

# Famine Ghosts and the *Féar Gortach*: A Strand of Irish Belief

*Deborah R. Davis*

The expression “*an féar gortach*” (the hungry grass) is an Irish idiom connoting possession of a prodigious appetite: “The *féar gortach* is on me” (i.e., “I am famished”). It may be uttered as a curse to one’s foe: “May the *féar gortach* be on you!” For certain Irish people, however, the term “*féar gortach*” is infused with personal meaning derived from collective belief. What underlies the foregoing turn of phrase is a particular phenomenon of consequence in Irish culture. This class of extraordinary experience is comprised of fairly well-documented components: an individual, treading upon a specific spot, suddenly feels extreme weakness and hunger, which may be alleviated by the consumption of even a small amount of food.<sup>1</sup>

In order to explore their interpretations of the incidents, I will draw upon the stories and commentary of Irish people who have had a *féar gortach* experience. Throughout the essay, I refer to these people as narrators. Their explanations suggest that *féar gortach* encounters make sense within Irish culture as ideas about the *féar gortach* are part of an array of folk beliefs concerning death and dying in Ireland:

- The dead are both present to the living and separate from them.
- There may be matters unconcluded at death that prompt discarnate souls to manifest themselves.
- The living can act in various ways to help the dead.

I will begin by examining issues regarding the interface of belief and experience. Then I will illustrate these relationships in Irish culture through a discussion of archival materials. Finally, I will offer one woman’s interpretation of her own *féar gortach* experience.

### Experience and Belief

As David Hufford demonstrates in his study of the relationship between belief and experience in supernatural assault traditions, *The Terror that Comes in the Night* (1982), people have a fundamental need to integrate their experiences with belief. In his research, Hufford found that numinous experiences are widespread and that there is a personal empirical basis for many individuals' beliefs in the numinous. Some investigators have, however, taken the position that extraordinary experiences most likely do not occur; if people see ghosts it is because they are deluded. They see ghosts because they believe that they do. Such narrowly conceived "explanations" consequently lend a condescending flavor to folklore scholarship.

Proceeding from such a presumption leads to bias. If belief is understood to be the *cause* of experience, then one's experiences reveal the nature of one's beliefs, not the nature of the phenomena experienced. The contention that belief begets belief is fallacious. This view is fundamentally discordant with the relationship of belief and experience expressed by the narrators themselves, as I will discuss. This view does not satisfy their needs to know what happened to them. Moreover, it implies that people who claim to have extraordinary experiences are misdirected by allegedly less advanced cultural conditions. Such a perspective relegates supernatural explanations to the realm of the irrational, recalling the nineteenth-century evolutionary approach to folk belief espoused by scholars such as Edward B. Tylor (see Tylor 1970 [1871]:16).

What underlies this misconception is, of course, the assumption that supernatural explanations are inadmissible, that the only acceptable interpretations are those consistent with convention. I will consider how explanations offered by the medical/scientific establishment not only imply that the beliefs held and expressed by the folk are mistaken, but that the medical establishment also relies on facts that are not consistent with the narrators' own descriptions. On the other hand, taking the common Irish belief that the dead may return for some purpose results in an explanation derived directly from the relationship between belief and experience expressed by the narrators themselves.

Also important in these phenomenological accounts is the fact that the narrators *have* entertained alternative explanations, such as those supplied by conventional medicine. Thus, in their memorates—defined here as personal experience narratives of encounters with the supernatural—they consider conventional interpretations of the phenomenon. Thus, the results of their questioning are assimilated into their accounts of their own experiences. In their search for explanations, the people themselves define this genre of belief. An "experience-centered" approach, detailed by Hufford

(1982), enables recognition of a genre that entails a personal and empirical basis for belief. The memorates incorporate belief statements, not as lists of decontextualized items recited for the folklorist, but as personally and culturally meaningful interpretations of numinous experience.

In her 1985 article, "The Notion of Context," Katharine Young suggests that in matters of text and context, different folk genres can be seen to absorb aspects of context variously according to the nature of the form. While Young's purpose is to differentiate context from setting in storytelling events, her point regarding the relative perviousness of texts is relevant with respect to memorates. These narrative forms may assimilate a number of personal elements: descriptive elements of the experience, awareness of the narrator's own beliefs, and self-interrogation regarding possible causes. Furthermore, cultural or societal elements may appear as allusions to traditional values and explanations.

I propose that Irish culture provides individuals with more parsimonious explanations for this phenomenon than do institutions such as conventional medicine. Furthermore, I will consider how the Irish folk explanations of the phenomenon of *féar gortach* make sense of people's experiences as well as the nature of death.

The fluidity of the boundary between the living and the dead has frequently been foregrounded in Irish expressive culture. A consciousness of death and dying permeates Irish life. Indeed, Irish culture is replete with such familiar intimations of the next world such as the *bean sídh* (banshee) and *Oíche Shamhna* (Hallowe'en). The *bean sídh*, whose eerie wail is believed to presage death, serves as mediatrix between the living and the dead (Lysaght 1986; Ó hÓgáin 1990:45-46). According to custom, the dead return at the feast of *Oíche Shamhna* when the fabric between this world and the next is exceedingly permeable. However, it should be noted that the dead often interact with the living at other times of the year, without recourse to mediation. The dead are always with us, and connections with the other world are part of the Irish folklore of death. This branch of Irish folklore is shaped by larger belief systems that run throughout Irish culture.

Ghostly encounters are by no means confined to Ireland. Given the ubiquity of extraordinary experiences, it is not surprising that folk expressions of supernatural presence have their counterparts in many cultures. In Ireland, elements of expressive culture that enable people to find meaning in ghostly manifestations draw upon religion (both pre-Christian and Christian), as well as upon economic circumstances (most poignantly the devastation of the nineteenth-century Famine).

The basic human need to be at once connected to and separated from one's dead is central to the *féar gortach*. Attribution of the *féar gortach* to the post-mortal presence of those who have died tragically, outside of normal

limits (e.g., at a young age or away from home), illustrates Irish people's concern for their dead. This belief involves the idea that some essence of the deceased is associated with the site of death and somehow reflects the designs of the living. Revenants frequently return to deal with matters unconcluded before death, and the féar gortach is only part of a larger concert of Irish beliefs concerning the dead's return to complete unfinished business.

### **Féar Gortach in the Irish Folklore Archive**

One corpus of Irish folklore specifically invokes the adversity of famine. For example, in many Irish religious tales the thin-legged revenant is a motif regarded as synonymous with the purgatorial state (Ó Súilleabháin 1951-52). The striking image of wasted legs that attends these narratives could well have been derived from the widespread starvation that prevailed during the Potato Famine. The mental and material landscape of the Famine was (and remains) a prominent part of Irish consciousness. Folk narratives provide a way for people to come to some understanding of such grievous circumstances (Davis 1994). Similarly, narratives about the experience of féar gortach may have served to address the concerns of the famine-stricken.

There are a number of references to the féar gortach (as well as narratives about thin-legged revenants) in the holdings of the Irish Folklore Archive, contained in the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin. Many of these materials were collected in the *Gaeltacht* (the Irish-speaking areas of Ireland) under the auspices of the Irish Folklore Commission around the time of its inception in 1935 as part of a massive salvage operation undertaken to preserve the country's folklore. Much of the archival material (verbatim transcripts of sound recordings) was assembled by full-time collectors. Additional material resulted from the use of questionnaires dealing with specific topics (e.g., Nic Néill's 1946 paper on wayside death cairns). The féar gortach folklore was part of the more generalized collection effort. The extent and constitution of the archival materials is delineated in *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1963 [1942]) by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, who originally served as archivist.

In the archival manuscripts, references to the phenomenon of féar gortach appear in the form of simple belief statements, extensive memorates, or third person accounts. Belief statements are invariably in the if/then form and generally lack an empirical basis. Memorates may incorporate both belief statements and fragments of third person accounts as a means of elucidating personal extraordinary experience. Third person accounts may incorporate

belief statements in connection with experience. Most of the materials that I examined were in Irish; for the examples presented here I offer summaries of my translations:<sup>2</sup>

1. *Belief statements* (all from Gaillimh):

Iml. 389:33: If a meal partaken out of doors and 1. without giving thanks or 2. without leaving a morsel of food for the fairies, the féar gortach would be in that place.

Iml. 305:211-12: Féar gortach results from laying down a corpse. It is said that there is féar gortach at a certain well in the area. [The “if/then” nature of such belief statements is implicit here.]

Iml. 433:16 [English]: “If you were crossing a field and you got the féar gortach or hunger weakness you should chew something. The fong [sic] o’ your shoe or some o’ the straw in a stubble field if you were near it would do.”

2. *Memorates*:

Iml. 774:317-21 (Tír Chonaill): Two men were taking their potatoes to market when the fine weather turned stormy, and they had dinner. After leaving the market, outside the village, the narrator began to feel as though he were drunk, even though he hadn’t touched a drop. He experienced weakness and thirst. He sought a particular well and upon locating it, scooped water with his hat and drank it. They then went to the village and procured biscuits and lemonade. He realized that the féar gortach had come on him. He recalled then that the old people knew of this particular spot.

Iml. 861:695-99 (Cláir): The narrator experienced sweat and weakness while walking up a hill. A bit of bread set it right. Was told that a number of people had had this sickness called féar gortach in the same spot. Many people who wandered this way were aware of the properties of the place and came prepared with grain or bread.

Iml. 653:334-35 (Muigheo): The narrator, bicycling not long after a meal, was overcome. He had just passed a wayside death cairn where a boy had been found dead twenty years before. He at once became very weak and was forced to dismount. Recalling what he had heard about féar gortach, he opened a parcel of butter that he’d been carrying on the handlebars of the bicycle and ate some. He felt a bit better but still too weak to operate the bicycle. He pushed it until he reached a decline in the road, at which point he was able to mount and ride home. Upon entering his house he felt as well as ever.

### 3. *Third person accounts:*

Iml. 523:69-75 (Gaillimh): Féar gortach was the result of laying a corpse down. The malediction (*droch fhocal*) “*ocras ort thar eis do bheilidh*” refers to the experience. If after consuming a meal, one walked on féar gortach, hunger and weakness would come on him and he would lose consciousness. The old people would bring oatcakes on a long journey as a precaution; but a leather lace from one’s shoe would work just as well.

Iml. 1204:48-51 (Tír Chonail): If you walked in a certain place, the féar gortach would come on you, even after dinner. This was the result of laying a corpse down on the way to the wakehouse. A shepherd named John Burke told the narrator of his experience. He recognized it as féar gortach. Since he had no food, he removed a lace from his shoe, chewed on it and swallowed the juice; at once he was healed.

Iml. S599:108-12 (Cláir): A cyclist who had eaten recently was overcome by the hungry grass. He dismounted and pushed his bike as best he could till he came to a dwelling. The woman there who gave him food said that hungry grass was common in that spot. Another man out hunting was compelled to consume the raw flesh of a recently-shot hare; if he had not eaten it, he was sure he would have died. Upon arriving home he ate copiously without feeling satisfied.

Iml. 811:188-90 (Cláir): This account was given in 1941. The narrator feels that however horrible the current war is [World War II], Ireland’s most dreadful story is the Great Famine. But the people themselves believe that the féar gortach constituted their great suffering, and it was not just bad food or a shortage of food. Treading on a certain place would result in weakness; no strength in hands or legs; the knees bent and trembled, the victim fell, crippled and senseless, and would remain so until food could be given—a bit of bread or a few grains. Many narratives are told about people who have had the experience.

Thus, the various archival texts are in agreement on both the components of the experience (sudden weakness and extreme hunger when crossing a particular spot) and its remedy (consumption of some form of sustenance, no matter how minuscule).

In *The Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1963 [1942]), Seán Ó Súilleabháin classifies the hungry grass under “Talismans,” presumably in reference to the practice of carrying a piece of bread or other meager form of foodstuffs when traveling in order to be prepared for possible attacks. The handbook,

and this entry in particular, are highly item-oriented, which leads to the possible misinterpretation of the hungry grass. This indexing is not only problematic in its item orientation, but it is also mistaken. The function of a talisman is to ward off ill-fortune. In experiences of *féar gortach*, the presence of food on one's person does not function in this way. Rather, the food that one bears has only an *ex post facto* effect. Thus, it is not truly a talisman, but instead a remedy for the ordeal. It is possible that this classification of talisman refers to the practice cited only in the belief statements of leaving crumbs to propitiate the fairies, but a talisman is usually a particular object carried to ward off a known evil. Leaving crumbs from a meal consumed out of doors so that the spot will not be transformed into *féar gortach* does not appear particularly talismanic.

A number of remedies were referred to in the various archival texts. Typical edibles included:

Bread (Iml. 1834:147 [Roscommon]; Iml. 861:695-99 [Cláir]; Iml. 811:199-90 [Cláir]; Iml. 936:177-78 [Ciarraf]; Iml. 169:546-7 [Tír Chonaill]; Iml. 630:372-4)

Grain of meal (Iml. 405:381-82 [Gaillimh]; Iml. 861:695-99 [Cláir]; Iml. 811:188-90 [Cláir])

Oatcake (Iml. 523:69-75 [Gaillimh])

Potatoes (Iml. 169:546-47 [Tír Chonaill])

Lemonade and biscuits (Iml. 774:317-21 [Tír Chonaill])

When these foods were not at hand, people turned to less tasty remedies:

Raw flesh of a hare (Iml. 599:108-12 [Cláir])

Stubble (Iml. 433:16 [Gaillimh])

Those improvident travelers who had ventured forth without any food could nevertheless find aid right at their feet. A number of narrators suggested that removing one's leather shoelaces, chewing on them and swallowing the juice effectively ameliorates a *féar gortach* attack (Iml. 433:16 [Gaillimh]; Iml. 1204:48-51 [Tír Chonaill]; Iml. 523:69-75 [Gaillimh]).

There are two reasons frequently given in the archival materials for why certain places acquire the properties of *féar gortach*. First, someone fails to leave crumbs of food on the ground after an outdoor repast (Iml. 405:381; Iml. 70:54-55; Iml. 389:33; Iml. 257:237-38). Offering thanks to God after a meal is often another required insurance against the *féar gortach*.

Second, a certain patch of earth has come into contact with a corpse. This may happen if someone rests a dead body on the ground on the way to a wakehouse (Iml. 805:563-65; Iml. 653:334; Iml. 523:69-75; Iml. 305:211-12; Iml. 1204:48-51; Iml. 653:256; Iml. 653:220). Or in the case of an unnatural, tragic death, the place where the victim falls becomes a site of *féar gortach*.<sup>3</sup>

The first strand (failure to leave food) often incorporates the fairy faith (even though “thanks to God” may be part of the procedure). This strand tends to be expressed more in the simple statements of beliefs than in memorates; that is, in the *if/then* statements that recommend leaving crumbs. Such explanations embody the *gortach* (hunger) aspect explicitly. A person, however, may typically provide such a simple *if/then* statement without actually believing it (Hufford 1976). Such simple and more decontextualized belief statements in the archival materials generally lack a connection between belief and experience. These belief statements are more externalized forms that do not include any personal, experiential basis for belief. On the other hand, some memorates include belief statements that are generally presented as a means of making sense of personal experience. These are more internalized forms.

The second strand of belief (contact with a corpse) is expressed more often in the form of memorates, which, as I have emphasized, incorporate belief statements and self-questioning with a personal and empirical basis. This strand associates the quality of being dead with specific sites. The resting of a corpse en route to the wakehouse does not involve the act of dying itself and hence has less to do with the complex of beliefs that address tragedy and its mitigation. However, this strand does specifically involve unnatural death, which introduces emotional crises for the victim’s community.

What emerges most strongly from these materials is the idea that things left undone and events that conclude tragically must be set aright. This is not an aspect of fairy faith; it is fundamental to thinking about death. The explanation that *féar gortach* occurs at the site of an unnatural death, the repercussions of which must be somehow rectified, speaks to Irish people’s concerns about death and interprets the information at hand in a manner that makes sense in the context of traditional beliefs.

### Contemporary Interpretations

The phenomenon of *féar gortach* is well-documented in the archival manuscripts, and reports of the experience are consistent. Narrators are neither deluded nor are they oblivious to the admissibility of biological explanations. In many cases, they emphasize that some form of sustenance had been



consumed shortly before the attack. One memorate from Galway even mentions the malediction “*ocras ort thar eis do bheilidh*”—wishing hunger upon one who has eaten. The curse thus acknowledges that the recent intake of food does not prevent the attack. The fact that this element of the experience has even found its way into a malediction indicates widespread cultural awareness of it; people are not stubbornly selecting an ill-founded numinous explanation in preference to more plausible biological ones. Féar gortach victims are not in fact hungry prior to the abrupt onset of the events, and their symptoms are mitigated by oral contact with even minute amounts of food—in some instances even a shoelace suffices. Thus, the phenomenon cannot be dismissed as a consequence of some nutritional deficiency such as hypoglycemia. The narrators themselves often consider and then reject this possibility.

A doctor in Ireland, Patrick Logan, has remarked upon the phenomenon in his 1972 book *Making the Cure: A Look at Irish Folk Medicine*. He offers the “folk explanation” for féar gortach, followed by the clinical one, and there is no doubt in Dr. Logan’s mind which is more plausible:

The folk explanation for this dramatic occurrence is that the sufferer happened to walk on hungry grass which caused him to get weak with hunger....The attacks may be prevented or cut short by bringing a cake of oaten bread and eating it when the attack begins. The condition appears to be due to a drop in the blood sugar and probably could be treated more quickly with sugar. The reason for the use of oaten bread is that it is slowly absorbed and has a more prolonged action in raising the blood sugar and keeping it raised. (1972:7)

This is a rather unbalanced exegesis. Logan does not attempt to account for what makes the hungry grass precipitate weakness and hunger; he apparently does not feel a need to do so, since as far as he is concerned, folk explanations are inadmissible and nonsensical. His treatment of the hungry grass is willow: he never considers what meanings the phenomenon might have for people in Ireland. (I imagine that oaten bread is used because it is common, portable, and fits easily into a pocket.)

He admits to having accounts from many “reliable people,” but does not divulge any details or descriptive elements of their experiences. He offers his readers none of the data at his disposal. Two conclusions can therefore be drawn. Either he did not examine the Irish Folklore Archive material and drew his conclusions without the benefit of this information. Or, he found that the archival material would not support his clinical conclusions, and thus dismissed the ideas and observations of those people as “folk,” and therefore not to be taken seriously.

In the study of belief, certain misleading biases frequently occur, leading to derogatory characterizations of believers. We have noted an example of *spatial bias* displayed by Dr. Logan: people in other places are the simple, self-deluded “other,” whose alternative beliefs, although quaint, are summarily dismissed as spurious. Biases such as Dr. Logan’s about people removed from him by space are also applied to people removed by time. I call this *temporal bias*: the people who have passed before us in time are the simple, self-deluded other. In other words, in the past, people were highly credulous, but now we know better because education and technology have banished beliefs of earlier eras. Thus, if experience is held to be a *consequence* of belief (i.e., people see ghosts only because they are culturally conditioned to do so), then from an alleged absence of supernatural belief in the modern world, it follows that extraordinary experience would cease to occur. This misreading of the relationship of belief and experience is not borne out by events.

I recently recorded a memorate that agglomerates many of the convictions and features of the féar gortach phenomenon related in the archival manuscripts. This detailed first person narrative, excerpts of which are presented below, was told to me by a woman in Ireland in 1991. She derives meaning from self-interrogation and from collectively held, traditional interpretations. Like many of the narratives in the Irish Folklore Commission Archives, her first person commentary incorporates aspects of tradition and fragments of third person accounts.

The episode made a great impression on her, and she subsequently sought to understand both what had happened and why it had happened to her. The incident occurred during a visit she and her husband made to the Curraun Peninsula in County Mayo. This place, with its acres of ancient bog oak, fascinates her. She relates that while on a walk in these surroundings:

I began to feel very weak, and I felt my legs very heavy. And I couldn’t go on any longer and I had to sit down. I felt very bad and I felt very, very hungry. I was *starving* with the hunger. And I wanted to *lie* down.... But I thought if I lie down my husband will think that I’m dying.

She assumes that she must have forgotten to eat, and explains the problem to her husband:

I said, “I am *dying* with the hunger.” He said, “You didn’t forget to eat. You had something before we left.” I said, “My God I did.” I said, “What’s wrong with me?” I said, “I’m so hungry.” And I was so hungry and so weak. And I stayed...I sat there for a while and he stayed with me. And eventually I began to try to pull myself together.

But she could not go on and had to turn back, “Because I was *still* hungry and still weak. And I *was* pale, and... well at least he said I was pale. I *felt* pale. I felt cold sweat.”

The next day, she spoke with a patron in the pub about her experience. She offered me the following account of their conversation:

“I’d a bad experience up there. I got weak up there. I don’t know what happened to me,” I said. “I wasn’t feeling well at all.” And he said, “You know what happened to you? I bet you it was the féar gortach.” And the minute he said it I knew that was *exactly* what had happened to me. And I said, “My God, you’re right.” I said, “I used to hear my mother talk about that.” And he said, “That’s right.” He said, “The odd person,” he said, “I’ve heard of the odd person getting that up there.” And I said, “What did I *do*?”

She recalls her mother’s use of the term féar gortach to refer idiomatically to the possession of a prodigious appetite. Both the idiom and the phenomenon that gave rise to it are familiar to the narrator, but still she wonders what caused it. The man in the pub commented, “Well, there’s different explanations for it. What we say around here is that you probably hit up against the Famine Ghost.” (Famine victims expired in a drastic and untimely manner and likely without Last Rites. Thus, they might seek the interventions of the living.)

This interpretation accords with the relationship of belief and experience held by the narrator herself, so she finds it credible and in a certain sense, satisfying. The man relates another instance of féar gortach in this locale experienced by a bicyclist. The woman figures that if the effect of féar gortach could be felt even by someone on a bike, not actually touching the ground, then it must be quite forceful. Presumably, it would take something as compelling as the anguish of starvation to have engendered such a powerful effect. Perhaps, she reasons, it was the ghost of a Famine victim. Yet still she wonders:

Why did this happen to *me*, in 1990? And I wasn’t thinking of anything. And some people said that perhaps someone died there. Or somebody fell down there. And then I thought that maybe, they would identify with me in some way. And then I wondered about that: was it some woman like myself...and I just stepped where she went down?

The woman did not have any particular preconceived notions about the presence or possibility of supernatural manifestations. The episode occurred in the absence of any prior ideas regarding féar gortach. Reflecting upon her experience, she admits to curiosity about why it happened to her in

1990. This aspect of her thinking may appear to hint at temporal bias, but I argue otherwise. Given her lack of prior expectation, she does not appear to be implying that modernity precludes supernatural experience. Her comment, I feel, is more an expression of wonder at the persistence of the supernatural in the world and of astonishment that it happened to her.

The issue of identity is central to her thinking about her experience. She is aware that not everyone experiences the féar gortach. So she suggests that perhaps it is her deep feeling for the bogland that caused her to be singled out. She also wonders if the person that died there was a woman like herself.

For this narrator, the components of starvation and weakness stand out. The man in the pub noted that even chewing on a match would have served to mitigate these symptoms. So she entertained and rejected the obvious medical explanations:

- *low blood sugar*: she had just eaten.
- *oxygen deprivation*: she was not at an especially high elevation.
- *fatigue*: she had not gone that far or, again, that high.

But the idea of a Famine ghost *does* make good sense to her, because the onslaught of starvation that she experienced was sudden and intense. She does not, however, perceive it as some malevolent force. And so she declares, "It's just a kind of weakness. You know. Somebody wanted me to experience hunger, maybe."

This interpretation is consistent with the components of the experience. It also offers a consoling perspective on the social problem of unnatural death. Furthermore, it confronts a tragic aspect of Ireland's history that is still much a part of Irish consciousness.

The speaker is a practicing Catholic. Although she does not personally or explicitly relate the experience to what *she* perceives as the official doctrine of purgatory (something she takes to be negative), she understands the importance of communion between the living and the dead that the concept of purgatory affords (Davis 1994).

Thus, there remains a significant need to recognize the dispossessed dead, as the woman whom I interviewed perceived in her sensitive reflections on her experience. Her interpretation of events is a powerful acknowledgment that the realms of the living and the dead are both separate and connected, refuting the notion that extraordinary events happened only in the past and only to simple, self-deluded people.

### Notes

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1 A similar phenomenon has been reported in places other than Ireland such as in Western Japanese narratives of *Hidarugami*, the spirit of hunger (Iwasaka 1994:89).

2 Iml.=*Imleabhar*, the volume in the Irish Folklore Archive from which the particular narrative was drawn. The following refer to counties in Ireland from which the materials were collected: Gaillimh=Galway; Cláir=Clare; Ciarraí=Kerry; Tír Chonaill=Donegal; Muigheo=Mayo.

3 The property of *féar gortach* is sometimes linked with death cairns raised at places where people have died away from home. "The custom of marking a place where death occurred in the open by a heap of stones or twigs or grass, to which each passer-by added, seems to have been practiced all over the world" (Nic Néill 1946:49). In Ireland, such memorials have been formed of stones. Like the *féar gortach*, the cairn or *leacht* finds its way into curses, which are curious in the ambivalence of their connotations. Promising to put a stone on one's cairn could be interpreted as a promise to honor an individual but, under different circumstances, could also be interpreted as a curse or a threat to kill. The distribution to Irish Folklore Commission collectors in 1938 of a questionnaire on the death-cairn custom resulted in the accumulation of archival materials that address not only the practice of raising cairns but also local attitudes towards them. Cairns 1) are a reminder of unnatural death (and thus a warning of the possible presence of *féar gortach*), 2) prompt passers-by to pray for the souls of these unfortunates (helping them through purgatory), and 3) keep the deceased at a distance and the spirits from wandering (e.g., Iml. 653:218).

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