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# Evidence of religious influence on the folk and fairy tales of Ireland

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San Jose State University, 1992

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EVIDENCE OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE ON THE FOLK AND FAIRY TALES  
OF IRELAND

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Theatre Arts  
And the Faculty of the Department of English  
San Jose State University

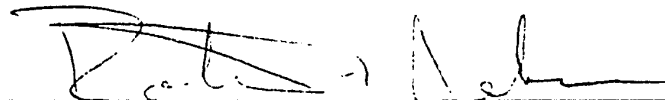
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Brian J. Conroy

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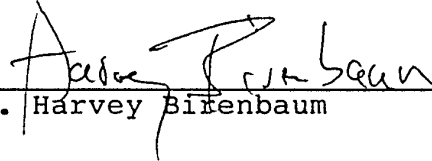
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ABSTRACT

EVIDENCE OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE ON THE FOLK AND FAIRY TALES  
OF IRELAND

by Brian J. Conroy

This study examines the folk and fairy tales of Ireland to determine the influence of religion upon the tales. Focusing on the three early Cycles of Irish folktales and extending to modern folktale collections, the tales are correlated with findings from archaeology, history, and religion.

Research reveals that there was a religious influence upon the tales. The earliest evidence is from the Megalithic People, whose influence led to the creation of the Celtic mythology.

With the arrival of the Christians Irish folktales were adapted to the teachings of Christianity. An overlapping of Celticism and Christianity produced tales which are the hybrid result of the influences of both religions.

In modern times the remnants of the religious beliefs of the Irish manifest in tales of the fairy world. Though the original Irish gods are reduced to diminutive fairies in these tales they reveal traces of the religious past of Irish people.



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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Three groups of inhabitants have dominated Ireland during the past five thousand years of the country's history. Chronologically these three groups are the pre-Celtic or Megalithic People, the Celts, and the Christian Irish. These three groups, each of which is associated with a distinctive religion and historical time period, will be analyzed to determine whether or not any of the beliefs and practices of the three religions influenced the folktales of Ireland.

The religion of the Megalithic People can only be inferred through archaeological evidence of which there is an abundance. The exact dates of their residence in Ireland is imprecise. No written records of this group are extant. It is believed that these people took up residence in Ireland about 3000 BC, dwelling there for approximately 2000 years. These earliest inhabitants of Ireland are known as the Megalithic People because they were the builders of various stone monuments which housed their dead. From the manner in which they buried their dead and the artifacts placed in their burial monuments, it can be inferred that they worshipped the spirits of the dead, that they believed in an afterlife, and that they believed in the supernatural powers of the elements of nature./1/

/1/ The tombs of the Megalithic People were copies of their former dwellings where the dead continued an existence surrounded by their belongings from this world.

The Celtic religion was first brought to Ireland by a branch of the Celts who reputedly came from the areas now known as Spain. This group of Celts came to Ireland in approximately 600 BC. Descendants of this race still live in Ireland. The Celtic religion was imparted to Celtic society by an aristocracy of high priests known as the Druids. The mysteries of this religion were gained through an initiation process known only to the Druids and their initiates. The Druids, as ministers of the Celtic religion, taught the Celtic people principles of the animate essence of the natural environment as well as beliefs in immortality, rebirth, and the existence of an otherworld.

Christianity came to Ireland during the fifth century AD. It existed simultaneously with the Celtic religion, gradually adopting many of the Celtic customs, and finally persevering and taking hold as the major religion in Ireland to this day.

Two of these religious groups have produced folktales: the Celts and the Christians. Since no written records were handed down from the Megalithic People, no written folktales from their societies have survived. The Celts forbade committing their tales and beliefs to writing, preferring to keep their tales alive in the memories of their poets and storytellers. However, as Christianity took a firmer hold, a number of the Celtic tales were put into written form by Christian scribes.

Dating from the era of the Christians, and increasing

steadily since the Middle Ages, Ireland has produced an immense wealth of recorded folktales, comparable to that of any European nation. Has there been a religious influence on this wellspring of folktales?

In a number of the Irish folktales the acceptance of a "fairy world" is evident. The "fairy world" is the unseen world which is detailed in the folktales. The inhabitants of this world are the invisible "sidhe" beings, or fairies, the leprechauns, the banshees and the pookas. Are there religious implications in the tales of the fairy world?

Some scholars have labeled the beliefs in the existence of fairies, the "fairy faith." This faith in the supernatural beings of the fairy world will be investigated in order to ascertain whether it has influenced the tales of Ireland, and modern perceptions of Christianity.

Has Christianity completely replaced the more ancient Celtic and pre-Celtic beliefs, or is there a commingling of faiths? Have Christian, Celtic, or pre-Celtic beliefs had an effect on the art of the tale makers and tale tellers of Ireland?

An attempt to answer these questions will be made through an analysis of evidence contained in the Irish folktales of the fairy world. Initially, an introduction to the terms and characteristics of the three early Irish Tale Cycles will be made in Chapter Two. This will be followed by a brief historical perspective of tales from the Christian and

modern periods. In Chapter Three, a religious overview of the dominant Irish religions: those of the Megalithic People, the Celts, and the Christians, will be presented.

Chapter Four will examine the archaeological monuments left by the Megalithic People to elicit the effect these monuments had on the Celts upon their arrival in Ireland. The gods associated with these monuments will be evaluated for their influence on the Celts in inspiring a Celtic mythology.

Chapter Five will focus on the religious beliefs of Celtic society as evinced by festivals and practices related to the veneration and appeasement of the dead. This chapter will examine the Celtic doctrine of rebirth and immortality, and Celtic conceptions of the soul.

An investigation of Christian influence on Irish folktales will take place in Chapter Six. This chapter will be followed by an examination of the hybrid effects of the Celtic and Christian religions as manifested in the tales of the fairy world.

Tales to be used in this study will include tales from the three earliest Tale Cycles among the Irish: the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle, and the Fenian Cycle. Other tales utilized will include those collected from the early Christian period to those collected during modern times in Ireland. A variety of tales from each of these time periods will be analyzed to create a balanced basis for evaluation.

Though the term "Celts" refers to the people of not only

Ireland, but also Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, and the Isle of Man, the focus of this thesis will be strictly on Irish Celtic traditions.

The term "fairy" will be used loosely to indicate three groups of beings. The first group refers to the Celtic ancestors known as the Tuatha De Danann. Forthcoming chapters will define this group. In addition, the term "fairy" will refer to the invisible beings known as the "sidhe" that are said to haunt the burial mounds of Ireland. The sidhe beings will be further detailed in later chapters. Finally, the term "fairy" will be used to identify the various beings common to more modern Irish folktales such as leprechauns, banshees, changelings, pookas, and fairies. The terms "fairy tales" and "fairy lore" may be used to describe any folktales which may contain any of the above mentioned characters.

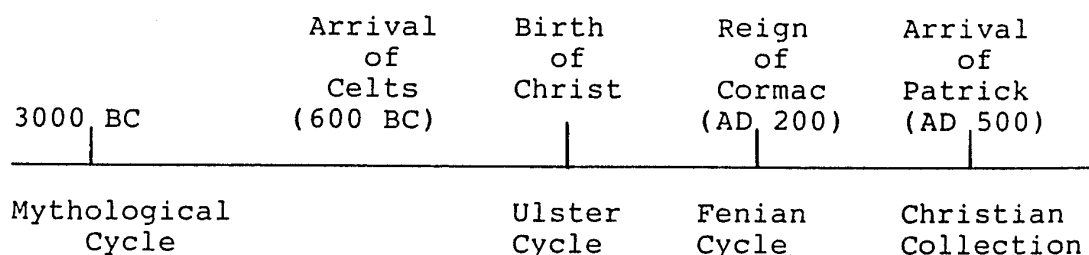
Are ancient religious practices, beliefs, and rituals manifested in the folktales of fairy lore among the Irish people? The answer to this question lies in an analysis of Irish religious history and folklore.

## Chapter 2

## IRISH TALE CYCLES

Three major cycles of tales compose the early folkloristic literature of the Irish. In chronological order of composition the tale Cycles are: the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle and the Fenian Cycle.

The tales from all three Cycles were put into print by Christian scribes during a several hundred year period beginning in approximately the sixth century AD. However, the events detailed in the pseudo-historical accounts of the Cycles occurred roughly as follows. The tales from the Mythological Cycle describe a period of time that begins before the arrival of the Megalithic People. It is difficult to attach a specific year to these tales. However, the early invasion myths of this Cycle are believed to have taken place about three thousand BC. The events of the Ulster Cycle are reputed to have taken place about the time of the birth of Christ. Those of the Fenian Cycle occurred mostly in the reign of Cormac mac Art, who lived in the third century AD (Rolleston 252). The graph below shows the approximate time line of events occurring in the three early tale Cycles, and their subsequent collection.





## The Mythological Cycle

The Mythological Cycle consists of a semi-historical account of the early invasions of various races that ultimately led to the possession of Ireland by the Celts.

The invasions detailed in the Mythological Cycle begin with the coming of Partholan into Ireland. Partholan's people are overthrown by the people of Nemed, followed by an invasion by the Fir Bolg. The Tuatha De Danann subsequently usurp the Fir Bolg. Lastly, the Tuatha De Danann are conquered by the Milesians, who in the folklore represent the Celts.

The major portion of the Mythological Cycle deals with the invasions of these five groups. According to the Mythological Cycle the earliest races of Ireland vanished without a trace as a result of battles waged against each conquering race. Despite the complete extinction of those early races, the Mythological Cycle presents reincarnated characters from the earlier races who are given the power to remember their former incarnations. It is through such figures as Tuan mac Carell, who had purportedly lived in various incarnations as part of all five races of the early inhabitants of Ireland, that the tales of the Mythological Cycle have been handed down.

The Mythological Cycle explains the exploits of all five races, but utilizes as its main characters the race known as the Tuatha De Danann. This race becomes the most

sympathetic and heroic race in the early tales. Even though they are ultimately displaced by the Milesians, they emerge as moral victors in the tales of the Mythological Cycle.

Not only are the Tuatha De Danann heroes, they become the gods of the Celtic people. Human in form, yet by nature divine, the Tuatha De Danann are portrayed both as deified mortals and as earth gods. The Mythological Cycle details the various gods of the Tuatha De Danann who are related not through a hierarchy, but by their nature as gods of the elements and of nature.

#### The Ulster Cycle

The Ulster or Ultonian Cycle forms the next branch of the early tale Cycles. The Ulster Cycle picks up chronologically where the Mythological Cycle leaves off. The beginning of the lineage of the Ultonians starts with Ross the Red who wedded a Tuatha De Danann woman. This Cycle is characteristically heroic, dealing with the heroes of Ulster, the northernmost portion of Ireland, and the first part of Ireland to be settled by the Celts. The Ulster Cycle is characterized by powerful warriors who use decisiveness of mind and body to overcome extraordinary obstacles. The greatest of the Ulster heroes is the warrior Cu Chulainn.

The Ulster tales are written in a combination of prose and verse. They differ vastly in poetic style and literary structure from the conventional and stoic tales of the

Mythological Cycle, as well as from the emotional and largely moralistic tales from the Fenian Cycle. The Ulster tales are believed to provide an accurate portrait of early Celtic society (Cross and Slover 355). It is generally agreed that the historical time period represented in the Ulster Cycle is that from approximately the birth of Christ until the third century AD.

Though a proliferation of the Ulster tales are preserved in written form, relatively few have become a part of the oral literary traditions of modern day Ireland.

### The Fenian Cycle

The third Cycle of the early tales of Ireland is the Fenian or Ossianic Cycle. It is known as the Fenian Cycle because it has as its main characters the Fenians (also known as the Fianna), two clans of warriors led by the greatest of the Fenians, Finn mac Cumhail. These tales are also known as the Ossianic Cycle because they were reputedly collected by the poet of the Fenians, Oisin, son of Finn mac Cumhail.

According to the Irish annals<sup>/2/</sup>, Finn flourished during the third century after Christ, but the earliest references to him in literature do not appear until several hundred years later. The vast majority of tales from the Fenian Cycle are found in manuscripts dating from the twelfth century and later

<sup>/2/</sup> The Annals of the Four Masters, completed 1636, contain the genealogies and histories of early Ireland.

(Cross and Slover 355).

The Fenian tales contain not only narratives, but also many poems of the ballad type. In marked contrast to the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle is characteristically romantic, showing human warmth and emotion, where the earlier Cycles do not. The tales of the Fenian Cycle are placed in a pastoral setting at a time when life was idyllic.

Unlike the earlier two Cycles, the tales from the Fenian Cycle have formed a part of the popular oral literature of the present day people of Ireland. It is thought that the Fenian tales were the beginning of the oral tradition or the literature of the folk in Ireland, whereas the earlier Cycles had been the product of an elite aristocracy. Evidence of the validity of this theory is the fact that the Fenian tales which exist today in Irish oral tradition have been adapted and molded by each succeeding generation of storytellers.

A smaller segment of the Fenian Cycle is known as the "Colloquy of the Ancients," which supposedly was collected by a Fenian named Cailte. These tales deal with the interaction between the Fenians and the Christians, and the relationship between the Fenians and the Fairy Folk. The "Colloquy" has a noticeable absence of the moralistic qualities contained in the other literature of the Fenian Cycle. There is an even greater sense of wonder and beauty in the "Colloquy" than in the remainder of the Fenian Cycle.

### Christian Tales and Tale Collection

When the Christian missionaries came to Ireland in the fifth century AD they were able to infiltrate the oral traditions of the Celtic people and infuse Christian beliefs in the process. This was accomplished first through the process of recording the Celtic tales in written form. Many of the stories were recorded authentically. However, a blending of Christian and Celtic motifs and beliefs, and an apparent depaganization of Celtic beliefs can be perceived in the tales recorded by the Christians, as shall be investigated in a later chapter. According to Joseph Campbell, "the Christian missionaries and chroniclers (fifth century and following), who recorded the old stories sought painstakingly to coordinate them with the Bible" (Hero 199).

A second way in which the Christian missionaries were able to infiltrate the oral traditions of the Celts was in the creation of biographies of Christian saints which were circulated orally. Beginning in the seventh century AD and continuing well after the end of the Middle Ages, Christian scribes wrote hagiographies based on figures from Irish monasteries. Partly factual in detail and geography, these tales known as "The Legends of the Saints," drew on works of classical secular literature, as well as the Old and New Testament, the Apocrypha, and similar biographies of Continental saints. These tales were written with the

"definite purpose of advancing the prestige of particular saints or monasteries. The hagiographers did not hesitate to borrow or even fabricate material for their purpose" (O'hOgain 379).

The period between the fifth and eighth century AD in Ireland, when considerable numbers of Irish people were turning to Christianity, is known as the "age of the saints." It is to this period that all of the saints who are celebrated in Irish hagiography belong.

Typically, these tales, recorded predominantly in Latin, portray the birth of each saint as accompanied by wonders and marvels. The saint shows the capacity for holiness and miracles while still a youth. On coming of age the saint gains great triumphs against hostile forces and as a result of this is recognized and given authority. Extraordinary circumstances attend his or her death (O'hOgain 379).

Through the documentation of Celtic tales and through the creation of an entire cycle of tales known as "The Legends of the Saints," the Christian missionaries were able to infuse their beliefs into Celtic society and become a part of the oral traditions of Irish folktale.

#### Modern Folktale Collection

These three Cycles comprise the major body of early Irish folktale. However, during the past one hundred and fifty years modern folklore collectors have been able to record thousands

of tales from field work, many of which parallel or repeat motifs from the earlier tales of the three main Cycles. The modern era of tale collection begins with the contributions of T. Crofton Croker, whose first collection of tales was published in 1825, followed by a second collection in 1828.

In 1935 the Irish Folklore Commission was created. The members of the Commission were not university scholars but people who knew the countryside, the language, and most importantly, the people. They went directly to the country people to do field work. Later, school children were recruited to assist in the collection of folklore, in lieu of composition assignments in their schools. By 1938, more than half a million pages had been amassed by the school children. Today the manuscript collections number more than two million pages, housed in University College in Dublin. Sean O'Sullivan, who published a compilation entitled Folktales of Ireland in 1966, is the present director of the Irish Folklore Commission (O'Sullivan v-xxi, xxxiii-xxxv).

It is from the three early tale Cycles and from the succeeding collections of folklore from more recent times that modern studies of Irish folktale can be made. These are the main texts which will be utilized in this study.

## Chapter 3

## A RELIGIOUS OVERVIEW

The Religion of the Megalithic People

The earliest people inhabiting Ireland are a race without name or documented history. Archaeologists have named this race the Megalithic People, after the Greek me-gas, meaning great, and li-thos, meaning stone. What is known about this race is that they were the builders of sepulchral monuments.

Based on the elaborate methods of burial among the Megalithic People, and the artifacts buried within the tombs, it is thought that the sepulchre was not only a place for the burial of the dead, but "also a holy place or shrine....they were sepulchral in their origin, and were also associated with the cult of a primitive religion" (Rolleston 68-69). In the early literature the burial monuments are regarded as "the dwelling places of the Sidhe, or Fairy Folk, who represent, probably, the deities of the ancient Irish, and they are also, traditionally, the burial places of the Celtic High Kings of pagan Ireland" (Rolleston 69).

Primitive religions are often rooted in rites and practices connected with the burial of the dead. The Megalithic People of Ireland, like their contemporaries, the Egyptian tomb and pyramid builders, were no exception.

The religious practices of the Megalithic People are conjectural, but it is clear from the archaeological



monuments which abound in Ireland that they honored the dead and worshipped their spirits. Their religion was "associated with a cult of the dead.... The imposing relics of their cult which the Megalithic People have left us are full of indications of their religion" (Rolleston 60-63).

Rolleston in his study entitled, Celtic Myths and Legends has evaluated the features contained within the design of the monuments in which the dead of the Megalithic People are buried. The majority of these monuments, for instance, have small holes bored into the stones at their entrances. The prominence of these holes has led some archaeologists to conclude that the aperture was intended to provide ingress for the spirits of the dead. Others have speculated that these holes were used in making offerings for the dead. Still others have suggested that these holes were a link for priests or magicians between the physical world and the spirit world.

The most prevalent images on the sepulchral monuments of the Megalithic People are representations of human beings on a journey aboard a ship. These carvings of ships, comparable to Egyptian carvings on similar tombs, are thought to be representations of the dead on their voyage to the Otherworld. The ship was a recognized world-wide form of sepulchral enclosure (Borlase 701-04). As shall be shown, documentation indicates that the Celts believed strongly in a doctrine of immortality. If the figures of ships carved in the Megalithic tombs represent the dead, then this could well be the origin

of the Celtic doctrine of immortality.

Perhaps the religious symbolism of Egypt was transferred to Europe through the Irish Megalithic People. The religious symbolism utilized by the Egyptians on their burial monuments bears a striking resemblance to that of the early inhabitants of Ireland. The Egyptian symbolism centers on the voyaging of spirits to the world of the dead. The Egyptian world of the dead centered around beliefs in a future life, and ideas based on the immortality of the soul. From what the later Celtic races believed, it seems likely that the Celts may have adopted in large part the religion of the Megalithic People who, based on archaeological evidence ascribed to similar beliefs in immortality and an afterlife.

It is thought that the Megalithic People venerated natural objects such as stones, rivers, trees, and mountains. The Megalithic People did not see their deities as separated from the natural environment. Stones, rivers, wells, trees, and other natural objects were to them the adequate symbols of the supernatural forces which they venerated (Rolleston 86).

The religion of the Megalithic People then, can be summarized as a religion, like other primitive religions, that venerated the dead. In addition, these people believed in an after life, a belief which was inseparable from a belief in the immortality of the soul. Lastly, in a similar fashion to the way in which they venerated the spirits of the dead, the Megalithic People venerated natural objects they found

surrounding them including, stones, rivers, mountains and trees.

### Celtic Religion

The beliefs among the Celts can be understood by generalizing them as religious beliefs in magic. The magic of the Celts may be defined as the art of controlling invisible forces. Celtic beliefs were a mingling of superstition, a mystical perception of natural phenomena, and primitive scientific observation. According to Rolleston, "The fundamental conception of magic is that of the spiritual vitality of all nature. This spiritual vitality was not conceived as separated from nature. It was implicit and immanent in nature. In its remote origin it was associated with the cult of the dead, for death was looked upon as the resumption into nature" (60).

In the preceding statement Rolleston gets at the heart of the two fundamental principles of the Celtic doctrine. First, the Celts believed that all aspects of nature were endowed with supernatural qualities. Natural phenomena, whether they be rocks, trees, or rivers, were thought of as gods, not in the Christian sense of all powerful, omnipotent deities, but in the sense of localized household gods to whom primitive people of this earth prayed and offered sacrifices, in order to gain agricultural and spiritual favor (Evans-Wentz 433).

There is almost a total absence from Celtic Irish religious practice of anything that would seem to have been an icon from the standpoint of modern evaluation. There is no material personification of deities until the introduction of Christianity (Wood-Martin vol. 1, 305). Instead, the pre-Christian Irish saw their deities all around them, in nature. The Celts regarded all elements of nature as being empowered with a spirit, or, to put it in Christian terms, a soul. Whenever they saw a tree, or a stone, or a hill, or a river, they saw a local god which had the force of a living spirit within.

Secondly, this belief in the spiritual forces contained in nature led the Celts to a strong belief in rebirth and immortality. After visiting the Celts, Julius Caesar stated, "The principal point of their teaching is that the soul does not perish, and that after death it passes from one body into another" (Rolleston 80).

According to Pythagoras' system, to be born again was the punishment and the common lot of the wicked. It was in this way that the evil would redeem themselves for their faults. In the Celtic doctrine pertaining to rebirth, however, to be born in this world again, and to put on a new body is a privilege, not a punishment. For the new life, according to Celtic belief, was a continuation of that led in the former incarnation (de Jubainville 197).

This conception of rebirth was connected with a belief

in an Otherworld. Evans-Wentz in his study The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries states, "Death was a going to the Otherworld from this world, and Birth a coming back" (358-59).

The Celtic Otherworld was not a place of suffering to which the impious were sent for an impure life. The Celtic Otherworld was a place of light and liberation (Rolleston 89). Furthermore, the Otherworld of the Celts was not situated "in some distant, unknown region of planetary space, but here on our own earth. Sometimes, it was a subterranean world entered through caverns, or hills, or mountains, and inhabited by many races and orders of invisible beings" (Evans-Wentz 332).

The Celtic beliefs in rebirth and in the Otherworld are connected with beliefs and superstitions surrounding the burial mounds of the Megalithic People. Upon their arrival the Celts saw an abundance of these burial monuments, and seem to have based a large portion of their religious beliefs on the archaeological remains of the previous inhabitants of Ireland. Among the Celts these tombs were connected with religious usages, chiefly with a cult of gods and fairy-like beings (Evans-Wentz 398).

The primary meaning the Celts ascribed to these tombs was that of a dwelling place for the dead. The Celts, after the fashion of the Megalithic People, constructed burial tombs for their own dead, while continuing to honor the original burial monuments of the Megalithic People.

Based on the items which were buried in these tombs such

as food, furniture, armor, money, and other personal belongings, it seems that these dwellings, analogous to similar Egyptian dwellings, were viewed as places where the dead continued an after-life existence. Based on the Celtic doctrine of rebirth, the Celts believed that the spirits of the dead continued to live in these monuments with replicas of their earthly belongings which would comfort them in their transition to the Otherworld.

Perhaps the Celts adopted what they believed were the the religious beliefs of the Megalithic People. It was not uncommon for races without definite religious principles and deities to borrow the religion of their predecessors, as the Romans did with the Greeks. Whether they derived their religion or attained it from an older source, it is clear that the Celts, like the Megalithic People, held a veneration for the dead. They too saw spirits in the forces of nature, and objects normally thought to be inanimate. They too adhered to principles of immortality and rebirth. Like the Megalithic People, the Celts believed in a realm where the dead lived on, after their physical life, in a place which can be generalized as the Otherworld.

### Druidism

Celtic society submitted to the rulings of the Druids in all matters public and private. The Druids were the ministers or priestly caste of Celtic society. This learned

class maintained, by supreme knowledge, the result of long and profound study, undisputed authority. They taught the children of the Celts, imparted religious principles, studied nature, and served as judges among the people.

Caesar observed that "The Druids preside in matters of religion, and interpret the will of the gods. In almost all controversies, they are the supreme judges" (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 247).

It was within the Druidical cult that the natural magic of the Celts was first practiced. "Magic," as Wood-Martin suggests, "is probably coeval with the first germs of religious thought" (vol. 2, 252). Druidical magic was a doctrine that asserted that, through the control of the spirits of fairies and demons found in nature, Druids could control natural and agricultural phenomena, as well as cast spells and foretell the future.

The fundamental training of Druid priests was in the magical or occult sciences. Georges Dottin in his book La Religion des Celtes notes, "The Druids of Ireland appear to us above all as magicians and prophets. They foretell the future, they interpret the secret will of the fees (fairies), they cast lots" (44).

One of the branches of Druidism was that of the poets or Bards. The Bards were the makers of song and history. In the Bardic tradition of Druidism, Bards were expected to learn from memory 250 prime stories and 100 secondary stories.

They invested twenty years in their education, gaining a great number of verses by memory and becoming skilled as writers and composers of music. The combined verse and prose tales of the Bards contained the history of the Celtic people.

Perhaps the least important function of these tales was entertainment. It was through these tales that a majority of teaching was conducted in Celtic society. Since the Bards, in their Druidic capacity, were the keepers, and hence the teachers, of Celtic tradition, the Bardic tales provided a perfect opportunity for teaching both religion and history.

Though the Druids were acquainted with the techniques of writing, they strictly forbade the documentation of their oral literature. This was, more than likely, to keep their doctrines secret, accessible only to the initiates of Celticism. Caesar asserted that "It is unlawful to commit their (the Druids) statutes to writing for two reasons: 1) to hide their mysteries from the knowledge of the vulgar; and 2) to exercise the memory of their scholars (the Bards), which would be apt to lie neglected had they letters to trust to" (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 248). No doubt, the Druids refused to commit their literature and doctrines to writing in an attempt, also, to preserve their own privileged status. Ironic is the notion that, typically, folklore is the product of an unlearned class of people. Controlling the mythic imagination of the people through controlling the folklore would greatly increase the influence and stature of the Bards in Celtic society. The



level of influence and importance placed on the Bard attests to the fact that the Bardic tales contained important beliefs. The fact that the Celts, had they desired, could have recorded the tales, further suggests the guarded significance that was placed on the tales.

The tenets of Celtic Druidry were never recorded by the Celts themselves. The tales, however, were eventually put into print over a period of nearly a millennium, beginning with the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the fifth century AD, and lasting until the latter period of the Middle Ages. These tales were recorded by the Christian scribes from the tellings of the Celtic Bards.

#### The Arrival of Christianity in Ireland

Ireland, by virtue of its westerly and isolated geographic position, remained free of Roman colonization; thus, Irish society did not change appreciably until the advent of Christianity in the fifth century. Consequently, the culture of the Celts survived in Ireland long after it had been extinguished in other Celtic countries. It is this factor that makes the Irish tales such a repository of information about the Celtic people (Gantz 5).

It is perhaps unnecessary to pinpoint the exact date of the arrival of the first Christian missionaries into Ireland. Probably for some time before the generally accepted date of the introduction of Christianity into Ireland, there were

small scattered Christian communities existing secretly in the country (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 258).

It was with the arrival of Saint Patrick that the most influential era of Christianity began. The deeds attributed to Saint Patrick are likely a composite of the accomplishments of many Irish saints during the early stages of Irish Christianity. Saint Patrick seems to have been an archetype of the philosophies and accomplishments of the Christian missionary period. He was not the first, nor was he the only, Christian missionary of his era. Therefore, it is immaterial to affix an exact date on Saint Patrick's arrival in Ireland. Let it suffice that it was some time in the fifth century.

The conversion of the Celts to Christianity was a process that occurred between the fifth and eighth centuries. By the eighth century Christianity was accepted as the dominant religion throughout Ireland. This period of three hundred years is referred to as the "age of the saints." It is to this period that all of the saints who are celebrated in Irish history belong (O'hOgain 379).

Based on the geographic isolation of Ireland, it is doubtful that the conversion of the Irish people from their Celtic beliefs was an expedient or easy process. Since a period of three hundred years was required in order for Christianity to gain stature as the major religion of Ireland, sudden conversion of the Irish people seems improbable. More

than likely, Christianity was forced to propagate itself almost in secret, gradually gaining more visibility and acceptance.

The three most prevalent religions in Ireland during the past five thousand years are the religions of the Megalithic People, the Celts, and the Christians. It is traces of the religious beliefs and practices of these three groups that will be sought in the folk and fairy tales of Ireland. Traces of these religious beliefs in the folktales will serve as evidence to confirm or deny the influence of religion upon the body of folktales.

An evaluation of the religion of the Megalithic People will now take place through an examination of the remains of their archaeological monuments. These burial monuments are the only physical evidence of the Megalithic People and will be utilized in an attempt to reconstruct the religious beliefs and practices of the Megalithic People.

## Chapter 4

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE TUATHA DE DANANN

Pre-Celtic Archaeological Evidence

Hundreds of stone monuments cover the present-day landscape of Ireland. The oldest of these monuments are said to be between four and five thousand years old. These monuments are thought to have served dual purposes. They are believed to have been burial chambers for the pre-Celtic or Megalithic dead, as well as religious temples for rendering worship to the spirits of the dead.

"These stone burial chambers were places of worship, and like churches were dedicated to the memory of their founders who were in most cases believed to be buried in them" (Rees and Rees 166-67). To this day in Ireland, if you say in Gaelic that you are "going to the stones," you mean you are going to church (McDowell 18).

All of the great stone monuments of the world--the Great Pyramids, Stonehenge, the Acropolis--each in their own way record man's attempt to express materially what he feels spiritually. This is true of the burial monuments of Ireland.

Stone worship, among various other forms of nature worship, was particularly common in ancient Ireland. No doubt practices of worshipping stone monuments began with the worshipping of individual stones. Later the practice was transferred to the worshipping of piles or mounds of stones.

Finally, the practice seems to have evolved into the ritual of building stone monuments as houses for the dead and worshipping the spirits believed to be contained in them.

Various types of stone monuments in Ireland include the cairn, which was merely a mound of stones erected over a burial. "Gathering and piling stones in an immense heap was an easy way of keeping the noticeable fact of a recent death fresh in the mind of primitive man" (Wood-Martin vol. 1, 352).

Another type of monument is known as the dolmen. The dolmen was a kind of chamber composed of upright, unhewn stones, and roofed generally with a single huge stone. The primary intention of the dolmen was to represent a house or dwelling place for the dead. The relatively small and primitive cairns and dolmens gave way in time to the more sophisticated chambered tombs, such as the monument at New Grange which will be described below.

The Celtic doctrines of rebirth and immortality are partially rooted in pre-Celtic notions of the power of stones. Like several tribes in the Pacific, the pre-Celtic/Megalithic People believed that gods were present in the stones of the island. The pre-Celtic people, according to Wood-Martin, believed that the souls of the departed passed into these stones (vol. 2, 65-68).

In a tale from the Mythological Cycle entitled "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel," a number of the Ulstermen are slaughtered after a great battle. Those who escape death

"went to the cairn which they had built on the night before last, and they brought thereout a stone for each man not mortally wounded. So this is what they lost by death at the Hostel, a man for every stone that is now in Carn Lecca"/3/ (Cross and Slover 126).

This motif of persons who at death are transformed into stones can be seen in a number of tales. Far from being dead or inanimate, the Megalithic Irish believed stones grew and continued to exist.

The first region of Ireland to be settled is called Ulster. In the tale of "The Death of Fergus mac Leide" the origin of Ulster's name is explained. It is stated that "Fergus's soul parted from his body: his grave was dug, his name written in the ogam /4/, his lamentation ceremony all performed; and from the monumental stones (ulad) piled by the men of Ulster this name of Ulad (Ulster) had its origin" (Cross and Slover 487).

If we are to judge from their burial monuments, the Megalithic People viewed their stone dwellings as mere temporary shelters, and regarded their tombs as their true and permanent abodes. These pre-Celtic dwellers believed in a future state resembling that passed by the person on earth. Evidence of this belief can be illuminated by an inventory of articles buried with the dead. Vessels containing a supply

/3/ Carn Lecca is a cairn monument in Ulster.

/4/ Ogam is a method of inscribing Gaelic into stone.

of food for the departed were placed beside him for sustenance during his long journey to the land of spirits. In addition, shells, ornaments, and trophies from hunting expeditions were buried along with the deceased. Furniture was also buried to comfort the deceased (Wood-Martin vol. 1, 298-99).

### The Effect of the Archaeological Monuments on the Celts

Celtic history is mingled with legend and lore. In the Mythological Cycle, which serves partly as history and partly as mythology, the Celts are given the name of the Milesians or the sons of Mil, invaders who came from Spain./5/ The Mythological Cycle maintains that the Milesians were the fifth group of settlers in Ireland. The point is not easily verifiable. It is apparent though that the Celts were not the first settlers in Ireland since archaeologists have dated the earliest burial monuments as being from the third millennium BC.

Upon arriving in Ireland the Celts were confronted by these archaeological remains of much earlier settlements. The remains which they encountered were the passage-graves and tombs constructed by a specially advanced people whose name is unknown, but to whom certain researchers have given the name the Megalithic People.

"The incoming Celts must have been quite impressed by

/5/ This information is historically accurate in terms of the ethnic origin of the Celts.

such remains and--in a conventional cultural reaction--tended to associate these non-natural aspects of the environment with mystical otherworld beings of old.... The archaeological remains came to be associated with the characters and activities of Celtic mythology. The deities of this earlier race were thought to dwell in the largest of the archaeological sites and were thought to inhabit them still as spiritual beings" (O'hOgain 407-09).

Moved by these feelings of the presence of the spirits of the builders of the monuments which were abundant throughout all of Ireland, the Celts began to formulate a religion which made deities out of the spirits which they felt were present. The Celts set up their center of religious activity, in the County Meath, in a place known as Tara. Tara was probably selected as the religious center because of the profusion of burial monuments within that area. More important, however, was the fact that not far from Tara stood the largest example of a Megalithic burial monument known as New Grange.

#### The New Grange Monument

The New Grange monument, according to archaeologists, dates from the second millennium BC (Campbell, Primitive 70). The area near Tara, and the New Grange tomb in particular, are both believed to have been charged with mystical powers by all five groups of early settlers represented in the Mythological Cycle.



The height of the New Grange tomb is some forty-two feet, while the diameter is nearly three hundred (Campbell, Primitive 430-31). Based on the enormous size of the interior chamber of the monument and based on references from the Mythological Cycle that refer to the Boyne Country (where Tara and New Grange are located) as the burial place of the kings of Tara, it is clear that the New Grange monument held great significance for both the Megalithic and the Celtic People. Furthermore, it seems evident that such a vast chambered tomb would not be used solely as a burial tomb. Beyond its usage as a sepulchre, it was used as a temple for rendering worship to the spirits of the dead.

In the tales of the Mythological Cycle the New Grange monument is referred to predominantly as the 'Brug na Boyne,' or the 'Brug upon the Boyne.' In the tale entitled "The Adventures of Art Son of Conn," the Brug upon the Boyne is considered to be "one of the three chief burial places of Ireland" (Cross and Slover 491). Of these three chief burial places/6/ the Brug na Boyne was accorded the highest esteem. It was regarded as the proper burial place for kings and heroes in both history and folktale.

The deity who presided over the activities of the Brug na Boyne was a Tuatha De Danann god of eternal youth known as Angus. In folktales from the Mythological, Ulster, and Fenian

/6/ The other two chief burial places in Ireland were the Fair of Tailtiu and the cemetery of Cruachan.

Cycles he is referred to as Angus of the Brug, as well as Angus of New Grange. Though Angus is considered a god of immortality, he serves the dual function of being a god of the dead in carrying the "souls" of the dead to their more permanent dwellings in the monument of the Brug na Boyne. The notion that qualities of immortality and death should be embodied by the same deity illuminates the Celtic religious belief in immortality. Since the same god was associated with both immortality and death, it would seem probable that, to the Celts, these beliefs overlapped, or were one and the same.

After Finn mac Cumhail kills the warrior Diarmuid out of jealousy in the Fenian tale "The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne," he fears retribution from Angus who controls the souls of the dead. Finn and his company flee "for fear that Angus of the Tuatha De Danann might catch us." Knowing that he slew Diarmuid wrongfully, Finn calls on the gods saying,

Raise ye fairy shouts without gainsaying,  
 Let Diarmuid of the bright weapons be lifted by you;  
 To the smooth Brug of the everlasting rocks--  
 Surely it is we that feel great pity.

Angus responds to Finn's pleas stating "that he would himself bear it (the body) to the Brug upon the Boyne." After that Angus "caused the body to be borne upon a gilded bier, with his javelins over him pointed upwards, and he went to the Brug of the Boyne" (Cross and Slover 415-17).

References abound in the early tale Cycles of the

Brug na Boyne as the principal burial place for Celtic heroes and kings. Additionally, it is known as an area charged with spiritual energies traced to the deities of the Tuatha De Danann whom the Celts believed to be the rulers and stewards of the Brug na Boyne or New Grange monument.

#### The Tuatha De Danann and the Creation of a Celtic Mythology

According to Evans-Wentz, New Grange was for Ireland the royal or principal spirit temple. "It seems probable that the largest portion of this monument was utilized for the celebration of ancient Celtic or pre-Celtic Mysteries. It is directly related to the ancestors of the cult of the Tuatha De Danann or Fairy Folk, of spirits, and of the dead" (409).

In the Mythological Cycle the New Grange tomb is associated with the Tuatha De Danann as one of their spirit palaces. Historians and folklorists tell us the builders of the Irish burial monuments were known as the Megalithic People (Rolleston 52), while the mythological literature refers to the builders and inhabitants of the monuments as the Tuatha De Danann (O'hOgain 407). A definite ambiguity exists between history and folklore pertaining to the attachment of a name for the builders of the early burial monuments. History becomes clouded and diverges from the mythology in the early passages of the Mythological Cycle. Is there, however, a relationship between historical information and the early folkloristic literature?

In the "Book of Invasions" section of the Mythological Cycle it is stated that the Milesians conquered the Tuatha De Danann, who then were subjected to the rule of the Milesians. It is said of the Milesians that,

They conquered noble Ireland

Against the Tuatha De of great magic

(Cross and Slover 16). History, however, has no documentation of such a conquest. It would appear that the confrontation of the Milesians and the Tuatha De Danann is not to be read literally. Is the conquest of the Milesians over the Tuatha De Danann instead a symbolic or a figurative conquest?

Upon arriving and seeing the imposing stone monuments left by the Megalithic People, the Celts may have felt it necessary to invent a mythology which would explain the absence of a race of people whose dwellings were still very much present. Where the Megalithic People had gone is unclear. Whether they had withdrawn before the arrival of the Celts, or had been obliterated by earlier invaders is a matter of speculation. The Celts desiring to gain an affinity between themselves, the landscape, and the early inhabitants of Ireland may have felt it necessary to mythologize the history of this physically absent, yet spiritually present race. So, giving the name of the Tuatha De Danann to the Megalithic People, they assigned to them a mythological history which would explain their spiritual presence, a power which to the superstitious Celts was undeniable. Hence, the Mythological Cycle attempts

to legitimize the history of the Tuatha De Danann.

In the tale which describes this spiritual conquest the Tuatha De Danann are described as large, strong, and beautiful beings who are human in form (hence their ability to build human-like dwellings), yet by nature divine (hence their ability to survive in an invisible spiritual state). According to the tale they were devotees of Dana, the mother of the gods. Their name means "the people of the goddess Dana." Having first settled in the northern islands of Greece, it is stated that "they learned druidry and many various arts ... until they were knowing, learned, and very accomplished in the arts thereof" (Cross and Slover 11).

After defeat in battle at the hands of the Milesians had taken the three kings and queens of the Tuatha de Danann, Amergin, the chief poet and judge of the Milesians, divided Ireland in two. He "divided Erin into two parts, and gave the part that was underground to the Tuatha De Danann, and the other part to the Milesians, his own mortal people" (Cross and Slover 215).

The tale further states that by their magic art the Tuatha De Danann cast over themselves a veil of invisibility, which they were able to put on or off as they chose. They then "went into the hills and fairy places, so that they spoke with the fairy folk underground" (Cross and Slover 215).

Thereafter, there were two Irelands: the spiritual and the earthly. The Tuatha De Danann dwelt in the spiritual

Ireland and became the people to whom the Irish owe their spiritual heritage. The Milesians dwelt on the external surface of Ireland and are the people to whom the Irish owe their cultural heritage. The belief in the spiritual nature of the Tuatha De Danann is apparent since in the tales, despite being forced into their invisible state by the invading Milesians, the Tuatha De Danann remained a powerful force who controlled the monuments and activities of the dead.

Believing that the Tuatha De Danann were present in Ireland in an invisible spiritual state, the Milesians began making propitiatory offerings to the Tuatha De Danann as gods of the earth (Evans-Wentz 279). It was believed that the Tuatha De Danann, dwelling inside the earth as they did, had the power to destroy or improve the produce of the land (Rees and Rees 39). In this way they can be seen as fertility gods of the earth.

Evidence of these propitiatory offerings are contained in the tales of the Mythological Cycle. In the "Book of Invasions" section of the Cycle it is said that shortly after the conquest of the Tuatha De Danann by the Milesians, the Tuatha De Danann in retaliation, destroyed the wheat and milk of their conquerors. A treaty between the two races was soon signed, after which, the Milesians found their wheat abundant and were able to drink the milk of their cows (Evans-Wentz 291). These tales show the elevation of the Megalithic People, renamed as the Tuatha De Danann, to the stature of gods through

the creation of a symbolic mythology in the tales of the Celts.

Celtic Worship of the Tuatha De Danann

The Celts practiced rituals within the burial monuments for the purpose of communing with the spirits of the god-race they called the Tuatha De Danann. They felt that the spirits of this race could be approached by a pilgrimage made to their abode. A residence in the burial monument for three days and nights would take place, during which time there was to be an unbroken fast. Entering into these monuments for a period of this duration indicates that the existence of invisible beings was taken for granted, probably through the knowledge gained by initiation (Evans-Wentz 422).

Evidence of this practice can be seen in the collection of tales known as "The Colloquy of the Ancients" from the Book of Lismore. A passage from this work describes how three sons of the king of Ireland "fast on the Tuatha De Danann at the brugh upon the Boyne" (i.e., New Grange). The three brothers tell their father, "Our project is to fast on the Tuatha De Danann, aiming thus to win from them good fortune in the shape of a country, of a domain, of lands, and to have vast riches" (O'Grady vol. 2, 109-11).

The tale further asserts that the sons "For three days with their nights abode in the sidhe" (i.e., the tomb of New Grange)./7/

/7/ Though the sidhe refers to the invisible fairy beings, it is also used to describe the dwellings of the sidhe beings.

An analogy to this practice can be drawn to the devotees of the Great Pyramid in Egypt who would perform a similar ritual wherein the neophyte laid himself in a stone coffin without a lid, for a certain period of time--probably three days and three nights. Then, the initiation complete, the devotee arose from the mystic death to a real resurrection, as a true child of Osiris. In New Grange we may suppose that the royal or priestly neophyte, while he "fasted on the Tuatha De Danann for three days with their nights" sat in a similar stone basin, in the tomb of New Grange, after the manner of the Egyptians (Evans-Wentz 422-23).

Further evidence that these stone configurations held significant religious value for the early people of Ireland lies in the fact that the edges of the tombs in Ireland, including that at New Grange, have the appearance of having exterior edges that have been worn smooth through ages of handling and touching. This wearing of the rock surface by human hands could not have taken place had the inner chamber been sealed up and used solely as a tomb (Evans-Wentz 424-25).

Drawn by what they perceived as the spiritual presence of the Megalithic People led the Celts to the waging of a spiritual battle, against the invisible forces they felt emanating from the burial monuments. Most likely the Celts were intimidated by these mysterious forces. In order to coexist among them the Celts would need to do two things.



First, they would need to declare themselves the victors and sole possessors of Ireland. They were able to do this successfully in folktale, by virtue of the tale that describes the division of Ireland into two parts. This tale allowed the Celts sole possession of the land while simultaneously allowing the spiritual race of the Tuatha De Danann to exist invisibly without being in conflict with the Celts. Secondly, they would need to appease the deceased spirits through honoring and venerating them both in ritual practice and in the tales told about them.

No doubt the Celts must have sought explanations for the meanings and origins of the burial monuments. This seeking of explanations was partly to satisfy their own curiosity. This type of questioning and analysis of the peculiarities of the natural environment is evident in the folklore of a variety of primitive nations.

The designation of the Megalithic People as deities of Celtic mythology would tend to give the Celts a greater sense of connectedness with Ireland's past, as well as a greater sense of ownership of the land and its monuments.

Seeing the monuments empty except for the dead remains of ancient peoples, the Celts would venerate the only tangible force present, that of the dead, so carefully entombed in stone. Since the forces and remnants of the dead were encased in stone, it is not difficult to see why the Celts believed that stones were living entities. It would follow that a body

of superstition and lore would emerge based on the practices that the Celts felt should be observed in order to placate the spirits of the dead.

The Celts, not knowing to whom the spirits of this race belonged, would take it upon themselves to invent a race of people, spiritual in nature, in an attempt to define the invisible forces that surrounded them. It is in this way that the Celts brought meaning to the burial monuments present in Ireland, and at the same time created a body of folktales to give literal meaning to the spiritual inhabitants of the burial monuments whom they named the Tuatha De Danann.

## Chapter 5

## VIEWS OF DEATH, IMMORTALITY AND REBIRTH IN IRISH FOLKTALE

According to Rolleston the myths and tales of the Celts sprang from the religion they practiced (52). To validate this contention an evaluation of religious belief and the folkloristic literature of the early Celtic people must be made. Is there a correlation between the religion of the early Celtic people and the body of folklore which has survived? To determine this an investigation into documented sources from both history and literature will be made.

The Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth and Immortality

Julius Caesar, after visiting the Celtic societies of Ireland, reported on the religious beliefs held by the Druids. Caesar stated, "In particular they (the Druids) wish to inculcate this idea, that souls do not die, but pass from one body to another" (Evans-Wentz 367). Shortly after the year AD 44 Diodorus Siculus stated, "Among the Celts prevailed the doctrine that the souls of men are immortal, and that after a fixed number of years they begin a new life by putting on a new body. The Druids proclaimed the immortality of the soul" (De Jubainville 196-97). Timagenus, who wrote in the latter half of the first century AD, echoed Siculus in stating that the Druids "proclaimed the immortality of the soul" (De Jubainville 197). Strabo, the Greek geographer, declared the

Druids, "believed in the indestructibility, which implies in some sense the divinity, of the material universe" (Rolleston 39-40).

These ancient historians, contemporaries of the Celtic tale tellers and makers (the Druidic Bards), all agree that the Celts subscribed to a doctrine of immortality. This contention is held not only by historical figures, but more modern folklorists as well. Rolleston states that the Celtic belief in immortality was "handed down by the Druids" (79). Wood-Martin attests that the "Druids taught the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and of metempsychosis" (vol. 2, 245).

This idea of reincarnation or rebirth, and the immortality of the soul formed the basis of what is called "the Celtic doctrine of rebirth. The Celtic doctrine of rebirth was at the heart of Celtic religion as propagated by the Druids. A closer look at this doctrine of belief will now be taken through an analysis of folktale, belief, and the annual celebration of the festival of Samain.

#### The Festival of Samain

The Celtic year was divided into two halves, winter and summer. The Celtic year began with the celebration of the festival of Samain, the first of November. It was on this day that the religious beliefs of the Celts were actualized and celebrated through feasting and ceremony.

On the evening before Samain it was thought that the souls of the dead returned and became visible. On this night chaos was let loose. Spirits and fairies were unusually active. The sidhe or burial mounds were opened and the spirits of their inhabitants were abroad in a more real sense than on any other night. For it was on this night, according to Celtic belief, that the boundary between the living and the dead was obliterated (Rees and Rees 89-90).

At this point of juncture between the seasons the poles of duality were fused together. Summer and winter, natural and supernatural, the living and the dead overlapped and became one during the festival of Samain. Samain was a day of changes, of births and deaths; it was an open door between the real world and the Otherworld (Gantz 12). As a tale from the Fenian Cycle entitled "The Boyhood Deeds of Finn" states, "Every year on Samain the fairy-mounds of Ireland were always open; for on Samain nothing could ever be hidden in the fairy-mounds" (Cross and Slover 366). This is echoed in an Ulster tale entitled "The Adventures of Nera" where it is stated that "the fairy-mounds of Erin are always opened about Samain" (Cross and Slover 252).

On the eve of Samain all the Celtic people of Ireland, "out of a religious persuasion instilled into them by the Druids, extinguished their fires entirely. Then every master of a family was religiously obliged to take a portion of the consecrated fire (of the Druids) home, and to kindle the fire

anew in his house, which for the ensuing year was to be lucky and prosperous (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 280-81).

Though the Celts venerated the dead throughout the year, Samain was the culmination of their devotions. On this night when the burial or fairy mounds were open it was considered unlucky to touch the bodies of the dead since demons and the people of the sidhe (people of the fairy mounds) were at large. Mortals found near dead bodies at such a time were in great danger of being taken by these spirit hosts (Evans-Wentz 288).

Perhaps much of the mystique and superstition was created by the Druids who on this day, according to Toland's History of the Druids, demanded the payment of their dues. If any man had not cleared with the Druids for the last year's dues, he was neither to have a spark of the holy fire, nor could any of his neighbors let him take the benefit of theirs, under pain of excommunication, which, as managed by the Druids, was worse than death (Wood-Martin 280-81). It seems without doubt that on this day the influence of the Druids was at its pinnacle. Acting as intermediaries between the dead and the living, between the visible and invisible worlds, the Druids exercised control over the unseen forces. In being able to control these invisible forces the Druids were able to simultaneously control the Celtic people.

Being the beginning of the winter season, Samain was a season of death to the land which sustained the agrarian Celts. It was a time when living things died in order to be

reborn. Therefore, it was a time of preparing for "recreation and rebirth in Ireland" (Gantz 13).

References to Samain appear in Irish folktales. In the "Sick Bed of Cu Chulainn" it is said, "Every year the men of Ulster were accustomed to hold festival together; and the time when they held it was for three days before Samain, and for three days after that day, and upon Samain itself" (Cross and Slover 176-77).

Several major events occur at Samain in the early tale Cycles. Cu Chulainn, the Ulster hero, dies on the eve of Samain. Conaire Mor, an Ulster king, likewise dies at Samain. It is at Samain that Da Derga's Hostel is destroyed in the tale of "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel" from the Mythological Cycle. The fact that the festival of Samain is manifest in the folktales seems to suggest that they are derived originally from the religious ritual of Samain.

Samain, the most important of Celtic festivals was adopted by the Christian missionaries to serve their own purposes. The festival was renamed "All Souls Day," and has survived unto modern times, not only in Ireland, but throughout Catholic countries. Its popular counterpart, often celebrated without conscious knowledge of its religious origin is known to modern society as Hallowe'en. Both in modern popular practice and as a "holy day" within the Catholic Church this religious festival continues to be a day that honors the spirits or souls of the dead.

### Celtic Views of Rebirth and Immortality

Death, to the Celts, was not the end of existence. It was merely a new beginning. After death, according to evidence from Celtic religious beliefs, life continued in various ways. Life for Celtic individuals could continue through rebirth as a human being on this earth. Life could continue through the process of metempsychosis, or the transformation of a person into another body or into a creature other than human. Lastly, life could continue through the entry of a person into the Otherworld where eternal life would be enjoyed.

De Jubainville speaks of the belief of the Celts in the continuation of life after death in another human incarnation. This doctrine of rebirth can be seen in the tales of Finn mac Cumhail who is later reborn as Mongan. Though reborn as Mongan, he still remembers his previous incarnation as Finn. In one of the "Stories of Mongan" it is said, "Mongan was Finn, though he would not let it be told" (Cross and Slover 550). In similar fashion Tuan mac Carell, from the Mythological Cycle, is reborn as a man for the second time, and still is able to remember all the events he had witnessed in his former lives (De Jubainville 196).

De Jubainville further states that, according to Celtic doctrine, "after death men find in another world the new life and new body which their religion holds out to them." This new life is a continuation of that led in this world. In fact,



it was believed that "the debtor who dies without having acquitted his debt will find himself in the other world in exactly the same position towards his creditor. His obligations will follow him into the land of the dead, and he will have to fulfill all the engagements he contracted in the land of the living (197-98).

The Celtic belief in immortality is evident in the folktales of the early Cycles. In "The Wooing of Etain" from the Mythological Cycle, it is said that Etain lived "one thousand and twelve years from her first begetting by Ailill until her last by Etar" (Gantz 47). Though most of her incarnations are as a beautiful woman, she endures rebirth as a butterfly (or as a scarlet fly in some translations). In order to be reunited with her husband from a previous life, Midir, both are simultaneously reborn as swans (Rolleston 162).

Tuan mac Carell, the sole survivor of the first settlers in Ireland, undergoes successive rebirths as a deer, a boar, and an eagle. He is reborn as a salmon, after which he is eaten by the wife of King Carell and reborn of her. He was called Tuan son (mac) of Carell, and he bore within him the whole history of Ireland since the coming of Nemed (Rees and Rees 229). Before being reborn as Tuan mac Carell, he was reputed to have been the first man to reach Ireland. Two hundred and twenty years later, he was reborn as Tuan mac Carell (Evans-Wentz 377).

A similar motif can be seen in the tale of "The Wooing

of Etain" wherein Etain after having been transformed into a scarlet fly falls into a goblet of wine in the castle of the King of Leinster. The Queen of Leinster does not notice the fly in her goblet and drinks it. Nine months later Etain is reborn in the same shape and size of her previous human incarnation, as the daughter of the Queen of Leinster. She has no memory of her past incarnation, however (Rolleston 156-7).

Turning to the Ulster Cycle, the belief in immortality and rebirth continues to be evident. In the tale entitled "The Wooing of Emer," it is stated that the Ulster people were concerned with the recklessness and hence the possible demise of their hero, Cu Chulainn. "They were troubled and afraid that Cu Chulainn would perish early, so that for that reason they wished to give him a wife that he might leave an heir; knowing that his rebirth would be of himself" (Cross and Slover 155).

When Cu Chulainn does die in the tale entitled "The Death of Cu Chulainn," it is alleged that "the soul of Cu Chulainn appeared there to the thrice fifty maidens who had loved him and they saw him floating in his phantom chariot" (Cross and Slover 340).

In the tale of "The Exile of the Sons of Usnech," Deirdre's beloved Naisi and his two brothers are slain. It is said that after the slaying Deirdre demanded to be buried alive in the same grave in which Naisi was to be buried. She throws herself

into his grave and dies./8/ The two are then joined in burial in a common grave. From this communal grave grow two trees, whose tops, when they were full grown, met and intertwined together, and none could part them (Rolleston 196-201).

A modern version of this tale can be observed in the tale entitled "The Twining Branches." In this tale a pair of lovers are forbidden to marry because of a previously "arranged marriage." Filled with grief that the two must part, the male lover dies of sorrow. Within twenty-four hours the female lover dies as well. The affluent parents of the female are advised that the two bodies should be buried in one grave. The parents, however, insist on separating the two even after death. Both bodies are buried in the same grave yard, but at opposite sides. Soon after their burial two trees begin to grow out of each grave, which intertwine and become one.

Both tales show the continuation of life after death through non-human incarnations. They reflect a common motif that expresses the religious beliefs of both the Celtic people and the modern Irish that lovers can continue relationships beyond the grave.

Beginning with the Fenian Cycle and continuing until recent folktales, the tone toward rebirth and immortality has a decidedly Christian flavor. Motifs of metempsychosis, rebirth, and immortality are still prevalent. However, they

/8/ In some versions of this tale Deirdre dashes her head against a rock, thus committing suicide in order to be joined with her lover.

shift from a Celtic conception of immortality to a combined Christian/Celtic conception of the immortality of the soul.

### Immortality and the Soul

The soul in Celtic belief is often thought of as a miniature person. When this soul is disembodied from the physical body of the person, it continues to exist. Being of diminutive size, the soul is often regarded as a "miniature replica of the person" (Evans-Wentz 239).

Often when the soul leaves the body it flies away, fluttering like a butterfly, and continuing its life as an immortal part of the being. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead there is an illustration of the soul, in the form of a butterfly-like creature bearing a sail, the emblem of breath, and the Crux ansata, that of life, in the act of revisiting its former tabernacle. In this illustration the soul hovers over the mummified body of its former inhabitant (Wood-Martin vol. 1, 295).

In a Statistical Account of the Parish of Ballymoyer, County Armagh, written in 1810, the Rev. Joseph Ferguson states that a girl chasing a butterfly was scolded by her companion, who said to her, "That may be the soul of your grandfather" (Wood-Martin vol. 1, 296).

This conception of the soul as a butterfly can be clearly observed in a tale from Yeats' collection Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland entitled "The Priest's Soul." In this tale a

learned priest denies the existence of his soul until "one night an angel came down from Heaven, and told the priest he had but twenty-four hours to live." The priest is told that he will be "cast into Hell forever," unless he can find one person who believes in the soul. After being unable to find a true believer among his own followers, the priest finds a small child who still believes in the existence of the soul. The priest instructs the child to inform his followers that all of his teachings have been wrong. He further instructs the child to bring his followers to see him at the moment of his death so that they can see his soul emerge from his body.

At last when the stillness of death settled on the priest's face the child and the priest's followers saw "a beautiful living creature, with four snow-white wings, mount from the dead man's body into the air and go fluttering around his head."

"And this," the reader is told, "was the first butterfly that was ever seen in Ireland; and now all men know that the butterflies are the souls of the dead, waiting for the moment when they may enter Purgatory, and so pass through torture to purification and peace" (195-99).

This story, though clearly Christian in nature and motif, is neither entirely Christian, nor wholly Celtic. It is instead a mix of both traditions, a hybrid tale imbued with both Celtic and Christian beliefs. The characters are

obviously from the Christian tradition. Purgatory, Heaven and Hell are Christian conceptions. It could also be argued that the term "soul" is essentially a Christian notion. However, the peculiar conception of the soul as a butterfly, as a "living creature," or as "a soul of the dead" is an ancient belief which can be traced to the Egyptian and Celtic cultures. This conception is compatible with the Celtic doctrine of rebirth and immortality. The manifestation of this belief in modern folktales is proof of the survival of Celtic religious beliefs through the medium of folktales. Centuries of story retellings containing ancient Celtic motifs have transferred Celtic beliefs to the Christian cultures of Ireland. The retention of these belief systems in folktale now forms a part of what may be considered a hybrid religion combining elements of both Celtic and Christian principles. This hybrid religion has no formalized meeting place other than the firesides where Irish folk gather. There is no ordained hierarchy of priests who administer this religion to the people other than the storytellers who take it upon themselves to perpetuate Irish beliefs and traditions through the tales they tell.

## Chapter 6

## CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE ON IRISH FOLKTALE

In effecting their conversion over the people of Ireland the Christian missionaries could not overlook the power of the priestly order of the Celts. In the same manner they could not overlook the "scriptures" of that priestly order, namely the traditional tales which the Bardic Druids told to the people of Celtic society. Surely the Christian missionaries recognized the power that these tales held for the people of Celtic Ireland. Rather than denouncing these tales, the missionaries wisely attempted to infuse Christian beliefs in the tales while retaining the characters and motifs of the earlier Celtic religion. As Wood-Martin attests, the Christian missionaries utilized the tales as a frame to illustrate the principles of the new religion (vol. 1, 314).

Since the tales of the Mythological Cycle and those of the Ulster Cycle belonged to antiquity, it would be difficult to manipulate the tales from these Cycles. Realizing the loyalty accorded to these well established tales, therefore, the missionaries recorded the tales of the first two Cycles accurately, with relatively few attempts at exploitation.

The tales of the Fenian Cycle, on the other hand, were supposedly created beginning in approximately the third century AD. The literature did not appear in print until several hundred years later, the vast majority of manuscripts

from the Fenian Cycle dating from the twelfth and later centuries.

The exploitation of these later tales, which were being created and subsequently altered as Christianity gained greater and greater power, would be a much easier task for the Christian missionary scribes. Since the Fenian tales were part of the oral traditions of the Celts at the time of the arrival of the Christians, these would be the easiest tales to infuse with didactic Christian themes. These oral tales, having no original written versions to which they could be compared for their authenticity, could constantly be changed and molded through the process of oral transmission. In accomplishing this end the Christians played a role very much like that of the Druidic Bards. Consequently, during the years when Christianity and Celticism overlapped it would be nearly impossible to be able to know which of the tales had originated from the Bards and which from the Christians.

In addition to their adaptations and manipulations of already existing tales, the Christians created their own body of tales which detailed the glories and miracles of Irish Christian saints. This series of tales known as "The Legends of the Saints," created a Christian mythology as part of the body of Irish folktales.

As this process progressed, a power struggle resulted that came not from the people, but from the Druidical order, who with their wisdom perceived the manipulative intentions of the



Christians. In reaction to this exploitation of their "scriptures," a battle ensued. A large part of the battle was waged in the dogma of the texts which were being produced, as well as in the doctrines which were being circulated orally through the vehicle of storytelling.

Sharply critical of the older power structures of the Druids, the Christians inserted passages that denounced the honor and legitimacy of Druidism and the Celtic religion. In the "Adventures of Connla," a fairy woman says of Druidism and magic: "Druidism is not loved, little has it progressed to honour. When His [Jesus Christ's] law shall come it will scatter the charms of Druids from journeying on the lips of black, lying demons" (Evans-Wentz 259).

The Celtic loyalists fought back with such passages as the following from "The Death of Muircertach mac Erca" where it is said:

Never believe the clerics,  
 For they chant nothing save unreason:  
 Follow not their unmelodious verses,  
 For they do not reverence righteousness.  
 Cleave not to the clerics of churches,  
 If thou desirest life without treachery

(Cross and Slover 526).

Meanwhile, Saint Patrick was warning the people

Against incantations of false prophets,  
 Against black laws of heathenry,

Against craft of idolatry,

Against spells of women and smiths and Druids

(Wood-Martin vol. 1, 263).

The term "Druid" held great power, however, to the Celtic people. So, in some cases the Christians wisely expanded the definition of the term to mean "someone with great wisdom." The term had always taken on similar connotations, but typically meant "someone with great wisdom who was part of the established order of Druids." In an attempt to alter this definition of the term, it is stated, in a poem attributed to Saint Columbkille during the sixth century AD, "My Druid is Christ, the son of God" (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 150).

Having redefined the meaning of the Druid, the Christian missionaries set about converting the Celtic goddesses. The goddess Brigit, one aspect of the threefold goddess, Dana, was converted into the Christian Saint Bridgit, and was subsequently given a body of tales chronicling her miracles. This transformation of the Celtic goddess Brigit into the Christian Saint Bridgit was likely a process that required several hundred years. Evidence of this transition can be observed in a tale entitled "The Vision of Mac Conglinne," composed during the Middle Ages. In this tale Mac Conglinne refers to both Celtic and Christian deities in saying, "To God and Brigit (note the older spelling) we give thanks" (Cross and Slover 584).

Vera (or Beare in some tales), another of the original

Celtic goddesses is converted to Christianity in folkloristic style. She states,

I, that when the hour was mine,  
Drank with kings the mead and wine,  
Drink whey-water now in rags  
Praying among shrivelled hags.

Amen! Let my drink be whey,  
Let me do God's will all day,  
And, as upon God I call,  
Turn my blood to angry gall

(Wood-Martin vol. 2, 218).

In this tale the formerly powerful goddess is rendered powerless without the Christian god. Furthermore, she is made into one of a coven of shrivelled hags.

The gods of the Tuatha De Danann were similarly stripped of their power, dignity, and honor. During the recording of tales which made up the Mythological Cycle it would appear that "The Tale of Eithne" had been tampered with by the Christian recorders. In this tale it is said that Eithne was one day deeply insulted by a Tuatha De Danann chieftain. The pure soul of the girl had so resented the insult that her "guardian demon" (the opposite of a Christian term) was replaced by a guardian angel sent by the true God. From that moment on Eithne refused to eat the magic swine of the Tuatha De Danann. Thereafter, she is miraculously sustained by the true God.

Having given up the food of the "pagans," Eithne is now ready to receive the metaphorical "food" of the new faith brought by Saint Patrick. "And though she had not heard the preaching of the Christians, the mysterious action this faith had wrought upon her was become more potent than the enchantment of the pagans" (De Jubainville 158).

After undergoing her awakening, Eithne, being one of the Tuatha De Danann divinities, lost the Veil of Invisibility, bestowed upon them during the division of Ireland between the Tuatha De Danann and the Milesians. The power of the Veil of Invisibility gave her entrance into the Tuatha De Danann fairyland and hid her from mortal eyes. Unable to find her way back to her home after losing this power, she came to a walled garden, and looking through the gate saw a man in a long brown robe. The man was a Christian monk who brought her to Saint Patrick. Patrick administers the rite of baptism. Soon after, Eithne dies with her head upon the breast of Saint Patrick who administers to her the last rites (Rolleston 142-45).

The character of Eithne seems to have been chosen for "depaganization" because the Celts believed that she had a "pure soul." Implied by references in the story, the Tuatha De Danann appear as demon worshipers having, instead of guardian angels, "guardian demons." Also insinuated is the idea that Tuatha De Danann chieftains are rude and insulting to others, as they were to Eithne. Losing her Veil of

Invisibility, Eithne simultaneously loses not only her home, but also her immortality. Shortly after her baptismal, she dies and attains true peace in Heaven rather than having to endure what the Christians would consider the false world of the Tuatha De Danann.

This same reducing of gods and goddesses was extended to the Celtic heroes. Cu Chulainn is called up from the dead in folkloristic form only to defend Christian principles. The tale in which he does this is "The Phantom Chariot of Cu Chulainn." This tale, though often grouped with the tales of the Ulster Cycle because of its characters and subject matter, does not form a true part of that cycle. The tale was composed in the twelfth century and is part of the Book of Dun Cow.

This tale details how upon the request of Loegaire, King of Ireland and a staunch supporter of the old faith, Saint Patrick summons Cu Chulainn from Hell. Loegaire tells Patrick: "By no means will I believe in thee, nor yet in God, until thou shalt call up Cu Chulainn in all his dignity, as he is recorded in the old stories, that I may see him, and that I may address him in my presence here; after that I will believe in thee" (Cross and Slover 347).

The literary stage has now been set for the Celtic world to meet and submit to the newly empowered Christian world. The legendary Cu Chulainn appears pleading with Loegaire to "believe in God and in Patrick." He embellishes his plea by

stating:

Great as was my heroism,  
 Hard as was my sword,  
 The devil crushed me with one finger  
 Into the red charcoal!

Though thine were a perpetual life  
 Of earth, with its beauty,  
 Better is a single reward in heaven  
 With Christ, Son of the living God

(Cross and Slover 353-54).

Cu Chulainn goes on to beg Saint Patrick for entry into Heaven. The tale concludes by affirming: "Great was the power of Patrick in awakening Cu Chulainn after being nine times fifty years in the grave." Cu Chulainn is consequently granted his wish of Heaven and Loegaire becomes a believer.

The Fenian hero Oisín, son of Finn mac Cumhail, similarly submits to the new religion in folktale. He returns from Tir-na-n-Og, the Land of Youth, a withered old man. The tale of "Oisín in the Land of Youth" begins with a beautifully inspired description of his adventures in the Celtic Otherworld, but ends uneventfully in the didactic world of Christian ideology.

The tale consists of a dialogue between Saint Patrick and Oisín. Oisín eloquently recounts the ecstasies of Tir-na-n-Og while Patrick preaches monotonously on the damnation of Finn

and all his comrades, while extolling the merit of the "one God." This killjoy method of sermonizing to the pagan Celts was likely a reflection of the methods employed by the Christian missionaries in attaining conversion of the Celtic people.

Other tales serve to teach Christian principles in the disguise of Celtic tradition. The tale of "The Voyage of Maeldun" introduces the concept of sin, a notion which was completely foreign to the Celtic mind, and therefore, in the earlier purely Celtic tales. On one of the many islands visited in this tale, the Island of Women, Maeldun and his crew are tempted by the "sinful" beauty of the women of the island who offer themselves to the men as brides.

On another island in his journey, Maeldun sees an eagle transform from old age and decayed plumage into a new and strong bird. Seeing the eagle gain this power after diving into a lake of the island, one of Maeldun's crew urges the crew to "bathe in that lake and renew ourselves." This would seem to be a cleverly disguised form of self-baptism.

This epic tale is written in a style similar to the Icelandic sagas and the epic tales of Greece. It parallels the wandering adventures of Odysseus. Yet its themes are heavy-handed and overly explicit. The Christian scribes likely borrowed the literary formula of the epic narrative and used it as a means to illuminate the principles of their religion. Every island within the Maeldun saga champions a different

Christian virtue. One island speaks of the merit of forgiveness, another of honesty, yet another of retribution for evil deeds. The tale is so overtly based on Christian teachings that it takes a great deal of suspension of one's imagination to look beyond the instructive elements of the tale.

A tale similar to the "Voyage of Maeldun" is "The Voyage of Bran." This tale attempts to represent itself as having been written before the birth of Christ. However, it is by no means that ancient. In its capacity as a tale which supposedly predates the birth of Christ, it ventures to prophesy that event.

A noble salvation will come  
From the King who has created us,  
A white law will come over the seas,  
Besides being God, He will be a man

(Cross and Slover 593).

This tale goes on to imply that the Druids were feared and kept secrets from the people. In this way the religion of the Christians became personalized; the teachings of Jesus were not to be feared by the Celts but trusted.

He will delight the company of every fairy knoll,  
He will be the darling of every goodly land,  
He will make known secrets--a course of wisdom--  
In the world, without being feared

(Cross and Slover 593).

This tale also serves as a record of the transformation



of the Celtic Otherworld from an indistinct "land of the dead" to a threefold division of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory. The Otherworld by Christian standards was no longer a place where all Celts went after death. It was now a triad of dwelling places that could be obtained as a result of adherence to the principles of the religion. In pointing out the difference between Heaven and Hell, "The Voyage of Bran" refers to Heaven as "the gathering where there is no sorrow."

The Christians successfully learned the metaphorical language of the Celts and capitalized on the imagery that could captivate and sway their beliefs. They sensed the power of the Druids and the Bards and sought to replace both orders. The Druids were displaced by the priestly order of the new religion. With the advent of Christianity, the Druid as priest of the old religion lost his function (Rees and Rees 141). At the same time the Bards were replaced by the Christian scribes. The scribes, asserting their power through their command of letters and writing, did their best to defame the Bard in their literature, demoting him in the scale of importance, and stripping him of his dignity until the Bard was

No longer courted and caressed,

High placed in hall, a welcome guest.

The Bard finally degenerated into

A wandering harper, scorned and poor,

Who begged his bread from door to door

(Wood-Martin vol. 2, 250).

Christian missionaries tried to take the most direct route to convert the Celtic people of Ireland. If they could infuse their beliefs in the tales, which had previously been the exclusive medium of the Bards, they would be able to effectively transport the Celts to a compromise between "pagan" notions and Christian understanding.

This process began by reducing the power and dignity of the Celtic gods, goddesses, and heroes. The process continued through a form of storytelling and story writing which involved the emergence of a new set of characters who would interact with older, familiar characters whom the Celtic people recognized as authentic figures from the earlier faith.

One effect of the influences of Christianity on Celtic tales was to produce practices, beliefs, and tales which were the hybrid result of Christian and Celtic religious beliefs. To see the long lasting effect of these influences, an examination of fairy lore and tales must now take place.

## CHAPTER 7

RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS OF FAIRY TALES AND THE FAIRY FAITH  
IN IRELANDThe Tuatha De Danann and the Origin of the Fairy Faith

The line of separation between the fairies and the cult of reverence for the dead of the Tuatha De Danann was always very thin. The tale from the Mythological Cycle that details the division of Ireland by the poet, Amergin, states that the Tuatha De Danann "went into the hills and fairy regions, so that the fairies under ground were subject to them" (Rees and Rees 38). From this evidence it is clear that the fairies and the Tuatha De Danann are separate figures. However, this passage also makes it clear that the fairies and the Tuatha De Danann possess essentially the same nature. Both have a spiritual nature, allowing them the power of invisibility. Both live in underground dwellings. The Tuatha De Danann are said to have once dwelt on the earth in human form. Likewise, the fairies are described as human in form whenever they are seen by mortals. Both, then, are human in form, yet by nature divine. Both are races of beings who have attained immortality or an ability to live beyond the physical realm of existence.

The dominant term used to refer to the fairy-like creatures in the Mythological Cycle is the "Tuatha De Danann." Beyond the tales of the Mythological Cycle, the

appearance of the Tuatha De Danann race as characters diminishes until they disappear altogether. Spiritual figures, similar in nature to the Tuatha De Danann persist, however.

In the Ulster and Fenian Cycles these characters are known as the sidhe, or the fairies. The terms "sidhe" and "fairy" are used interchangeably. The term "fairy" is an English translation from the Gaelic aes sidhe, which means literally, "folk of the fairy mound" (Cross and Slover 488). As the literature progresses chronologically, the Gaelic term is used less and less until the term "fairy" is used almost exclusively in the later folktale collections. The use of this term continues throughout modern folktale collections.

Beginning with the Ulster Cycle, the sidhe or fairy figures exhibit the identical aspects and qualities of the Tuatha De Danann. They maintain invisibility, appearing only to selected individuals. They exercise power and control over the crops of Ireland. They continue to retain their immortality. They dwell in the underground dwellings originally associated with the Tuatha De Danann. The fairies are even given ownership in the folktales of the archaeological monuments originally associated with the deceased spirits of the Tuatha De Danann. The monuments become known in tale and popular tradition as "fairy forts" and "fairy mounds." Based on these qualities and descriptions, the sidhe and the Tuatha De Danann merge and become one, and are renamed "fairies." The name change signals a loss of respect and stature for the

previously highly venerable Tuatha De Danann. In their guise of fairies, the Tuatha De Danann take on a benign appearance. They are mere tricksters; their power has been taken. Their divinity is stripped to such an extent that they are no longer superhuman, but rather subhuman. In fact, they begin to take on the most negative qualities of Irish mortals. Some modern interpretations of fairies stoop so low as to portray fairies as cute, little green men who are seen only in alcohol-induced visions of town drunkards.

A tale entitled "The Haunted Cellar" places the sacred otherworld of the fairies in the wine cellar of a rich man. Far from maintaining a god-like status, the "little fellow" in this tale is a feeble figure "about six inches in height." Not only is his size reduced, so is his honor. In this tale he is a fop and a common drunk. "His face was like a withered winter apple and his nose, which was of a bright crimson colour, wore a delicate purple bloom like that of a plum about the tip." The master of the house determines that he shall be polite to this helpless sprite. After many years, however, the "little fellow nearly emptied his wine cellar" (Croker and Lyons 73-4).

Though the literature shows a deterioration in the status of the Tuatha De Danann from deities to trickster fairies, the belief in the fairy world in Ireland still holds importance as a system of belief and superstition even in recent times. A body of fairy belief still forms a part of the consciousness

of a portion of the Irish people to whom the tales are more than mere fancy or entertainment devoid of meaning. As such, the tales form the "scriptures" of the devotees of the fairy faith. Irish people obtain more from these tales than simple pleasure and humor. With the tellings of these tales, the Irish are able to make a connection with the past, with their roots, with the primitive gods that were forgotten when the Tuatha De Danann were disguised as the fairies. As remnant traces of the earlier faiths of Ireland, these tales of the fairies reflect the ancient religious beliefs of the Celtic and Megalithic People. It is these traces of folktale, belief, practice, and superstition that make up the elements known as the fairy faith.

#### The Survival of the Fairy Faith

Banished from the surface of Ireland, rendered invisible, made into cartoon-like leprechauns in modern times, the fairies never completely died in the minds, hearts, and oral traditions of the Irish people. The fairies remained alive in the hearts and minds of the Irish people, but underwent a series of transformations from larger than life gods to barely visible leprechauns, pookas, and banshees, which were pale imitations of older traditions and beliefs.

Very possibly the stripping of pagan qualities from the fairies of Ireland began with the recordings of tales by the Christian scribes which they felt included idol or demon

worship. As part of their documentation of the tales, they may have attempted to limit references to the fairy folk that elevated their status to that of gods. To properly work against the idea of the fairies as gods, they would characterize them as harmless and playful sprites who had little power.

The beauty of Irish fairy lore, however, has been maintained in spite of the Christian moralizing and rationalizing that has taken place (Briggs 87). The love of music, poetry, horses, and fairy women has been carefully preserved. In modern times the fairy has taken on the role of the ancient muse, a source of inspiration for the creative artist. Irish pipers used to go, or even go yet, to the fairy folk to be educated in the musical profession, and then come back the most marvelous players that ever were in Ireland (Evans-Wentz 299). The famous seventeenth century harper, Carolan, was said to have had an experience where he slept on a fairy rath. Ever after he was blessed with the skill of a musician graced with the music of the fairies.

The fairy folk have music to which that of our own world could not be compared; for even Patrick himself states, in a tale in which it is revealed that he has heard the fairy music, that it would equal the very music of Heaven if it were not for "a twang of the fairy spell that infests it" (Evans-Wentz 297).

Even in tales where obvious Christian influence is

apparent such as "The Death of Fergus mac Leide," the power of music among the fairy folk is left intact. This tale describes the activities of a fairy palace as: "singing of poems, instrumental music, the mellow blast of horns, and concerted minstrelsy" (Cross and Slover 484).

The tale from the Fenian Cycle of "Oisín in the Land of Youth" describes music in the Land of Youth:

Our host all nigh in gay array  
Held glorious feast where harps ne'er ceased,

Also,

And close behind him there was seen  
His youthful queen--a consort meet--  
With fifty maidens in her train  
Who sang a strain divinely sweet

(Cross and Slover 449).

The Christian missionaries were understandably fond of music, and saw it as one of the methods of realizing Christian conversion. Since it was no threat to their purposes, their work would not be hindered by allowing references to music and minstrelsy in their process of recording tales.

Though the Irish people who created and told the later tales of the fairy world were almost entirely Christian in belief and practice, they nevertheless identified, perhaps unconsciously, with a more remote faith, partly Celtic, partly Christian, and partly the making of the storytellers. Those Christian people who are believers in the fairy world--



storytellers and story listeners--do not see a conflict between faith in the fairy world and faith in Christian principles. Indeed the two faiths overlap. In the tale of "The Fighting Fairies of Mangerton," it is said of the main character, Billy Thompson, that "he never passes a fort (a fairy fort), or hears a blast of wind, without taking off his hat, with a 'God save ye, gentlemen,' in compliment to the Good People" (Croker and Clifford 54). According to Lady Gregory, "When the Sidhe pass by in a blast of wind we should say some words of blessing, for there may be among them some of our own dead" (10).

In spite of, or perhaps with the help of the Christian beliefs, the tales of the fairy world have survived in a manner which expresses both Celticism and Christianity.

#### Traces of Earlier Faiths in Modern Story Characters

Perhaps the most common character from the fairy world in the tales of the modern period is the leprechaun. As a representative of the last vestiges of earlier fairies, the leprechaun is consistently portrayed as much smaller than human beings. The first reference to a leprechaun comes from a tale written about AD 1100 entitled "The Death of Fergus mac Leide." In this tale can be seen the diminutive size of the fairies for the first time. Up until the introduction of this tale the fairies were, if anything, considered larger than human beings. They were certainly never described as smaller than human beings. The text of "The Death of Fergus mac Leide"

describes leprechauns as, "so tiny that the close-cropped grass of the green reached to his (the leprechaun's) knee" (Cross and Slover 473).

From that point on leprechauns are presented as tiny mischievous sub-human beings who can either cause harm or help, though more often than not they are apt to trick a person. According to Irish folk belief, these "fairies can cause a man to lose his bearings (just as they can upset his sense of time)" (Rees and Rees 346).

In the tale entitled, "Darby O'Reilly and the Clauteens Clurricane," the main character, Darby, is drawn to a fairy fort by a leprechaun after becoming intoxicated. Because of the leprechaun's trickery, Darby "didn't know whether he was coming or going and, as bad luck would have it, he went every way but the right, for instead of keeping the straight road he turned off through the fields, and after an hour of wandering found himself in the old fort at Clauteens" (Croker and Clifford 39-40). In this tale the leprechaun still possesses some of the power of the earlier fairies; however, its power amounts to meaningless pranks.

Another character prevalent in the modern tales of the fairy world is the "pooka," or "puca," in Gaelic. This character, whom Shakespeare utilized for his character of Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream, is also a trickster like the leprechaun. Like his Shakespearian counterpart, he plays havoc with human beings, and then in a role similar to the

Greek Eros, he unites mortal lovers. After becoming drunk and sleeping under the tower of the pooka, Daniel O'Rourke, the main character in a tale of the same title, is taken on a whirlwind journey, to the moon, across the ocean, all at the whim of the pooka. In the end the drunken Daniel O'Rourke is reunited with his loving wife who scolds him for being a drunkard and unwisely falling asleep under the tower of the pooka (Yeats 90-96).

In the two tales just mentioned the fairies are forces to be avoided at all costs. In Celtic society the Druids and the fairies worked in harmony. In the tales of the modern period, however, a sense of antagonism exists between society and the fairies.

Vindictive qualities of the fairies can be perceived as they gradually lose their power in the folklore. Fairies are said to guard the fairy thorn trees. When a mortal cuts one of these trees down, it is said that the person will wake to find the thorns of the tree in their bed. For the fairies

Have planted those trees  
 For pleasure here and there.  
 Is any man so daring  
 As dig them up in spite,  
 He shall find their sharpest thorns  
 In his bed at night

(Gordon 351). Other modern fairies have degenerated into

thieves who take babies out of their cradles and substitute them for fairy changelings. They lure newly married women away from their husbands, leaving counterfeit copies in their places. Fairies are known to administer blows to strong men, leaving them blind or paralyzed. They bewitch cows; they destroy crops (Gordon 351-52). These aspects of the modern fairies are partly Celtic in their origin. It is said that the Tuatha De Danann destroyed the milk and crops of their conquerors, the Milesians, after the division of Ireland in the Mythological Cycle. In a small sense some of the fairies in modern folktales still retain their roles as earth gods, but the most dominant aspect is that of tricksters, thieves, and troublemakers.

The character known as the banshee also shows a combination of Celtic and Christian beliefs. The banshee is a supernatural woman whose lamenting cries foreshadow the death of an Irish mortal. The Celtic aspect of this character can be viewed in the motif of a supernatural character who comes to escort a person to the otherworld. A popular Christian belief holds that the banshee is the spirit of an old woman who must cry for the dead as a penance for sins in a former lifetime (Lysaght 96). The folktales of the modern period present the idea of the banshee as a belief that even devout Christian people can hold which is not in conflict with other Christian beliefs. However, whereas the earlier Celtic people embraced the notion of death as being the journey to their permanent home in the otherworld, the Christians fear, in most cases,

the coming of the banshee and death.

In the tale from Croker's collections entitled "Diarmuid Bawn, the Piper," the coming of the banshee is met with the following reaction from the household maid. "The Blessed Mother defend us all!" cried Judy, rapidly making the Sign of the Cross. "'Tis the Banshee!" (Croker and Clifford 102-05). Another tale collected by Croker entitled simply "The Banshee," similarly has a servant alert the mistress of the house that the banshee has made its presence known. The mistress of the house states emphatically, "I charge you not to mention what you have told me, for there is no occasion to frighten your fellow servants with the story" (Croker and Lyons 89-92). In these Christian influenced tales, death is not submitted to easily. It is feared, and the banshee is seen as an evil force.

Leprechauns, pookas, and banshees represent the remnants Celtic beliefs. In their altered semi-pagan, semi-Christian characterization, they nevertheless have an association, albeit adulterated, with the original fairies, the Tuatha De Danann, from whom they are descended. Beyond this they show a blending of religions, of faiths and superstitions from both Celtic and Christian traditions.

#### Immortality and the Fairies

In the early cycles the fairies are immortal. They live in the Happy Otherworld free from pain, sickness, and aging. As the body of folktales progresses toward modern times,

there is still the belief that fairies live forever in an otherworld. However, their otherworld becomes suspect, and their immortality is dubious.

A legend that taints the stature of the fairies' immortality has circulated in the oral tradition. This legend maintains that "at the time of Satan's rebellion some angels remained true to their allegiance, others sided with Lucifer, while a third party remained neutral. At the termination of the struggle those who sided with the Almighty remained in Heaven, those who fought against Him were cast into the nether regions; but those who remained neutral, unfitted for either Heaven or Hell, were compelled to dwell in rocks and hills, lakes and seas, bushes and forests, where they must remain until the day of judgement" (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 5). Based on this perception of their status, the fairies appear as fallen angels who have been subjected to their fairy regions out of punishment. Their Otherworld thus becomes a Purgatory.

Following this logic Katherine Briggs calls the fairies "the spirits of the Druids dead before the time of Christ; who being too good to be cast into Hell were allowed to wander freely about the earth" (142).

Their immortality is similarly exploited in the later folktales. A folktale collected as recently as 1967 strips all fairies of their soul. In doing this they are stripped of Christian salvation. In the tale known as "The Blood of Adam," a fairy asks a priest if "we (the little men) will go

to Heaven?" The priest replies that since they have not a drop of Adam's blood in their veins they "have no right to Heaven" (Glassie 151). These tales that reduce fairies to suspect Christian status defame the fairies. Since these tales are not found in the early Cycles, it appears clear that they have been influenced by modern Christianity.

The disparaging view of the fairies living underground would seem to be an idea concocted by the Christians. Underground to the Celts was a positive place set aside for the veneration of the dead. To the Christian way of thinking the world underground is a negative place akin to Hell.

Beliefs in the fairy faith, the remnants of an earlier faith than Christianity, have influenced the more modern motifs and characters of Irish folktale. The power of the fairies has been continually diminished, as has their size, so that they now have become harmless caricatures, instead of the gods that they once were. Despite the lowering of their status from gods to cute leprechauns, a body of faith pertaining to the fairy faith still exists, around which superstitions and folktales are abundant. It is these practices and the proliferation of folktales about the fairies that prove that the remnants of the earlier Celtic religion is contained in the tales of the fairy world of Ireland.

## Chapter 8

## CONCLUSION

"If by an impossible miracle every trace and memory of Christianity could be swept out of the world, it would not shake or destroy at all the belief of the people of Ireland in the invisible world, in immortality and the life to come. For them the veil between things seen and unseen has hardly thickened since those early days of the world" (Gregory 190). This statement by Lady Augusta Gregory expresses the hardy attachment a portion of the Irish population has maintained to beliefs which hereafter will be referred to as the "fairy faith."

Despite the dominance of Christianity, despite the advances of modern science, despite the influence of a well-respected educational system, the fairy faith still survives as a meaningful body of folk religious practices and beliefs. The vast majority of believers in fairies see them as having many characteristics in common with human beings, but consider them to be spiritual in nature (Smith 400). Stewart Sanderson believes that fairy beliefs spring from the same source as religion. He alleges that its major function is to "afford an explanation of the inexplicable and the unknown" (Smith 398). The process which the Irish have utilized for centuries in understanding the inexplicit is the process of storytelling and its accompanying traditions. As



Smith deduces, "vague, ill-defined ideas can be crystallised through stories in which fairy manifestations can be explored in a manner and form which is commonly intelligible" (402-03).

In the opinion of Evans-Wentz, "the belief in fairies has the same origin as all religions and mythologies. There seems never to have been an uncivilized tribe, a race, or nation of civilized men who have not had some form of belief in an unseen world, peopled by unseen beings" (xxiv).

The origin of this primitive belief in the unseen world is rooted in the origin of all ancient religions created by people who designated supernatural powers and qualities to the natural forces surrounding them. Aware of the invisible spiritual forces which came from the elements of nature, indigenous men constructed a cosmos in which they and the invisible forces could coexist.

In the early days of religious faith among the Megalithic People, it is probable that deities went unnamed, and practices were personal rather than public. In time, a natural cohesion of belief would result in widespread practices such as those practiced by the Druids in Celtic society. These practices led ultimately to public belief and worship. Eventually, major deities emerged from the practices and beliefs that symbolized the rituals of the faith. At the same time minor deities emerged representing certain geographic regions and localities.

With the arrival of Christianity the major deities of the

older faith began to be replaced by Christian saints and the "one God." Church services began to replace the widespread practices of the Druids. During the period of transition, the two religions were coexistent.

"After a lengthened period the public worship of (Celtic) deities ceased (as Christianity began to take hold), but many privately practiced it with tenacity ... Belief in the minor powers and fairies, firmly maintained its hold.... It is not the major, but the minor deities which still retain--to a great extent, but under other names--their hold on the imagination of the peasantry" (Wood-Martin vol. 2, 257).

On the surface it would appear as if Christianity had exacted an inexorable triumph over the Celtic religion of the Druids. However, the minor gods, the household gods, the personal deities of the Celts, held great importance. For generations the Celts had appealed to these local gods whose presence they sensed in the very elements of nature. An intimate personal relationship existed between the Celts and these very accessible gods. These gods were invisible friends and relatives on whom they could always count. In their minds public worship in a Christian church did not conflict with their own private practices in regard to their household gods.

The fact that the Christian religion was displacing the older faith created an awkward effect on the Irish who lived during the period of approximately four centuries of religious transition. Wanting to cling to the old religious roots,

perhaps being forced to conform to new ways, and yet without a completely lucid understanding of the belief system of the new religion, no doubt a great deal of invention took place in the minds of the Irish involved in the transition. Where a tradition was blurry or misunderstood, an Irishman would color that tradition with one he understood more fully.

As the older traditions continued to fragment and the earlier belief systems continued to dissipate and weaken, the lore of the Irish was continually strengthened. In an attempt to keep old traditions alive, the people made their traditions manifest in the arts, especially in their tales. Consequently a whole new cast of characters emerged in modern tales that were a reflection of earlier beliefs in Celtic gods yet at the same time reflected Christian religious beliefs. This new cast of characters includes leprechauns, pookas, and banshees. The older traditions of the Celtic faith were kept alive, even as the practices were diminishing, through a modification of the ancient tales. These modified tales exhibit elements of both Celtic and Christian traditions and beliefs. The hybrid combination of Celtic and Christian elements was in some cases the result of faulty transmission or ideological manipulation, while in other instances it was an attempt on the part of the storytellers to gain an understanding of the two overlapping traditions. These hybrid traditions, that have resulted due to the overlapping of two religions, have given birth to the fairy faith and its accompanying tales of the fairy world.

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