The Way They Never Were: Nationalism, Landscape, and Myth in Irish Identity Construction

Natalie Barber

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/rs_theses

Recommended Citation
doi: https://doi.org/10.57709/5560942

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.
THE WAY THEY NEVER WERE: NATIONALISM, LANDSCAPE, AND MYTH IN IRISH IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

by

NATALIE BARBER

Under the Direction of Dr. Molly Bassett

ABSTRACT

The fairy figure has had a long association with Ireland in popular cultural discourse. While often the source of children’s fairy tales, their history in Ireland is far from kitsch. Their enduring association with the Irish has been one of adaptation in the face of colonialism and is linked to the land itself as well as Irish identity. The Gaelic Revival and emerging field of archaeology in the nineteenth century pulled from a strong tradition of myth and storytelling to craft a narrative of authentic Irishness that could resist the English culturally and spiritually. This paper explores the relationship between nationalism, landscape, and mythology that created a space that the fairy survived in as a product of colonial resistance and identity.

INDEX WORDS: Tuatha de Danann, Colonialism, Fairy faith, Yeats, Sidhe, Liminal
THE WAY THEY NEVER WERE: NATIONALISM, LANDSCAPE, AND MYTH IN IRISH
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

by

NATALIE BARBER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
2014
THE WAY THEY NEVER WERE: NATIONALISM, LANDSCAPE, AND MYTH IN IRISH
IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

by

NATALIE BARBER

Committee Chair: Molly Bassett
Committee: Kathryn McClymond
Monique Moultrie
John Borrison

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2014
DEDICATION

I owe a huge thank you to my family and friends, who not only refrained from laughing when I said I was going to write about fairies, but showed visible enthusiasm and incredible support: Travis, Christina, their little wee-men (William and Andrew), Frank, Lana, Sydney, and Todd, just to name a few. Their belief in me during my academic adventures has been both humbling and, at times, completely unwarranted. This is especially true of my parents, so thank you, mom and dad, for believing in me and my academic adventures. I also cannot forget (and truly will not) Dr. Stephen Taylor for suggesting I go to graduate school in the first place. The thought had never crossed my mind before his suggestion and I am eternally grateful to him for believing me to be capable of it at all. If someone had told me in high school that I would go to graduate school, I would have laughed at them. I therefore find it fitting to dedicate this thesis to people who have seen and believed in things that I did not. It has changed me and my life for the better.
I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Bassett for encouraging me to write this thesis. She has shown both an adventurous spirit and academic rigor in critiquing the research that was required. She has been incredibly generous with both her time and intellect while critically, patiently, and optimistically guiding me through the process. Without her expertise and leadership, this paper would simply not have been possible.

Thank you as well to my committee members for the guidance, genius, and energy they have expended during my time in this program and with this paper. Dr. McClymond has been unwavering in her support and encouragement in this department. Her willingness to participate in a thesis topic that is perhaps unorthodox in Religious Studies speaks to her commitment to the ideas and pursuits of her graduate students, and I am exceedingly thankful for being just one recipient of such generosity. Dr. Moultrie has been an incredible teacher, thoughtfully challenging me to not only listen for the silenced voices in my research, but to better develop my own as well. I am grateful for her hard questions, acute insight, and thoughtful guidance over the past two years. I also owe an enormous thank you to Dr. Burrison, whose class on Irish Folklore sparked my interest in the topic of this paper. His expertise and clear love of the subject brought it to life while grounding it in scholarship, and I am indebted to him for his encouragement when I first said I wanted to write about fairies.

While not on my committee, I do wish to express my thanks to all of the faculty and staff in Religious Studies at Georgia State University. They are brilliant, challenging, approachable, and clearly care. I am extremely honored to have had the opportunity to engage with them on a wide variety of topics, and they have all left a mark on my mind as a result.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... v

1 INTRODUCTION................................................................................................................ 1

1.1 The coming of the Sidhe............................................................................................. 1

1.2 The legacy of language............................................................................................. 6

1.3 Bibliographical essay ............................................................................................... 9

2 MYTHOLOGY: THE HISTORY OF TRANSMISSION ............................................ 12

3 NATIONAL LANDSCAPE ............................................................................................. 18

3.1 Collective (formal) tradition..................................................................................... 21

3.2 Private (vernacular) tradition.................................................................................... 25

4 ENVIRONMENTAL LANDSCAPE ............................................................................... 31

4.1 Sidhe continuity and concepts.................................................................................. 35

4.2 Nationalist archaeology and sacred land ................................................................. 38

5 MYTHOLOGY: CONTEMPORARY TRANSMISSION ........................................... 43

6 CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 47

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................................... 50

APPENDICES ...................................................................................................................... 56

Appendix A: Emain Macha ............................................................................................. 56

Appendix A.1: Navan Fort, the royal seat for the kings of Ulster in Northern Ireland........ 56
Appendix A.2: View of St. Patrick’s church, peeking over the back of the larger Roman Catholic cathedral, from the top of Navan Fort at Emain Macha. .......................... 56

Appendix B: The Hill of Tara and the Lia Fáil.......................................................... 57
  Appendix B.1: The Hill of Tara (the Lia Fáil is right of center on top of the hill) 57
  Appendix B.2: The Lia Fáil...................................................................................... 57

Appendix C: Ring forts (fairy forts)........................................................................ 58
  Appendix C.1: Ring fort next to a Christian cemetery........................................... 58
  Appendix C.2: County Sligo.................................................................................. 59
  Appendix C.3: Northern Ireland, just outside of Armagh..................................... 59
  Appendix C.4: County Clare.................................................................................. 60
  Appendix C.5: Western Ireland, just on top of the hill in the background.......... 60
  Appendix C.6: Between Sligo and Armagh.......................................................... 61

Appendix D: Neolithic monuments....................................................................... 62
  Appendix D.1: Newgrange...................................................................................... 62
  Appendix D.2: Carrowkeel portal tombs/ Cairns (visible as nubs on top of the mountains) ......................................................................................................................... 64
  Appendix D.3: The cairn of Queen Maeve. Visible for miles from the roads....... 65
  Appendix D.4: Mound of the Hostages at the Hill of Tara................................. 65
  Appendix D.6: The inside wall of the Mound of the Hostages............................ 66
Appendix E: The Paps of Anu (where Fionn mac Comhaill sat on the night of Samuin, or Halloween, to access the world of the Sidhe) ..................................................... 67
1 INTRODUCTION

“Have not all nations had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?”

1.1 The coming of the Sidhe

Thousands of years ago on the first of May, a new tribe arrived on the coast of Ireland. They brought with them poetry, art, music, and eloquence the likes of which had never been seen or heard on the island before. They were the divine race of the Tuatha de Danann (the Danann). Among their ranks were names such as Lug and Bridig, who were worshipped across the continent of Europe. They were not alone on the island however, and they waged two battles to claim it as their own on the plains of Mag-Tured (Moytura). The first was against the Fir-Bolg and the second against the Fir-Bolg’s gods, the Fomorians. Lug, sun god of the Danann, battled the massive and powerful Fomorian god, Balor. This malicious god had one eye that was always closed, and it required several men to lift its lid and annihilate anything in its view. As Balor attempted to lift the patch that covered his evil eye and fatally focus it on his nimbler opponent, Lug used a sling to launch a stone through the menacing eye with such force that Balor was dead.

2 Celts had four days marking the yearly cycle revolving around harvests: February 1st, May 1st, August 1st, and November 1st. May 1st is the festival of Beltaine, which ushers in summer and symbolizes not just fertility, but communication between humans and the divine. C. Austin, “May Day Inaugurates Celtic Summer,” http://merganser.math.gvsu.edu/myth/beltaine-feb99.html, accessed on 1/17/2014. The arrival of the Celts to the island is a turning point in the calendric year and Irish history. They will interact with the divine inhabitants and make Ireland home.
3 Pronounced Too-ah de Dah-nahn. In Irish mythology, several waves of inhabitants came before the Celts (Gaels). The Cessair (supposedly wiped out before the Biblical flood), the Parthalón, the Nemed, the Fir Bolg, the Fomorians (like Greek Titans), and the Tuatha de Danann. Treated as a tribe of gods, this translates roughly to ‘tribe of Danu.’ Mythically, they were the group who preceded the Milesians and had fought to rule Ireland with the Fomorians, who had held it earlier. Incredible art, poetry, and music is attributed to them. Interestingly, Danu birthed this divinely represented group with Bile.
4 Mag-Tured is believed to be in the area of Connacht in the Western portion of the island. Jubainville cites the Fomorians as the gods of pre-Celtic peoples (i.e. the fir-bolgs, a plausibly historical group).
before his massive lumbering body hit the ground. Soon after, the Fomorian king lost his sword to the new tribe and the Danann god-king Dagda (good god) retrieved his stolen harp from the Fomorian banquet hall along with his son Ogma and the heroic Lug. At the mere sound of Dagda’s voice, the harp killed nine of its captors in an earnest response to its master’s call. With the Fomorians thus soundly crushed, the Tuatha de Danann comfortably ruled the island.

Years later, on a cold and clear winter’s night, a son of Mile named Ith gazed out across the North Atlantic Ocean from a tower in Spain and spotted an island he had never seen before. He soon set sail with a few men to explore it and quickly encountered its inhabitants. The Danann, jealous of their homeland, murdered him and slew many of his party. Not all of Ith’s men were killed however, and when the story reached the other sons of Mile, they too sailed the choppy Atlantic for Ireland. They sought revenge for what had happened to their own tribesmen and to claim the land as their own.

It was again the first of May that the vengeful Milesians arrived at the southwest corner of Ireland. As the Tuatha de Danann had arrived with knowledge and magic in their own time, the Milesians arrived with a fili (poet/storyteller) named Amairgen. The Danann knew of their arrival, and invoked a storm to keep them away. Unlike their former opponents, Amairgen had in his power the language of “divine science,” that enabled him to invoke and harness the power of the island itself, including the life that lived within it. As he stepped onto the shore, he said:

5 Balor was the maternal grandfather of Lug, a sun god or god of light, who was known by the Celts in continental Europe as well. Lug’s mother was Ethniu (Balor’s daughter) and his father was Cian, of the Tuatha de Danann. Lugh, Dagda, and Ogma are a triad of divine heroic figures featured in many myths. Lugh is the father of Cú Chulainn, a mythic hero warrior valorized in the later sagas of Ireland.

6 In mythology, Mile is believed to be the ancestor to the Irish, and his sons on this voyage, the Milesians, are the Gaels (Celts) who sail there and the first mortals to the island. They are commonly treated as coming from Spain, though early scholars such as Arbois de Jubainville posit them as being from the land of the dead, treating Mile as the son of Bile, a Celtic god of death. His explanation can be found in his work, The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., LTD., 1903), 130-131. Historically, the Celts arrived in Ireland during the Iron Age, or about 400 BCE.

7 H. D’Arbois de Jubainville, The Irish Mythological Cycle, 137.
I am the wind which blows over the sea;  
I am the murmur of the billows;  
I am the ox of the seven combats;  
I am the vulture upon the rocks;  
I am a tear of the sun;  
I am the fairest of plants;  
I am a wild boar in the valour;  
I am a salmon in the water;  
I am a lake in the plain;  
I am a word of science;  
I am the spear-point that gives battle;  
I am the god who creates or forms in the head of man the fire of thought; 
Who is it that enlightens the assembly upon the mountain?  
Who telleth the ages of the moon?  
Who showeth the place where the sun goes to rest?8

Through the power of his poetry, *Amairgen* merged himself to Ireland, identifying himself as the physical environment. He was the land and life within it, making himself, as representative of the *Milesians*, synonymous with Ireland. The *Milesians* successfully landed and walked for miles until they came to the Hill of Tara where three bickering kings of the *Danann* reigned: *MacCuill* (wed to *Banba*), *MacCecht* (wed to *Fotla*), and *MacGrene* (wed to *Eriu*).9

They encountered the kings’ wives first, and after *Eriu* quickly regarded the greatness of the new arrivals, *Amairgen* assured her that the land would be her namesake. The kings however, were not so sure of the greatness which *Eriu* had perceived in the newcomers. *Amairgen* agreed that he and the *Milesians* would temporarily depart for a distance of nine waves at sea in order to ease tensions. During this time however, there was a battle of invocation, as the *Danann* attempted to keep them out permanently and the *Milesians* sought to come back in. The *Danann* called upon storms to block their way just as *Amairgen* called upon Ireland once again to return. *Amairgen’s* poetry was more powerful and certainly more specific. Instead of invoking the weather, he once

8 Ibid.  
9 Ibid., 131. These are the grandsons of the god *Dagda*. Jubainville and other scholars have noted the Celtic fondness for triads. The wives of these kings represent the land of Ireland, being different forms of the same concept. MacGrene means “son of the sun,” and Ith had arrived just as the son of the sun had been married the land. Tara was the seat of power for centuries and is still accessible today.
again invoked the island and beseeched it as a living thing, shouting “I invoke the land of Ireland!”\textsuperscript{10} The sons of Mile once again returned.

At the river Boyne, the Milesians slew the kings and queens, at last taking the island for themselves. The land was divided vertically between the divine and mortal opponents. The Milesians took the exposed land above the surface while the defeated gods took to the hidden space beneath it: caves, mountains, mounds, lakes, and other parts of the landscape. This netherworld became associated with the otherworld. The inhabitants of the otherworld still roam the realm of humans, able to take any form they choose and to effect both good and bad in the affairs of everyday mortal experience. The defeated Tuatha de Danann thus became known as the Sidhe (shee).\textsuperscript{11} Overtime, the Sidhe, ancient gods and goddesses of Ireland who lived in the land, became known as fairies. The exact translation of Sidhe has never been concrete. At times it may reference a feature in the landscape, such as an ancient passage tomb, while at other times it may refer to the otherworldly entities who reside within it. These entities have been called the gentry, the good folk, the wee folk, them, the others, or in a more popular fashion and in the interest of this thesis: the fairies. While one origin story of the Irish fairies assimilated them into Christianity as fallen angels, the older origin story can be traced to the myth just retold. The latter proved invaluable to political movements in the nineteenth century while revealing and reinvigorating an active fairy tradition in Ireland. Fairies live in these myths and within the landscape itself.

In much of the industrialized world, fairies are not often lumped into discourses about religion. They are more specifically the subject of children’s fodder, not to be taken seriously. The study of fairies in Ireland, however, has resulted in the widely used term fairy faith by

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 146.

\textsuperscript{11} This terms is often used interchangeably to mean mound, hill, otherworld, or referencing entities residing within the mounds. It is variously spelled sidhe, side, si, and when paired with the Irish term for female, banshee.
scholars. Whether referenced in a pre-Celtic, Celtic, or Christian light, their roots are firmly planted in the realm of the divine. Irish scholar Diarmuid Ó Giolláin goes so far as to call fairies an aspect of “Irish popular religion.” Locals’ claims of genuine interaction with the fairies have lasted well into the twenty-first century. The history of the fairy in Ireland is an ambiguous and complex one; it gives life to a tradition that has outlasted living fairy traditions in other Western nations, including those with similarly strong Celtic roots. It is striking that the fairy has persisted in Ireland despite the historical influences of Christianity, colonialism, and modernity.

In contrast, Wales, a Celtic nation that faced a similar struggle against such obstacles during the late nineteenth century, heavily muted fairy myths and the supernatural in its struggles with colonialism and identity just as the Irish embraced it. Thus, a fairy faith is relatively absent in contemporary Wales, especially when compared to Ireland. For over one hundred years, thousands of narratives have been collected in which the Irish testify to fairy existence. Tying the fairy to anticolonial fervor and identity created a powerful effect on its place in contemporary Irish culture.

In this thesis, I will analyze the relationship between mythology, nationalism, and landscape in creating a space in which fairies have persisted, largely as a product of colonial resistance and identity creation. I take both an historical and phenomenological approach. While the history of fairies in Ireland is a strong one, it is a history that involves experience and engagement. People in Ireland have attested to experiences with the fairies. I take these claims simply as they are, and do not seek to debunk them. The fact that people tell these stories at all is important to my thesis, not the degree of their literal truth.

---

14 Ibid.
1.2 The legacy of language

The term myth is often mistaken as something that is false, purposely misleading, and a lie. If one were to approach a text of mythology in the same manner as a science book, then this would be an accurate description. Mythology however, should not be read in the same way as a science book. Wendy Doniger notes that for myth, the power “is as much visual as verbal.”15 It plays on imagery and symbolism to say something that is true whether or not the event described actually occurred. It is a story with an often sacred meaning that transmits a community’s values. Myth is a term that is difficult to define, but within this particular study, it can best be understood in the way described by Stephen Sayers:

…myth can inform a distinctive kind of consciousness that defines, binds and gives courage to a community. It grounds people in their lands, links one generation with another and inspires action. It is that which over times imbues a community with its distinctive ‘mythic imagination’-its way of seeing, its way of making sense of things communally.16

As it pertains to the fairy faith, this is true of both the collective mythology written down by the Christin monks of medieval Ireland and the stories that people have told each other privately in their homes.17 Doniger aptly delineates the telling of myth at these two different levels: the collective myth of a group and the private myth of the individual.18 In this study, the collective applies to the myth resulting from formal training in storytelling in addition to the written word. The private myths are those gathered from individuals in interviews that sometimes echo the collective myth, but other times do not. These two strands of myth, the elite and the vernacular, propagated what has become the fairy

17 The Christian monks of medieval Ireland were the first literate class in Irish history. Ireland was an oral culture before the arrival of Christianity. Over the years, the texts were heavily edited and after the Viking invasions, many texts were lost. What remained from medieval Ireland were fragmented copies of copies.
18 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Other People’s Myths, 142.
tradition while giving identity to Ireland as a community and nation. According to Doniger, these two levels flow both ways; the collective can inform the private and the private can gradually become the collective.19 Both the public and private myths have bound people to the land of community and country for years.

Historically, the word fairy has not been precisely or consistently defined, and was often used for any number of applications such as a creature, phenomenon, or place. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first recorded use of the term did not occur until the 1300s CE in Old French and abstractly referenced “enchantment” and “magic”; an actual entity was not associated with the word until approximately the 1400s.20 Noel Williams observes that fairy seems to be derived from the Latin term fatum (things said), and throughout its evolving variations and meanings was generally understood as “a quality of phenomena or events which may or may not be associated with creatures.”21 Modern popular culture can be credited with the images that spring to mind in association with fairies now, but these are concepts far removed from the fairies of Ireland. Most collected narratives do not cite tiny sprite-like creatures with wings. In Ireland, there are singular fairies such as the leprechaun or the bean sí, trooping fairies that gallivant in groups for sporting activities, and the changelings. Changelings are sickly fairy babies that have been put in the place of human babies in the hopes that mothers will nourish them. At times, even young mothers are believed to be changelings; their human counterparts stolen to the fairy world to nurse fairy children. Irish fairies may be tall and beautiful or short

19 Ibid.
and curmudgeonly. Oftentimes, the word *fairy* has been avoided in favor of terms I have already mentioned (the gentry, the good people, etc.). This is typically attributed to respect for the entities themselves, but why *fairy* is disrespectful is never addressed. It may be due to resisting a colonizers term for indigenously divine beings, but there has not been ample evidence to confirm this. The word *fairy* was introduced to Ireland by the English, and it is not an exact translation of the otherworld beings of Irish myths known as the *Sidhe*. Fairies came to be associated with the *Sidhe* because both of these words were at once ambiguous in definition and carried otherworldly significance. As noted, the word *Sidhe* is intimately connected to the landscape. It can mean a feature of the landscape or an entity within it, and will be explored more thoroughly later in the thesis. It should be noted here that the *Sidhe* were not identified as *fairies* until English colonization.

Myths and their meanings in Ireland have evolved and adapted over time. The fact of this is not, as storyteller Eddie Lenihan asserts, evidence of something that lacks a true meaning. It is the illustration of something that has, like genetics in a biological process, evolved to survive within a narrative process. This narrative process allows mythologies to be relevant and come to life for their respective audience. This has been especially relevant in Irish identity formation and nationalism. When I say mythology helped create a space for fairies, I am not only referencing the myths that tell of them, but how those myths have been transmitted among the Irish. The story of the identity construction that occurred amid anticolonial fervor in nineteenth century Ireland is not complete without the inclusion of fairies.

I will begin with the history of myth transmission in Ireland as the repository for supernatural stories and authority in telling them. How myths were transmitted exhibits

---

continuity in Irish history that served to perpetuate and legitimate fairies. I will also address the syncretism of Christian myth and indigenous fairy myth in early Irish history. This is important for understanding the space created for fairies during a massive cultural shift that blended mythologies in an interesting way. I will then explore how nationalists used the myths, both collective and private, to inspire action and change in Ireland during the Gaelic Revival of the late nineteenth century. During this time, the role of the landscape in the preservation of the fairy reveals the role of the fairy in reciprocally preserving the landscape. I will examine how the emerging field of archaeology during the Gaelic Revival served as a bridge that linked the understanding of Ireland as sacred with nationalist ideologies. I conclude by looking at the modern transmission of myth and its role in contemporary fairy faith. Admittedly, while there is still evidence of a fairy faith in Ireland today, it is weak. This waning tradition of fairy faith in Ireland is ultimately the same struggle that most traditions face globally under the unyielding march of modernity.

1.3 Bibliographical essay

Fairies have been of interest to scholars for approximately one hundred fifty years. In the mid-1800s, Thomas Keightley cataloged of numerous types of fairies all over Europe. He categorized them, researched their geographic and linguistic histories, and grouped them by country and theme. Later that century, social elites such as Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats extended this work with a focus on Irish fairies. They gathered not just the types or descriptions of fairies, but the people’s encounters with them, and then presented a tradition of fairy belief active within the stories. While more recent scholars, such as Lawrence P. Morris, cite the work of this era as the privileged merely using the poor, it did shine a light on an aspect of Irish culture and its relationship with the landscape that might not have been preserved
otherwise. In the early 1900s, the work of Walter Evans-Wentz paralleled that of the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC). He collected narratives of local people in regards to their experiences with and views of fairies. The IFC collected stories well into the 1970s, producing roughly 60 years’ worth of accounts. More recently, Eddie Lenihan has carried on this difficult tradition of building trust with locals and archiving the experiences they are willing to tell.

There has also been debate surrounding the formalized written mythology over the years. This has typically involved the nature of the *Tuatha de Danann*, mythic ancestors of the fairies. In 1903, Henri d’Arbois de Jubainville argued that the *Danann* were understood to be the spirits of the dead, making extensive linguistic and thematic comparisons with Greek mythology. Yet many scholars throughout the early twentieth century treated the mythology as literal history. In 1941, Robert Macalister translated *The Book of the Taking of Ireland* into three redacted versions. His comment in the back of the book highlighted the debate among scholars at that time as to whether the stories involving the *Tuatha de Danann* were truly historical or mythical: “With great astonishment I have observed, in certain criticisms of the preceding volumes, evidence of an unwillingness to admit the presence of mythological matter in this text. I cannot imagine why.”

He then boldly challenged other academics to prove it was actual history and not mythology. Thomas F. O’Rahilly did not take the texts literally, and argued from the position that the divine tribe was intended to be understood as the Celtic pantheon of gods, not spirits or men. The argument that they were in fact men was the position taken Peter Alderson Smith, who asserted that the tribe of gods, in addition to the *Fir-Bolg* and *Fomorians*, were all actual histories euhemerized into mythologies by the medieval Christian monks. He stated that the *Sidhe* were “a highly primitive, almost feral race” seen as “uncivilized,” since the mounds

---

associated with them were not desirable places to live. Smith uses the term *fairy* where *Sidhe* would be more appropriate and his attempt to disassociate *Sidhe* with the realm of the dead or ancestors is unsuccessful. While he makes an intriguing argument, his sweeping claims about the religious state of the Celtic mind and interpretation of the extensively redacted mythology do not bolster his claims. The mythology certainly does not describe the *Sidhe* as a feral or uncivilized race, but as beautiful, powerful, and dangerous.

Whether the fairies are remnants of what was understood to be a feral people, gods, or spirits cannot likely be proven. My interest is how the understanding of them and the stories told about them have evolved and functioned for the Irish, creating an enduring fairy faith in the process. Folklore and archaeology have dug through narratives and landscapes, but the field of Religious Studies has been comparatively silent on the subject of fairies. The Irish fairy tradition has religious roots which were syncretized to the mythology of Christianity and were influenced by the Greeks. There is an abundance of topics in Irish mythology to pull from, but the scope of my contribution is confined to the endurance of beings that have lived well into the twenty-first century in both land and story.

---

2 MYTHOLOGY: THE HISTORY OF TRANSMISSION

Mythology without meaning, as William Sayers states, is relegated to folklore, citing the medieval Christian monks’ redactions of pre-Christian myths as an intentional move designed to render Celtic myths incoherent, leaving only the Christian myths as intelligible.\(^{25}\) This cannot be verified since the redactions took place over centuries under numerous pens and included elements of Celtic religion that would have been seen as blasphemous. If the attempt was to destroy Celtic or even pre-Celtic beliefs, why record them at all? The monks not only had the power to save the names of gods for future generations, they had the power not to.

The method of transmitting these stories in Ireland has its own history. It is not known how old the oral traditions that were the basis for Irish mythology are, but storytelling was prevalent among the Celts for centuries in the bardic tradition of the *fili* (plural: *filid*).\(^{26}\) The *filid* were a group of wandering poets who inhabited a class of people known as *Aes Dana* (people of art).\(^{27}\) The significance of the name lies in the pre-Christian mythological roots of Ireland. A compelling argument has been made that the *Dana* in *Aes Dana* refers to the *Danann* of the *Tuatha de Danann*, the divine tribe who battled the *Milesians* for Ireland and became the *Sidhe*. This made the *filid* not merely entertainers, but individuals with access to the knowledge and power of the *Sidhe*.\(^{28}\) The *filid* should not be confused with Druids. While both were a learned class in ancient Ireland, the Druids operated within a priestly function. They carried knowledge that included divination, astronomy, medicine, and combat as well as the performance of sacred rituals.

---


\(^{26}\) Jeffrey Gantz, “Introduction,” in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, 21. Fili was a division of a Druidic class. The priest was a *faith*, the poet storyteller was a *fili*, and the jurist was a *brehon*.


\(^{28}\) Ibid.
rites and rituals. Yet as poet-storytellers, the *fili* had authority and power in their words, even magic. The 10th century Irish king, *Cormac mac Cuilennán*, clarified their role by breaking down *fili* into two words: *fi-*meaning venom, and *li-*meaning light; they had the power to suffuse a king with either venom or light with their poetry. The mythology recorded by the medieval Christian monks stated that the *Danann* brought poetry to Ireland for the first time, illustrating the value placed on the eloquent use of language. Even the civic structure of the Celts was essentially grounded in storytelling and poetry, evidenced by the *fili* involvement in poetry, history, and law. Wielding words was akin to wielding the power of the gods, and they were considered seers. Indeed, satire from a *fili* was not a threat taken lightly by Irish petty kings, but a genuine threat to their honor since a *fili* could speak things into existence. In some cases, merely listening to a story of special significance could afford an audience good luck. While this collective tradition, like that of the private, is oral, it differed in that it was a product of formal education. Throughout Ireland’s history, the elite and vernacular populations were not entirely segregated from one another’s lives. Centuries of crossing paths resulted in a crossing of stories as well, creating an inevitable and choppy blend of local myths which narrate the countryside.

Anyone who displayed an aptitude could become a *fili*, including women (*ban fili*). While collective and private myths, as Doniger stated, bled into one another, the Irish social classes did not. While classes may not have been totally segregated from one another, a hierarchy existed. A bifurcation of formal (elite) and vernacular (folk) tradition remained. According to medieval

---

31 Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Paul Lynch, “Rhetoric of Myth, Magic, and Conversion,” 235; D.A. Binchy, “The Background of Early Irish Literature,” *Studia Hibernica*, No. 1 (1961), 12. It was only later that the Brehons took over law from the *fili*.
manuscripts, a *fili* required eight to twelve years of training to memorize roughly two hundred and fifty stories, all by category. The numbers may have been an exaggeration, but the fact of intensive training in this craft was not. There were seven grades of *fili*, but only the best were privileged to learn the additional one hundred stories which were saved for the elite. Upon mastery, the *fili* would then wander the countryside to seek sponsorship from a king. A king could say no, but he also risked become the object of satire if he did. To satirize a king’s honor was to strip him of it.

With the introduction of Christianity came the establishment of monastic cities and their immense wealth, as well as the introduction of the written word. Some scholars suspect two possibilities with this new mode of story and belief. Either the *fílid* went to the monasteries with the stories they knew and wrote them down, or monks from the monasteries went to the courts of petty kings and recorded what they heard from the *fílid*. In his study on Yeats and the *Tuatha de Danann*, Peter Alderson Smith offers a third option that includes the Druids. He writes that the schools of the Druids “were, by the eighth century, incorporated into the monastic ‘cities,’” and that the Druids’ teaching of their own subjects could not have been understood without the “fairy faith.” While Druids may have taught within the walls of the monastic cities, they would not have taught a fairy faith, since the word *fairy* had not yet been introduced. The Druids likely would have referenced gods, spirits, or the *Sidhe*.

There was however, a coexistence of old and new traditions which has been frequently noted in the scholarship of Irish history and religion. The key word used for the Celtic conversion to Christianity is syncretism. Syncretism is the process or product of two cultures meeting and mixing. This has led to many legends about how the blending of Celtic religion and

---

Christianity was achieved. One of the most popular tales is Saint Patrick’s use of the clover to explain the concept of the trinity to the Celts. According to the tale, Patrick used the three leaves of the clover sharing one stem to illustrate the concept of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This is unlikely however, as even a modest skimming of Ireland’s indigenous mythologies and sagas reveals a near obsession with triads and the number three. The Celts would have had little difficulty in accepting that concept. Yet syncretism did occur and has its own continuity in Irish history. While some subjects interviewed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries linked the fairies to the Sidhe and Tuatha de Danann, others linked them to biblical narratives, claiming they were angels cast from heaven to earth for failing to pick a side in the battle between God and the Devil. When the Devil rebelled against God with a portion of the angels, some of the angels refused to fight. Instead of throwing them into Hell, God threw them into Ireland, and they became the fairies. This syncretism of not just symbols but mythologies provided a space for fairies in the new Irish religion and even gave them validity.

Nora Naughton has analyzed this bicultural phenomenon and explains that “to retain their credibility and standing, it was probably both wise and necessary for priests to show respect for the long-standing traditions of their parishioners.”34 Ó Giolláin states that the bicultural nature of Irish religion was, for a long time, largely owed to a weak Catholic presence with no centralized authority.35 Less than half of the population even attended services before the Great Famine of the 1840s, so there was no real effort to instill a cohesive and solidly Christian doctrine.36 With such weak adherence, local indigenous traditions thrived and priests lacked the authority to suppress them. Indigenous and imported traditions shaped and legitimated one another to varying degrees for centuries. Local fairy myths, varied and particular to each region, were given a

34 Nora Naughton, “God and the Good Folk Belief in a Traditional Community,” Béaloideas, Iml. 71 (2003), 42.
36 Ibid.
singular narrative with Christianity that, after the famine, was strengthened and disseminated among the people through local priests and provided a new framework for fairies.

The medieval monks did not ignore indigenous traditions when they arrived in Ireland and Catholic priests did not seriously attempt to eradicate them throughout Irish history. For instance, in the early 1900s, a priest in West Ireland recalled a ritual in his community:

> It was proper when having finished milking a cow to put one’s thumb in the pail of milk, and with the wet thumb to make the sign of the cross on the thigh of the cow on the side milked, to be safe against fairies. . .whatever milk falls on the ground in milking a cow is taken by the fairies, for fairies need a little milk.\(^{37}\)

Fairies needing milk is a common theme in the collected narratives, and the fairies resorted to both stealing young human mothers and switching out human babies with their own in order to procure it. This particular ritual of making a cross with the milk and leaving what spilled as an offering was meant to protect a family from the fairies. The priest’s tone in this narrative was matter-of-fact. He was in no way critical of the non-Christian features of this act or its clear affirmation of fairy existence. He exhibited a Christian fairy belief.

The result of merging and transmitting the mythologies of both Christianity and the fairy tradition resulted in a religious culture that included both. Naughton and Ó Giolláin have argued that this was a bicultural religious understanding. I argue instead that it was not bicultural, but simply the religious culture as the people themselves understood it. These religious understandings did not exist side-by-side, but within one another. The transmission of myth in Ireland has historically been localized, with authority vested in those trusted within one’s own community. The local priests, like the filid, became legitimate transmitters of a myth that incorporated fairies. Instead of assimilating fully into Christianity’s spiritual colonization as

---

either angels or demons, fairies retained their own identity in the resulting religious amalgamation.
3 NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

The *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*Book of Irish Invasions*), which contains in its stories the myth of the *Tuatha de Danann*, was written in the thirteenth century, and Standish James O’Grady rediscovered it 600 years later. They were not stories taught at school or read to children at night, but the edited recordings of oral histories. The stories in the manuscripts that survived were largely fractured because medieval Christian monks had repeatedly redacted the early texts. The myths revealed glimmers of pre-Christian histories, gods, and demigods. They also attempted to connect Ireland with a broader world history by linking their own mythical figures with those of the Bible. Cessair, the first person to ever land in Ireland according to some of the surviving manuscripts, had been linked to Noah. This drew the Irish into the broader scope of world history instead being marooned at the edge of the world. Centuries later, the nationalist fervor of the nineteenth century illustrated this same use of mythology again as it reinvigorated and appropriated the story to the needs of the time.

A brief overview of Celtic and Irish history will clarify the atmosphere that erupted in the late nineteenth century. The Celts were not the first people in Ireland. There had been other groups who had made their way in since the Mesolithic period. The Celts arrived over two thousand years later, around the 5th century BCE, and they intermingled with the groups already there. The Greeks had encountered the Celts on the continent long before this and dubbed them

---

38 R.A. Stewart Macalister translates three separate versions of the battle for Ireland, which I summarized at the beginning of this thesis. He reveals the monks’ varying opinions of the *Tuatha de Danann* and how to deal with their perceived divinity. The first written records of the texts would have been redacted from the original oral tradition as well since they were told for the ear, not written for the eye. For more, please see *Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland*, Part IV, ed. and trans. by R.A. Stewart Macalister, D. Litt. (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland, LTD., 1941).

39 *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, 253. The monks had linked Cessair with the biblical Noah and endeavored to create their own exhausting genealogy, listing the kings of Ireland. This was no longer, in that light, a patchwork of five petty kings and their tribes, but a historicized civilization.

40 Ibid.
*Keltoi,* so it must be noted that these people did not refer to themselves as *Celts.* Their identity was tribal, and kinship was paramount.

St. Patrick came to Ireland from Britain in 432 CE. He had been there before when, as a teenager, the raiding Irish Celts kidnapped and enslaved him. After escaping a few years later, he returned with the goal to convert the Irish to Christianity. The new faith ushered in a Golden Age of learning and scholarship in monastic cities just as Rome was falling apart on the continent. The wealth these cities accrued caught the attention of the Vikings in 795. They raided the island for over two hundred years. During this time they urbanized it and established Dublin in 841. Having had enough, the High King Brian Boru rallied the Irish and finally defeated the Vikings in 1014.

In 1170, Henry II of England invaded Ireland. The following centuries saw English kings and queens dispossess the Irish of land, enact oppressive penal laws against Catholicism and the Gaelic language, and implant their own English culture. The Irish had been perceived as a “backwards” people living “like animals,” making the prospect of colonization a palatable and justifiable one.41 The Irish people’s particular brand of Catholicism and vernacular folk-faith traditions did not foster a better reputation in the eyes of the English. Many Irish left during the eighteenth century and more followed during the potato famine of the nineteenth. While not often considered in such a light, for much of its history and through the twentieth century Ireland’s economy has been that of a third world country: agricultural, rural, and poor.42 Despite the poverty, its culture survived. It took five hundred years for England to completely conquer

---


the island, and even then assimilation never fully took place.\textsuperscript{43}

By the late 1800s, many people of the upper class felt there was an authentically Irish culture which was being threatened by the English. There had been Vikings before the English, as well as waves of inhabitants before the Celts, but these peoples had been assimilated into the concept of \textit{Irish}. England’s centuries of colonization had not been just political and economic. The Irish were speaking English and being educated in the history of England, meaning that they thought more and more of themselves as English. Their own indigenous stories were being quickly lost. The nationalist fervor agitating other countries on the continent of Europe in the late 1800s agitated Ireland as well. Gaelic was quickly dying and the education of each proceeding Irish generation would be through the lens of the English while the people of the country moved further away from their native identity.

This global nationalist phenomenon coincided with a renewed interest in mythology that was not unique to Ireland, but spanned the globe. It was this enthusiasm for myth during an era of Romanticism that some historians of religion, such as Robert Ellwood, claim gave impetus to the nationalist movement in the first place.\textsuperscript{44} This rising interest in mythology coincided with the rising concern over Irish identity. The literati, a social network of the upper class literary arts, were particularly anxious.\textsuperscript{45} They feared that the mythologies the Irish would tell about their own formation and nation would eventually be subsumed by the English, dissolving what it meant to be Irish. What exactly \textit{Irish} meant needed to be defined, and mythology provided a language through symbolism and imagery. What it looked like and felt like to be Irish could be conveyed through myth more powerfully than a mere descriptive history.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Robert Ellwood, \textit{Myth: Key Concepts in Religion} (New York: Continuum, 2008), 120.
\textsuperscript{45} This was a group of upper class literati who spearheaded the preservation of Irish culture through language, music, theater, literature, and myth.
Country and nation should not be confused. A country may have a geographic boundary; a nation does not. As Ellwood notes, a nation is not designated by boundaries, but by its stories; a nation is an idea the people have about themselves that is founded in their myths. In this sense, a country is a place while a nation is an identity that is often formed through myth, and by the late 1800s, Ireland desperately needed a national mythology. More specifically, they needed a story to unite them as a people in their own land and root them in that land in a way that validated their right to it. The geographic boundary of Ireland was not the issue about which the literati harbored anxiety; they were concerned with national identity, quite apart from physical space. Myth became a tool used to combat English colonization by the Gaelic League of 1893 in particular. Their nationalist appropriation of myths took two routes mentioned earlier by Doniger: the collective tradition and the private. Collective tradition refers to the myths redacted by the medieval monks and later pieced together into a coherent and official narrative by the nineteenth century literati. They represent the mythic story of Ireland. The private myths are those that came from the local people in the nineteenth century and, while varied, were used by the literati to create a homogenous and authentically Irish representation. Both collective and private myths were employed by nationalists to structure an identity that could encompass all of Irish society.

### 3.1 Collective (formal) tradition

The collective tradition that fanned the flames of the nationalist imagination in Ireland is owed largely to the nineteenth century Irish author Standish James O’Grady. O’Grady had happened upon the Irish research of the eighteenth century antiquarian Sylvester O’Halloran and,

moved by it, he endeavored to reinvigorate the stories in his *History of Ireland*.\(^{47}\) His resulting work played a powerful role in the popularity and resilience of the fairies just a few short decades after its release. Historian Martin Williams claims O’Grady’s intentions were not nationalistic, but that his audience’s needs were. Those needs fueled the Irish nationalists’ interpretations.\(^{48}\) By the mid-nineteenth century, Ireland’s educated audiences were cut off from the oral tradition of the country and many were ignorant of the myths and sagas as well as the Gaelic they were preserved in.\(^{49}\) O’Grady re-worked the myths to make them appealing to his own tastes simply because they inspired him, and the Irish loved them.\(^{50}\) The rewritten myths were neither new, nor could they be true to their original detail. They had begun as an oral tradition, and were written down only after the arrival of Christianity. O’Grady’s popularization of them came roughly eight hundred years after that. From the first telling of the stories to O’Grady’s pen, thousands of years had passed. While core themes of heroism and explicitly descriptive beauty remained, the details animating the themes changed in order to appeal to a modern audience. To illustrate these changes, Williams highlights the description of the heroic *Cú Chulain* (koo-hu’-lin) in both the medieval text from the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (*Cattle Raid of Cooley*) and O’Grady’s appropriation of it:

**O’Grady:** Out of his countenance there went as it were lightnings, and showers of deadly stars rained forth from the dark western clouds above his head, and there was a sound as the thunder about him, and cries not his own coming from unseen mouths, and dreadful faces came and went upon the wind, and visages not seen in Erin for a thousand years were present around the hero that day.

**Original:** It was usual with him, when his hero’s flame arose in him, that his feet would turn back on him and his buttocks before him, and the knobs of his calves would come on his shins, and one eye would be in his head and the other one


\(^{48}\) Ibid., 310-311.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
gone out of his head. There was not a hair on him that was not as sharp as the thorn of the haw, and a drop of blood was on each single hair.\textsuperscript{51}

Certainly, a Victorian audience of that time would have had a hard time envisioning, let alone relating to, the figure in the original text. The hero is vividly morphing into something monstrous in his righteous fury, but for the upper class to take seriously a hero whose buttocks have twisted in front of him would have likely been asking too much. O’Grady’s reworking was apt for the reception and even adoration of the figure along with the others he introduced into popular culture. He took the choppy, fragmented, and often confusing remains of early works and stitched them into something cogent. In a way, he recreated the canon. This canon, with its heroic Victorian trappings, caught the eye of anti-colonial Irish nationalists who hoped to link their people with an illustrious and ancient heritage.

The colonization of Ireland had not been merely a political one, but as Williams suggests, a spiritual colonization.\textsuperscript{52} While that may be a difficult concept to qualify, it is telling that the overwhelmingly adoring response to the revived myths was in reaction specifically to stories of gods and demigods. These kinds of myths were precisely what the upper class Irish literati needed: myths pulled from antiquity that read just as heroically and eloquently as those of the English. Their own cultural history was just as old, just as good, just as legitimate, and uniquely Irish—just like that of their ancestors. Of course, it has been well documented that the Irish myths that the monks recorded were influenced by the stories of the Bible as well as Greek mythology. Many parallels have been drawn between heroic figures in all of these myths. Furthermore, the idea of a pure Celtic ancestry or their Celtic ancestors even thinking of their own identity as Irish is equally untenable, especially considering the swath of territory the Celts

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 311.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 314.
covered and the number of countries that could also claim a link to them. In spite of this, a complicated history was not what the nationalists needed. They needed the powerful symbolism from mythic history to unify and rally Ireland.

Yet the myths O’Grady rewrote and the myths the literati perpetuated both functioned to rally the Irish. Ellwood writes that people do not remember chronicles; they remember stories, and to make stories memorable they must include an *us* versus *them* conflict. In her review of Frank Herbert’s *The White Plague*, a novel that blends Irish mythology and science fiction, Ellen Feehan writes that “myths provide a potent cultural wellspring from which we draw as we seek to define our selves and our allegiance to our community.” The concept of the community and allegiance had been secured for the 1916 uprising to end British rule, an effort staged by the Volunteers, a group of Irish republicans steeped in the new translations of old stories. Williams cites Ella Young as an example of how intoxicating myths can be to those who identify with their powerful imagery. A poet during this time, Young taught the myths to roughly eighty boys from the working class during the evenings, and without exception, every one of them had participated in the 1916 uprising under a flag bearing the harp of *Dagda*. The 1919 Irish standard symbolized the truce between Catholic and Protestant within Ireland, but the flag waved to symbolize ‘Irish’ displayed the signifiers of Celtic gods. *Dagda* and *Lugh*, among others, are mythologized and immortalized as inhabiting the otherworld within the landscape as the *Sidhe*, later to be known as fairies. The hero worship of the old gods renewed their presence in Ireland’s

---

53 Irish Journalist Fergal Keane notes the extensive trade and interaction that occurred between Ireland and the rest of Europe- as far as the Mediterranean long before and after the Celtic arrival, with medieval petty Irish kings even modeling their kingdoms after the Roman Empire. “BBC’s: The Story of Ireland, 1 of 5, Age of Invasions,” YouTube video, 58:44, published by “BBC,” December 30, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tN0ndWAgA6o.


56 Martin Williams, “Ancient Mythology,” 323.
imagination as a powerful anticolonial statement. Everything about these gods, even the fairies they were conflated with, became ancient and noble symbols of resistance to colonial rule. The Danann were popularized as the heroic ancestors of the fairies just as the Celts who worshipped them were established as the heroic ancestors of the Irish. The myths preserved in medieval texts proved the English wrong. Ireland was not backward or fit to be colonized, but had a sophisticated history. Moreover, written texts were not the only form of mythology that the nationalists used. The oral tradition of the rural population was similarly employed by Irish nationalists.

3.2 Private (vernacular) tradition

The private myths of the vernacular oral tradition are intimate and generational and, while admittedly used on a national scale during the Gaelic Revival, function communally. Thomas Keightley observes in his study of fairies that in Munster, they bear a remarkable resemblance in character to the people themselves. Œ Giolláin’s research confirms this: “The fairies often had their own identified local rulers, such as Áine in Donegal and Clíodhna in Munster” who served to “articulate local identities,” especially during regional rivalries. Plots and details of the numerous stories change, such as the temperament of the fairies, their size and appearance, whether they are alone or in a group, benevolent or malevolent and so on, as they are often anecdotal or passed down from trusted confidants. The importance of the myth at this level is not a particular story, but the agents that populate it: the fairies.

The local populations and their fairy tradition proved useful to the nationalist cause. This usefulness was not only in the stories they told, but in the representation of the storytellers themselves. Among the privileged literati of the Gaelic Revival were Anglo-Irish individuals

such as William Butler Yeats. The Anglo-Irish sounded and dressed English and therefore needed a way of navigating their reality that uniquely signified Irish. In order to create this authentic Irish identity, the upper class looked to the native rural Irish for inspiration. Others who endeavored in this task included Douglas Hyde, who later became the first president of Ireland, Lady Augusta Gregory, and Lady Jane Wilde, mother of Oscar Wilde. They took to the countryside to speak with locals and record their stories. Often, these stories involved fairies. These stories were not treated by the subjects as cute tales for children, but rather as stories about deadly serious entities that were invisible but present in the landscape and not to be trifled with. The fairies’ marginal presence served as an apt metaphor for the Irish themselves: peripheral in importance and seemingly invisible to those colonizing the land, but a force to be reckoned with if provoked.

Scholars who study the Gaelic Revival have noted the fascination the literati had with the rural class. In his study of Yeats and Hyde, Lawrence Morris notes their tendency as young men to romanticize the Irish poor as having an authentic and pure nature while being simultaneously drawn to the idea of the “heroic aristocrat who sacrifices herself or himself for the people.”59 Ellwood cites this as a phenomenon of the political Romanticism that was widespread in the nineteenth century; people found “profundity” and purity in folklore and the poorer classes.60 The rural class was presented as having a direct and poetic link with the supernatural and divine. Hyde’s diaries document his attempt to manufacture a rural Gaelic speaking persona, falsely presenting himself as such an individual on trips to the country as a young man.61 Furthermore, in Celtic Twilight, Yeats wrote of the poetry of both an illiterate peasant and a poor Irish clerk

60 Robert Ellwood, Myth, 120.
61 Lawrence P. Morris,”Aristocracies of Thought,” 300.
who sought “to express something that lies beyond the range of expression” and “have within them the vast and vague extravagance that lies at the bottom of the Celtic heart.”62 The myths these men poeticized encompassed “a portion of that great Celtic phantasmagoria whose meaning no man has discovered, nor any angel revealed.”63 Both Hyde and Yeats, and others of the literati, used the poor to create an identity and a voice for their own socioeconomic group that had a natural familiarity with the divine and supernatural. This voice was arguably intended for the Anglo-Irish upper class, since there is no evidence that the rural population shared this anxiety about their identity or sense of Irishness. Yet their stories held the promise of something authentic and seemingly uncorrupted in the attempt at presenting a singular voice. Morris uses the verb “legitimate” to describe the function of this rural voice, and the intended audience for that legitimation was not just the Irish privileged class, but the English.64

While the stories legitimated national identity, they were not legitimately the stories of those who told them. As with the collective myths, the private myths of oral tradition were appropriated for an elite audience. The way in which these more localized myths were repackaged and refined by nationalists subtly bolstered Ireland’s anticolonial sentiments. Whatever purpose they initially served proved irrelevant to what was required by elites for their nationalist endeavor. Ruth Bottigheimer states that folktales “tend to reflect the belief system and the world of their intended audience.”65 Whether or not the locals actually believed in the fairies they spoke about was also irrelevant. The idea that locals believed in certain myths did present an image of continuity in myths and beliefs that was useful to the elite, as part of the imagined pre-Christian and pre-English world they wanted to present. The stories collected and

63 Ibid., 18.
64 Lawrence P. Morris,”Aristocracies of Thought,” 301.
popularized by the upper class were sold as uniquely *Irish*. They consequently suffused meaning not just into the stories, but into the crafted identity of the people telling them.

For Yeats, fairies did not merely serve a political agenda. Numerous books and articles have been written on his enchantment by the stories of these beings. Yeats was personally interested in these stories for spiritual reasons, and the fairies provided a window through which he sought that experience. Whereas the rural people he interviewed may or may not have truly believed in the existence of fairies, Yeats wanted to. In *The Celtic Twilight*, he rates popular folklorists’ treatment of the supernatural, criticizing one for “the sin of rationalism” while citing another’s belief in goblins as his only redeeming quality.66 In the same text, he writes of his “own glimpse of unaccountable things,” and the stubbornness of the fairy that will ensure its endurance in Irish discourse.67 Writing on the de-Anglicization of Ireland, Frank Kinahan goes so far as to describe Yeats’ interest in fairies as a religious search for an “alternate faith,” and that the stories of the peasants offered a “living text” for him to cultivate such a faith.68 Given the nineteenth century obsessions with historical veracity, origins, and scientific explanations, the supernatural world of the fairies and living people’s accounts of interacting with them provided a space for encountering mystery once again.

Trying to prove a myth as historically true has an undermining and blunting effect. Placing the myths of institutionalized religions such as Christianity within a historical reality and timeline, as was the attempt during this time, blunted their awe and emotional power. Nietzsche noted this consequence in 1872: “For it is the fate of every myth to creep by degrees into the narrow limits of some alleged historical reality, and to be treated by some later generation as a unique fact with historical claims…the feeling for myth perishes, and its place is taken by the

---

67 Ibid., 156-157.
The myth of the fairies on the other hand was both immune from and reinforced by such historicizing. Fairy myths and the mystery they held for Yeats had a past, but they were also absolutely present in everyday life. By placing fairies in antiquity alongside the ancient Celts as gods, the mystery was made real and given continuity into the present. The stories about these supernatural entities would not have been true ‘back then,’ but simply ‘true.’ Both the nationalist and spiritual endeavor could be achieved at once for Yeats.

What cannot be ignored in Yeats’ approach to this folk faith is the research and writing he did as a colonized subject and how that affected his interpretations, whether conscious or subconscious. Like the fairies, Yeats inhabited a liminal space in Irish history. Critical theorist Kathleen Heininge gives Yeats more agency in her interpretation of his fairy fascination. She cites his use of the liminal Sidhe/fairies as a metaphor for the refusal to conform to the English power structure’s insistence on drawing clear boundaries of identity. He was drawn to the idea of the fairies not just for spiritual reasons, but because of their usefulness as a literary construct which defied a colonizing presence. By using diverse fairy encounters from numerous individuals among the rural population, the consistency was not just in the manufactured image of the Irish people, but in the trope of their stories: the inability to draw a distinct boundary around identity by the colonizer. This is a way of identifying with fairies that may not have been isolated to only Yeats, but others throughout Ireland. The presentation of a homogenous rural population was not to insidiously or even intentionally treat them in an ahistorical manner by the literati, but because, as Victor Turner notes, liminality blends the concepts of “lowness and

71 Ibid.
Yeats attempted to make sacred the rural existence that colonizing powers had initially used as a justification to oppress the Irish. At the same time, he attempted to identify his class with the rural population by appropriating their stories. There is, after all, strength in numbers.

The collective and private myths created an identity that Irish nationalists needed in response to colonization. The period of the Gaelic Revival occurred during a global surge in nationalism and fascination with mythology. The world was industrializing and the political landscapes were changing quickly. The mythologies that were appropriated by nationalists and disseminated among the general public were laden with fairies; both as the gods they once were in the rediscovered texts and as the fairies the gods became in the oral vernacular tradition. The resurgent interest in mythology during this tumultuous time created a space in the cultural atmosphere in which the idea of the ‘fairy,’ a liminal and capricious entity, served as a powerful literary and political tool against colonization and also as a marker of identity. The fairy was woven into what it meant to be Irish, living on in the myths as well as the land of Ireland itself.

---

4 ENVIRONMENTAL LANDSCAPE

While the concept of the fairy today in Ireland was appropriated and reinvigorated via nineteenth century nationalism, these entities have always been associated with the landscape. The local landscapes play a large role in shaping people’s thoughts and stories about the supernatural and otherworldly. Irish folklorist E. Estyn-Evans observed that the “peculiarities” of a culture are largely owed to its geography.\(^{73}\) In the case of Ireland, the atmosphere of the island’s natural landscape and its effect on both the ancient and modern culture should not be underestimated. The landscape in which mythic beings lived, fought, and died is both visible and accessible in Ireland’s mountains, lakes, mounds, seashores, ruins, and forts.\(^{74}\) The natural physical environment of Ireland continues to command attention and assert a presence. Fairies are said to inhabit many of its features and have made it a living landscape that is infused with a sacred quality. However, this sacredness was not immune from being politicized, and the emergence of archaeology during the era of the Gaelic Revival established a bridge between the land of Ireland and Irish nationalists. More specifically, nationalists used archaeology to link sacred and Irish.

The ruins of history and mythology lay side by side in every region of Ireland. For example, St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Northern Ireland lies near the ancient and mythic site of *Emain Macha* (owen mah-kuh) (See Appendix A).\(^{75}\) *Emain Macha* served as the capital of Ulster in Northern Ireland in myth and history as both a political and sacred site. It had fallen out of use before St. Patrick’s church was built across from it, but the early Christians left *Emain*

\(^{75}\) The cathedral has been destroyed and rebuilt numerous times since its origins in the 5th century. It is in the same area as the original and is where Irish hero Brian Boru is interred. *Emain Macha* is named for *Macha*, a goddess who dies after a footrace in which she births twins, prompting the name of the site. It was the seat of power for Ulster (Northern Ireland) kings and is also mentioned in the myths about *Cú Chulainn*. The two sites were likely active at different periods, but it is of note that the adoption of Christianity did not require an erasure of pre-Christian sites which alluded to old gods.
Macha standing. Even the name of the church, *Ard Macha* (Height of Macha), retains the name of the goddess *Macha*, after whom the site was named. Land and language came together in the myths of the two traditions.

Imbued with power and agency, the physical environment acted as a living character in Ireland’s mythologies. The poem in the introduction alludes to a person’s ability to actively engage with the land. The stories behind the *Lia Fáil*, the inauguration stone brought by the *Danann* to the royal Hill of Tara, further illustrate this. In the myths, Tara served as the seat of the high kings who ruled all of Ireland and was also where the *Milesians* first encountered the kings of the *Danann*. If a man was to be king of Ireland, he first went to Tara and sat on top of this rather blatantly phallic structure in the presence of a Druid. If the Druid could hear it scream, then he was the chosen king (See Appendix B). It is of note that the stone screamed, not the man. The land acted as a living character identifying who would rule over it. The myth articulates a relationship between the land (the stone of the *Lia Fáil*), the sacred (only the Druid could hear the stone), and the people. It is little wonder, then, that the mythologies of Ireland place the gods of antiquity and the *Sidhe* not in a distant cosmic realm, but alongside ordinary people as co-inhabitants of the same island.

Richard Sosis proves helpful in understanding how sacred land functions in this context because of his delineation between sacred space and sacred land, not just sacred and profane space. He does not constrain his study to the space humans create in order to separate the sacred from the profane, but the land they live on as well. Sosis divides the notion of sacred into two spheres: sacred space and sacred land.76 As he defines them, sacred space is an area marked by human-made boundaries such as walls, but sacred land has no definitive boundary that separates

---

it from the profane. It is made sacred through an association with “supernatural agents.” Sacred space may be physically constructed, but sacred land is imaginatively constructed. While buildings may be desecrated through any number of profane activities, land can often retain its sanctity in the face of similar activities. Regardless of the changes the culture and society underwent, the physical landscape of Ireland functioned as a repository for the myths that sustained the supernatural. The ancient gods living within the land after the Milesians defeated them are not relegated to one specific place. They live in all the features of the landscape—water and land alike. This enduring connection to and identification with the land was illustrated in Ireland by the Devon Commission in the nineteenth century. Families who were moved from the small-plot clachans to new land situated only half a mile away openly wept “as if they were going to America.” In terms of survival and identity, land held immense meaning for the Irish people.

This covenant, a contract with the land established through story, was first documented by the medieval manuscripts that designated the landscape as the realm of the gods, but it is most evident in the contemporary oral tradition of today. This oral tradition was largely inspired by the landscape and highlights the role that environment plays amongst the rural poor in the conceptualization of fairies. One of the most renowned storytellers (seanchaí) of the twentieth century from southwest Ireland, Seán Ó Conaill, said he had no knowledge of the Milesians of

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 4.
80 This sacralising of land through story is not unique to Ireland of course. In India as well, medieval texts chart the physical landscape with stories that go with the sites, showing mythology to function as a method of memory for those places and at times even as a covenant with them. For more information, see David L. Haberman, Journey Through the Twelve Forests (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xi-xii; J. Edward Chamberlin, If This is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?: Reimagining Home and Sacred Space (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 213.
81 E. Estyn Evans, Irish Folk Ways, 26.
collective mythology when asked about them. This demonstrates Doniger’s delineation between collective and private myths. The collective myths clearly did not inspire or spread knowledge of the Sidhe or fairies to portions of the population, rather the private myths held more sway. After literacy was introduced in medieval times, only the elite would have read the collective myths which concretized the stories of the Danann and Milesians. Those without access to literacy would have continued to tell their own private myths that folklorists have collected. These stories are often about territorial fairies inhabiting features in the land, such as fairy forts.

Fairy forts are easy to spot in Ireland. They are typically sitting conspicuously in the corner of someone’s property. While the rest of the land is groomed and cultivated, the fort is often left alone. While many are officially preserved today, they were preserved for centuries by the myths surrounding them. There are presently thirty to forty thousand fairy forts, some possibly dating back as early as 600 BCE, and they are scattered along the countryside as mounds encircled by trees. The mounds and trees are considered fairy property (See Appendix C).

In 2001, a gentleman in Western Ireland told folklorist Eddie Lenihan, in reference to these forts:

I s’pose, if a fairy is molested, if you go tampering or meddling with ‘em, well, they retaliate. ‘Tis only kind o’ natural, retaliation when you’re interfered with. Nearly everyone is Ireland is aware that it isn’t the done thing. Was never the done thing. The most ignorant people in Ireland, people that were illiterate, wouldn’t bring a thorn out o’ them forts.

---

82 Simon Ó Faoláin, “Traditions of the Milesian invasion,” 56-57. While many stories about fairies seem particular to each region or locality that tells them, some myths have been more widespread. Patricia Lysaght’s in depth study of the Banshee shows that the vast majority of Ireland has shared an understanding and belief in such an entity as a female death messenger, though variations of the name and details of the appearance differ by region. For more on this, see Patricia Lysaght, The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger (Dublin: The Glendale Press, 1986).


This gentleman clearly expressed the demarcation of physical boundaries between fairy and mortal, sacred and profane, and them and us. He asserts a pervasive understanding that spans generations among the Irish in regard to respecting particular features in the landscape, since ‘nearly everyone’ is ‘aware’ that they are not be to bothered. Most notable is his reference to the fairies in relation to the forts they live in. To take even a thorn out of a fort is to tamper with the actual fairies themselves. This makes the distinction between the landscape and the fairy within it a blurred one. It is not just the entity within the feature that is supernaturally imbued, but the fairy and the fort. They are one in the same. This corresponds to the fairy’s predecessor, the Sidhe, which can indicate both the land and the entity who lives in it. While many of these landscape features most likely served a practical purpose during their initial construction, their meaning changed over the following centuries along with peoples’ interpretations of them. The myths told about the sites preserved them, while their long-standing persistence demanded an explanation which was, in turn, provided by myth.

4.1 Sidhe continuity and concepts

The term Sidhe, like the fairy it signifies, has often proven resistant to clarity. Sidhe does not have a definitive meaning or even spelling, and it has been written si, side, sid, or sidhe, just to list a few. Sidhe can refer to a fairy hill, mound, cairn (rocks stacked in a dome shape), passage tomb, otherworld, or the fairies themselves. It may also simply mean mound, and any supernatural or otherworldly understanding is added by context. In mythology, Sidhe is often the residence for the people of the Sidhe, and refers to passage tombs such as Newgrange. The term and what it literally means is ambiguous. Anthropologist Tok Thompson says the word Sidhe is “redolent with meanings throughout the Irish landscape and linguascape.”85 By contrast, the

bean sí (banshee) has been studied extensively, and Patricia Lysaght’s work proves helpful in illuminating what may have been one of the earliest interpretations of Sidhe. The term bean sí is sometimes translated as woman (bean) plus fairy (sí), but the figure has been understood as a female death-messenger since possibly as early as the 700s CE. In modern popular culture she is still associated with death, a trend that shows consistency in the interpretation of her role. Most stories portray her delivering the haunting wail, or keen, for the impending loss of an Irish life or descendant. Bean has been consistent in signifying ‘female’ ubiquitously over time and by region, but sí, the mercurial term associated with fairies today, requires further analysis.

The passage tombs identified with the Sidhe are Neolithic in origin. These tombs, most notably Newgrange, predate the ‘Irish,’ Medieval monks, Celts, and even the building of the pyramids in Egypt (See Appendix D). Although the culture that constructed them has been forgotten, the Sidhe are a feature with over five thousand years of continuity in Ireland and their presence has resulted in centuries of myths to explain them. They appear in some of Ireland’s earliest writings, most notably the early medieval Christian Book of Armagh. This work contains accounts from the 600s, with those accounts referencing even older ones to establish credibility. Tok Thompson notes that these earliest references are simply to physical sites, but that the modern Irish language implies either mounds or spirits of the mounds. These physical sites housed the dead, who were believed to have an active role among the living. The tombs were venerated well into the eleventh century, the time that the saga The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel was written.

---

86 Patricia Lysaght, The Banshee, 39.
87 Ibid.
89 Ibid., “The Irish Si Tradition,” 343.
90 Ibid., 353, 361.
In his introduction to *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*, Jeffrey Gantz writes that *Da Derga* can be interpreted as the red god of the underworld in whose house of death an explicitly detailed battle ensued on Samuin.\(^{91}\) The son of the semi-divine hero of the story (Conare, comparable to Oedipus) encountered three men whose appearance was entirely red, including the horses they were riding into the house of *Deirg* (red), and said to Conare’s son:

> Behold, lad, great tidings! Weary the horses we ride. We ride the horses of Dond Tétscorach of the *Síd*. Although we are alive, we are dead. Great omens! Cutting off of lives, satisfaction of crows, sustenance of ravens, din of slaughter, whetting of blades, shields with broken bosses after sunset. Behold!\(^{92}\)

Three red men on three red horses were mentioned later in the saga as having “lied in the *síd,*” and as punishment the king of the *Síd* condemned them to three separate deaths by the king of Temuir (Tara).\(^{93}\) The king of Tara referred to the mortal high king of Ireland and the king of the *Síd* to an immortal ruler of the Under/Otherworld. This implied coexistence between the dead and living in addition to a clear doctrine of rebirth for the red riders. The *Sidhe* was a site saturated with religious implications, and the king of the *Sidhe* was understood as an active ruler who could banish or retain those living within the landscape while the *Sidhe* residents could interact with the living. Archaeology has revealed many of the *Sidhe* sites to be burial mounds. The Celts appropriated these sites into their own sacred stories as the Otherworld (*Tír na nÓg*). The sites and the entities within them are of a liminal nature. While associated with the dead, the riders described themselves as both living and dead, essentially placing them between both realities but accessible to one another. There is a tension ascribed to these sites and the entities that live in them, both in medieval sagas and modern narratives.

---


\(^{92}\) Ibid., 71. Dond Tétscorach is likely a reference to Donn, the lord of the dead in Celtic myth who resides over the deceased on the island of Tech Duinn (House of Donn), a peculiarly formed rock off the western coast of Ireland. He is linked in myth to the *Milesians*. For more on this, see Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 58-59.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., 100.
While this particular saga and others like it were recorded by Christian monks, many of the stories’ elements are antithetical to Christian doctrine, which implies at least some preservation of pre-Christian beliefs. The stories would have been an oral tradition long before literacy arrived, and they provide a glimpse into the type of religious relationship the people had with the landscape. Since the sites were venerated well into the 11th century, they had likely been sites of ritual long before that, and they would have inculcated myths into an ever-evolving folk memory of the land and what it meant. Folk memory, while it should not be blindly trusted as accurate, does show in Thompson’s studies to carry with it elements of accuracy. At Newgrange, local folklore claimed that the sun would shine through its roof-box construction and light up the inner temple during the winter solstice. This symbolized a link between heaven and earth in medieval mythology and allowed for Oengus to take control of it from his father, Dagda. According to archaeologists, the last time the solstice had been witnessed inside was between 3320 and 2910 BCE, yet the phenomenon proved true.94 This is not an intention to romanticize folklore, only to reiterate that it should not be outright dismissed. The stories the locals told each other were clearly part of a living and land-based tradition. As Thompson notes, folk myths are not created “ex-nihilo,” but originate from something.95 The changing meanings and details that surround consistent otherworldly features created a space for the fairy adaptation and survival.

4.2 Nationalist archaeology and sacred land

Science, a source of fascination for the nineteenth century Victorian population, assisted in the production of Sidhe narratives and the preservation of sites connected to fairies. The

---

94 Tok Thompson, “The Irish Sí Tradition,” 346. This was hypothesized and tested during the reconstruction in the 1960s, but the site as a whole had actually been discovered by the Scotsman Charles Campbell in 1699. According to guides at the site, while locals working for Campbell were digging through the mound to collect stones for infrastructure, they discovered the entrance stone with spirals and diamonds carved into it first. The site was already rich in fairy lore, so upon this discovery the locals informed Mr. Campbell that if he was interested in stones, he could dig them up himself, then quit.

95 Ibid., 339.
nationalism of this era coincided with an intense interest in the emerging field of archaeology. Archaeology functioned alongside the literati of the Gaelic Revival to legitimate the nationalist narrative with concrete evidence by physically placing the myths in view and making them an immediate presence instead of the stuff of far removed legends. Excavations of mythic sites served to substantiate the stories for those swept up in the Gaelic movement. To excavate a sacred or ancient site is to uncover a story and subsequently retell it. The mythic stories linked to actual sites were a boon to nationalists because it confirmed the Ireland’s noble and ancient Celtic heritage. In their minds, to even refer to the sites that were being researched was to refer to a mythological and even supernatural event, hero, or deity. A landscape that was saturated with the supernatural was ultimately a landscape saturated with the sacred. Archaeologists confirmed the continuity of habitation by a people the Irish identified themselves with through a mythology permeated with the sacred. The idea of Irishness itself was consequently elevated above that of the English in the nationalist mind.

The names for many of the landscape features in Ireland echo mythic figures or battles and do pre-date the Gaelic Revival by centuries, as Celtic tribes inevitably linked their lineages to heroes, gods, and demigods.96 The dindshenchas (history of places) explains how geographical features acquired their names, and dates to between 900 and 1100 CE. This group of texts directly links the names of places to ancient mythology. These sites were tangible to the nineteenth century Irish and sacred long before their medieval recording.97 Sites like Newgrange were appropriated by the Celts to house their own myths and gods, possibly retaining indigenous myths within their own imported stories. The active chain of transmission is not simply one that

96 Ibid., 55-57.
97 Ronald Hicks, “The Sacred Landscape of Ancient Ireland: Evidence from both excavations and rare manuscripts reveal much about early Ireland’s cosmology and its people’s deep connection to the land,” Archaeology (May/June 2011), 40.
passed on a myth about fairies, but one that passed on the fairies’ connection with specific places. These places can be seen and engaged with by an audience. This provided an intimacy and experience with the myth beyond that of merely imagining its descriptions. As Sam Moore writes in his study of myth as an interpretive aid for geography, “the landscape becomes an embodiment of social and individual times of memory.”\footnote{Sam Moore, “Myths and folklore as aids in interpreting the prehistoric landscape at the Carrowkeel passage tomb complex, Co. Sligo, Ireland,” in \textit{Folk Belief and Practices in Medieval Lives}, ed. Ann-Britt Falk and Donata M. Kyritz (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 7.} Meanings change however, and the archaeological excavations of the nineteenth century created rather than retrieved memory. The landscape retained meaning as each successive generation reinterpreted and understood it through their myths. Archaeology functioned to nationalize that meaning. The private myths people told about the Iron Age fairy forts on their property were preserved by the thousands just as the \textit{Sidhe} sites of collective myths were real and traversable. By tying myths to these sites, the narratives appeared as ancient as the sites themselves and the people of Ireland as living archives of ancient truth.\footnote{Máirín Ní Cheallaigh, “Ringforts or Fairy Homes: Oral Understandings and the Practice of Archaeology in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Ireland.” \textit{International Journal of Historical Archaeology}, Vol. 6, Iss. 2 (June, 2012), 373} The fact that there were tens of thousands of these sites covering Ireland and fairy stories to go with them implied a unity and cohesiveness among the Ireland’s ancestors.\footnote{Ibid.} For nationalists, archaeology underscored what they themselves were trying to convey: Ireland had functioned as one unified nation before and could do so again.

The \textit{Sidhe} was, in the earliest manuscripts, not a fairy mound, but a house of death containing entities that could impact the living. Sayers states that even Otherworld is an inaccurate way of describing the sites. He prefers “Netherworld” instead for how the realm would have been conceptualized since the world of the dead functioned within the world of the
living, not on a separate and far removed plane. Thomas Keightley’s extensive work on fairies observes that all of the various Irish words for fairy derive from the term “Shia,” which properly translates to “spirit.” The root word for Sidhe, like the ubiquitous interpretation of the bean sí, is closely associated with the death and the afterlife. Furthermore, the word used for a feature of the land, Sidhe, was interchangeable with the word’s root, spirit. The land was a living, regenerating, and sacred thing.

When considered in light of the comparable nature surrounding the bean sí in oral tradition, the implication that the Sidhe lived in ‘fairy land’ or were understood as ‘fairies’ is misleading. Their association with fairies can be largely attributed to the introduction of the word from the English language. The anti-colonial efforts of the Gaelic League disseminated ‘fairy’ when they published the rural population’s private myths, not knowing how popular culture would later interpret it. If a local person had used the word Sidhe in Gaelic during interviews with the literati or the IFC, it was often translated into fairy. Thompson refers to this translation of “fairy” as “damagingly misleading,” as it belittled the understanding of what these beings were and what they meant in early Ireland. To be sure, ‘fairy’ is a significant demotion from ‘god.’ Yet had they remained as gods, would the stories and myths told about them have remained after Christianity was introduced? It is not likely that it would have continued as a living tradition without such adaptability.

As archaeologists preserved mythic sites, the stories about the sites were preserved and reimagined as well. The amount of stories that Irish tradition-bearers told the archaeologists that specifically involved fairies increased because these stories had a marked impact on

103 Tok Thompson, “The Irish Sí Tradition,” 343. Evans-Wentz reminds readers in The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries that the most ancient manuscripts reveal the sidhe persistently as divine and ever present; it is only the later ones that change their roles completely (292).
archaeologists’ desire to conserve the sites.\textsuperscript{104} Regardless of what archaeologists initially sought to excavate, once an area of land was linked to fairies, interest piqued, and the odds were greater that it would be preserved. Tradition-bearers in Ireland had just as much interest in preservation as the archaeologists legitimating the idea of an ancient nation. Both the literati and archaeologists popularized and authenticated the oral narratives of the countryside, and Lysaght confirms that fairy lore is actually strongest in areas where it is intertwined with features in the landscape.\textsuperscript{105} With a plethora of stories to pull from, it is compelling that the tradition-bearers specifically chose stories about fairies to preserve the land. Fairies were synonymous with land, as the \textit{Sidhe} had been. Details around the stories changed, but the otherworldly and often magical attributes of the landscape persisted. After centuries of evolving ideas and terminology referencing fairies, there was a “confusing” of the Otherworld and the fairy world.\textsuperscript{106} This confusion was also an adaptation that allowed the fairy to stay alive in local lore as it continued to be transmitted in contemporary Ireland.

\textsuperscript{104} Máirín Ní Cheallaigh, “Ringforts or Fairy Homes,” 370.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 375.
5 Mythology: Contemporary Transmission

Storytelling as a traditional practice remained strong in Ireland, and while it has faltered with the onslaught of media-based avenues such as movies and television, the oral storytelling tradition is still a craft that is being practiced. Irish storytellers are referred to as tradition-bearers, and this implies gravity to what they do and the stories they tell. Some scholars claim that the tradition of storytelling in Ireland today descends directly from the *filid* of pre-Christian Ireland.107 While tradition-bearers are not considered seers or imbued with notions of magic, they participate in a *fili*-like activity known as rambling, sometimes called a *cuaird*.108 To own a “rambling house” is to own a home to which the neighbors in a village were welcome to “ramble” for the purpose of telling stories.109 This is a social ritual that carries with it a significant weight and through which an individual earns the right to tell such stories. That is why those who hone this craft of histories, genealogies, and lore are not merely storytellers, but the bearers of a living tradition.110

What is especially notable is the authenticating process of becoming a tradition-bearer. While anyone is technically allowed to tell a story, this does not guarantee that their story will be received or accepted well. One does not tell a story they have simply made up on their own. Irish tradition-bearer Jenny McGlynn explains that a listener will pay careful attention to a story before retelling it later in the presence of the tradition-bearer they had heard it from. After the listener retells the story, it is either “sanctioned” or not by the tradition-bearer.111 Ramblings take place within one’s own village or lane, and the stories that are told and re-told are specific to

---

110 Ibid., 22, 25.
111 Ibid., 27.
their area. Thus, while the new tradition-bearers must be sanctioned by immediate locals, stories vary from region to region, just as the character and nature of fairies in the stories do. This helped create a diverse array of fairy beliefs and characteristics within private myths.

A key feature of tradition-bearing is the practice of listening. A literate culture often expresses a suspicion towards the accuracy of memory in retelling a story. Yet even stories told by locals not trained in tradition-bearing in Tok Thompson’s research showed elements of retention related to the excavation of Newgrange. Studies have shown that oral cultures literally store information differently in their minds than literate cultures. Their memories and knowledge are housed in the form of a story as opposed to facts, implying a way of using the mind for memory that is not practiced or immediately accessible to a literate culture. This is not to argue for an exact repetition, only that this method of transmission is a learned craft that bears no resemblance to gossip.

Dr. John Niles’ study of Scottish tradition-bearer Duncan Williamson provides insight into the traits, contributions, and method of tradition-bearing. Like Ireland, Scotland has a strong Celtic history from which details can be gleaned as to how this transmission has worked. Niles cites five attributes of individuals in this craft: engagement, retentiveness, acquisitiveness, critical consciousness, and showmanship. Williamson does not just tell stories; he embodies them. He diligently collects and synthesizes tales as he goes. As a traveler he is able to use stories as a source of trade for material goods, implying both a cultural and economic function. The fact that people are willing to relinquish material goods for a story illustrates their value. Williamson’s home is used as a rambling house today, and his account of being

114 Ibid., 187.
introduced to the tradition as a boy conforms to that of Jenny McGlynn. Both describe the expectation of listening carefully to travelers’ stories and having their performances of those stories validated by others.\textsuperscript{115} The authority of those in the immediate community, like that of the filid and priests, is still prevalent in contemporary tradition-bearing.

The locus of authority in this transmission of myth has contributed to the endurance of the fairy in Ireland. Part of this has been addressed in the storytelling tradition that goes back to the days of the respected filid mentioned earlier, and is echoed in the practice of modern tradition-bearers. Hearing a story of supernatural significance appears to almost be of equal weight to experiencing the supernatural oneself if the chain of transmission can be verified as legitimate. The chain does not extend far, keeping the storyteller as close to the phenomenon as possible. To illustrate, a Roman Catholic Priest recounted the story of a woman who bought a cow that could not be milked until it was exorcised of evil.\textsuperscript{116} After telling this remarkable occurrence, he insisted “this is reported to me as fact,” as though this assurance alone should dispel any doubt.\textsuperscript{117} The story does not have to be believable then, only the people telling it. Many of the accounts of fairies collected by folklorists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries include such statements as a form of verification. Actual evidence is not required of the content that fills the stories, but confidence in the honesty and soundness of the storyteller as an individual must be clearly evident to the audience. This confirms and perpetuates the myths as they are continually transmitted within the community.

The Celtic tradition of storytelling emphasizes passing on myths of gods and later fairies and has had a persistent place in Irish culture. This tradition ensured that

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{116} W.Y. Evans-Wentz, \textit{The Fairy Faith}, 42.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
myths about fairies would keep being told and the ambiguity of the Sidhe/fairy made space for the fairy be employed in both mythic imagination and identity. This was true locally as well as nationally. Whether assimilated into a new Christian myth or disseminated by tradition-bearers into numerous private ones, the nebulous conception of the fairy has been adaptable enough to be appropriated in multiple manners. The fairy has maintained its place in Ireland as the people repeat the myths about them, share the land fairies inhabit according to those myths, and incorporate their own local identities into the fairies’ nature.
6 CONCLUSION

The fairy is as difficult to define as it is to catch. It is an elusive term that has been applied to other equally elusive terms. The passage tombs and cairns they have been associated with were ancient by the time the Celts arrived in Ireland, and the evidence shows that stories have been told about the land and the life within it for centuries. The landscape in Ireland is not simply rural. True, it is largely unindustrialized, but it is covered from shore to shore with signs of meaning. Cairns can be seen on top of mountains and hills for miles from the roads. Massive standing stones and ancient gravesites are strewn about the countryside. Thousands of ring forts are left idle in the corners of yards, testaments to a bygone culture. The land and entities in it were sacred, and the myths, both written and oral, attest to this. Before they were fairies, they were gods and goddesses. Having been associated with sites of burial, those gods may have been the focus of ancestor worship before the Celts arrived. Regardless of their shape or appellation, they have a history of veneration and respect. Fairies today may seem kitsch, but Doniger notes that even in kitsch, something mythic still remains in the content, if not the form.118 Their history is that of an entity understood as divine.

Thus, I have argued that mythology, nationalism, and landscape are inseparable when attempting to explain the endurance of the fairy in Irish culture. In the introduction I cited Wales as an example to compare with Ireland in regards to fairies. Both are Celtic nations that have stories about fairies, but that is where the similarities between the fairy traditions end. In an effort to keep in step with modern rationalist thought in the nineteenth century, Welsh nationalists separated mythology from their efforts.119 Myths about them were not collected as evidence of a lived religious understanding, but largely marginalized. Additionally, Welsh

118 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, Other People’s Myths, 38.
119 Adam Coward, “Rejecting Mother’s Blessing,” 62.
patriots viewed their native landscape as a burden and a curse, not sacred, until tourism convinced them otherwise.\textsuperscript{120} Welsh nationalists censored their myths and demonstrated a lack of fondness for their landscape. Wales was just as nationalistic and in need of identity during this time as Ireland was, but the three key elements were absent, as is a living fairy tradition in contemporary Wales.

While the relationship between nation, myth, and land has been evident for a long time in Ireland, it was during the anticolonial efforts of the late 1800s that it was strongest and left a lasting mark on Irish culture. What had been locally and communally understood for centuries was suddenly thrust into public discourse to unite the Irish as one people with a cohesive identity in order to thwart England’s attempts at cultural and spiritual colonization. Irish nationalists could not have used the landscape or the mythologies in their efforts and not included the fairies. Since the nationalists were endeavoring to define themselves using myth (collective and private) and land (archaeology), this meant that the fairies were intrinsically linked to the creation of that identity.

There has been a decline in the Irish fairy faith since the 1980s. It has been diminished by modernity and globalization as tradition-bearers must compete with the stories told by movies, television, and social media. The media outlets that the fairy tradition must compete with have also delivered one of the most damaging blows to its representation. The Irish are well aware of what it sounds like to espouse a belief in fairies. Popular culture has presented an idea of the fairy en masse that is far removed from its culturally specific Irish contexts. Even if one did believe in fairies, it is not likely they would freely admit to it. Ultimately, the myths will find a more permanent home in children’s stories, but this does not mean that fairies are completely

removed from religious experience in Ireland. While the fairy faith is waning from the culture at large, it is simultaneously being picked up and practiced in the margins of society in a new way. Instead of merely testifying to an experience with the fairies, Dennis Gaffin has recently collected interviews in Ireland from people claiming to be actual reincarnated fairies.¹²¹ This is not a typical way for fairies to be interpreted. My purpose in citing Gaffin’s work is to illustrate the continued and evolving way in which fairies function in religious behavior. Regardless of one’s initial reaction to Gaffin’s subjects, they reveal a religious and spiritual fascination with the fairies that Yeats could have identified with. Irish fairy myths have been evolving stories with no fixed point, so why should they not continue to adopt new shapes? Becoming a tale for children or a window to spiritual experience is not the dissipation of a tradition, but another form for it to live in. The fairy will still be talked about, and regardless of the form the mythologies take, it is always better than not being talked about at all.

REFERENCES

Austin, C. “May Day Inaugurates Celtic Summer.”


Hicks, Ronald. “The Sacred Landscape of Ancient Ireland: Evidence from both excavations and rare manuscripts reveal much about early Ireland’s cosmology and its people’s deep


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Emain Macha

Appendix A.1: Navan Fort, the royal seat for the kings of Ulster in Northern Ireland

Appendix A.2: View of St. Patrick’s church, peeking over the back of the larger Roman Catholic cathedral, from the top of Navan Fort at Emain Macha.
Appendix B: The Hill of Tara and the Lia Fáil

Appendix B.1: The Hill of Tara (the Lia Fáil is right of center on top of the hill)

Appendix B.2: The Lia Fáil
Appendix C: Ring forts (fairy forts)

Appendix C.1: Ring fort next to a Christian cemetery
Appendix C.2: County Sligo

Appendix C.3: Northern Ireland, just outside of Armagh
Appendix C.4: County Clare

Appendix C.5: Western Ireland, just on top of the hill in the background
Appendix C.6: Between Sligo and Armagh
Appendix D: Neolithic monuments

Appendix D.1: Newgrange
Appendix D.2: Carrowkeel portal tombs/cairns (visible as nubs on top of the mountains)
Appendix D.3: The cairn of Queen Maeve. Visible for miles from the roads.

Appendix D.4: Mound of the Hostages at the Hill of Tara
Appendix D.6: The inside wall of the Mound of the Hostages
Appendix E: The Paps of Anu (where Fionn mac Comhaill sat on the night of Samuin, or Halloween, to access the world of the Sidhe)