael mountain which rises immediately to the north of Aberbeeg. "Its route to St. Illtyd's [Llanithel] would have taken the funeral along the straight mountain path from Hafod-y-Dafal down into the valley at Aberbeeg itself and then up the 'Rhiw' (an old Welsh word for a road or track leading up a hill) at SO 2115.0149 and then up to St. Illtyd's church."⁴

Although Llanithel Church (SO 218.020) is dedicated to St. Illtyd, it was originally dedicated to St. Heledd (or Hyledd), a seventh-century princess of Powys. The church's imposing mountaintop site stands above the village now known as Llanhilleth (a variant version of "Llanithel"), an Anglicised form of Llanhyledd. Although much of the present building dates to

around the thirteenth century its origins are pre-Norman – there is documentary reference to a church there as far back as the ninth or tenth centuries. Two very ancient trackways converged on the spot, and it is thought that at least one of these may go back to Roman times. St. Illtyd's was also on a pilgrimage route from the Cistercian abbey at Llantarnam to the shrine of Our Lady at Penrhys in the Rhondda Valley. There is a tumulus – an ancient earthen mound – close to the church which is thought to be a Norman motte, but was probably built over an earlier, prehistoric mound. St. Illtyd's gradually fell out of touch with the communities developing down in the valley which built new, local churches in the nineteenth century, and it became increasingly neglected, fell into serious disrepair and was ultimately declared redundant. More happily, the church has in recent years been restored and it is now used as a venue for lectures, concerts and other events. The Friends of the church encourage people to visit it.

Llanithel appears to have been quite infamous for its active fairies. Jones records the case of Henry Edmund who though warned that the fairies there “sometimes took Men in the night and carried them insensibly into other places” decided to walk home at night. Sure enough, he “was taken up on the way, and carried so far as to the town of Llandoverly” roughly thirty miles away in a straight line over wild, mountainous country. The next morning, he was returned to Llanithel. This is remarkably reminiscent of today's so-called “alien abductions”, and shows how deep the archetypal roots of such reported modern experiences are.

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1. Jones, Edmund, *A Geographical, Historical, and Religious Account of the Parish of Aberystwith*, 1779.
2. Olding, Frank, “Fairy Lore in 18th-century Monmouthshire”, in *3rd Stone*, no.31, 1998; and personal communication.
3. Jones, 1779, *op.cit.*
4. Frank Olding, personal communication.