County Louth Archaeological and History Society

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Source: *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Nov., 1915), pp. 365-368

Published by: [County Louth Archaeological and History Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27728055>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 00:37

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Some Irish Superstitions.

SUPERSTITION is generally regarded as the offspring of the religious instinct in man misled by ignorance. Few other human weaknesses have been so unsparingly and so unanimously denounced, and yet it survives: the savage carries his charm, and the modern motorist or the regiment on the battlefield has its mascot. Above or behind probably a million doors in England the horseshoe will be found nailed up, and there is a general desire to avoid association with the unlucky number thirteen. Neither of these were Irish superstitions, but we are borrowing them, for to the anglicised Irish mind even superstition is respectable when it happens to be English. Irish superstitions on the other hand are rapidly dying out, not because they are superstitious, but because they are only Irish, and have no place in English social life.

Such however is not the point of this article. What I want to draw attention to is that some Irish superstitions, instead of being the offspring of ignorance, appear rather to be concealed wisdom.

An instance is the practice observed by the peasant woman in milking her cow. All the customs or beliefs quoted here were, I should state, current in my boyhood's days in Farney, Co. Monaghan, and no doubt in other parts of Ireland too. The peasant girl in Farney was taught to milk the first few *striogs* or squirts out of each teat on to the ground. This was for the fairies invisibly flitting around, who were likely to make reprisals if this act of kindness was neglected. The same custom is also observed in Co. Donegal. I regarded this as very silly until I heard a learned professor explain in a lecture that there were many thousand times more microbes in the first milk drawn from the teats than in all the remaining milk the cow yielded.

This at once lifted the superstition and placed it on the throne of science, and suggested a train of investigation which goes to prove that many Irish superstitions have behind them shrewd observation and matured wisdom.

Now the old sage who prescribed in the beginning that the milk first drawn from the cow's teats at each milking should not be used certainly knew nothing of the modern theory of bacteria. But he probably knew enough to be convinced that this milk was neither clean nor wholesome. Had he preached this doctrine, however, to young rustic milkmaids, abounding in rude health, he should neither be believed nor obeyed. He knew this, and he also knew the terrors the supernatural had, so he wisely warned his milkmaids that to propitiate the fairies this first milk should be given to them, and woe betide her who carelessly forgot, or had the temerity to refuse to carry out this observance. And so the housewife

believed she was feeding the fairies when she was really preserving herself and her family from unwholesome milk containing millions of bacteria.

Another custom of similar purpose was that at a meal any food that fell to the floor should not be lifted or used. The "good people" wanted it. It was an invisible fairy that plucked it from your hand. Let it go, if you are wise. Such was the belief, and it was very generally acted on. In times of want and scarcity if a large piece fell on the floor they compromised a bit by lifting it, breaking off a small portion which was thrown away, and the remainder eaten.

Now the old-world wisdom behind the custom was that peasants did not eat their meals in dining rooms with waxed and polished floors, but in kitchens with earthen floors which were highly septic. Food that fell on such a floor was not fit to be eaten. But a country youth, painfully conscious of a keen appetite, would not be restrained by such a plea. Modern science, with all its logic and soundness, fails to get its precepts observed by the young and thoughtless.

The patriarchs of the olden time were wiser in their generation, and did not believe in giving reasons to those not capable of understanding or appreciating them; but the simplest person knew and feared the fairies, hence the latter were pressed into service, and the tainted food remained uneaten.

Still another similar custom was that the housewife should never go to bed without having some clean water in the house for the use of the "good people." And sometimes the poor tired woman, when she had just retired to rest, suddenly remembered that there was no clean water in the house. She got up, dressed, and going out in the dark to the well brought in a can of clean water. Then she went to bed again quite happy that she had escaped the fairies' ill-will, which she had so nearly incurred.

Well it is very unsafe—not to speak of bad housekeeping—to have no clean water in a house during the night. People living in towns with water taps everywhere at hand can hardly realise what it means to have no fresh water in the house, with the well a furlong or more away. Should anyone suddenly get ill during the night he might be lost while water was being fetched from the well. But the chances were a million to one against such an occurrence. The certainty of the fairies being about left little room for chance, so the fresh water was got in: the superstition established a useful practice.

Some writers have shown, or at any rate argued, that the *púca* (pooka) is a very modern Irish fairy, but modern or not he had to take a hand in the social economy. Nice ripe blackberries are sweet and palatable; but hungry boys and girls will eat blackberries that are neither sweet nor palatable. However, after *Oidhche Shamhna* or Hallow Eve no blackberries are eaten. And why? Because on that night the *púca* goes abroad and crawls over the blackberries, covering them with an invisible slime, and where is the boy or girl who would eat a berry soiled with the *púca*'s slime. The fact seems to be that blackberries after that date are stale and unwholesome. But the *púca*'s slime is the great deterrent.

Young people are fond of doing everything that is dangerous and wrong. One of those customs beloved of youth is walking backwards. It is not very wrong, but it is highly dangerous, as a person walking backwards, not seeing where he is going, may fall into a dyke or pit or some other harmful place. Tell a child never to walk backwards and he is sure to practise it all the more when he believes you don't see him. The old Irish people did not tell their juveniles not to walk backward because it was dangerous, but because it had the effect, or the same effect as cursing one's father and mother. I remember well when I wondered how it could possibly have that effect, but youth has the gift of believing without seeing and so we refrained from walking backwards, simply because we did not wish to curse our parents.

After the fairies the next most potent agents for keeping the young, and headstrong, and erring within bounds were the Christian saints, and of these Columcille was most dreaded. Even the most reckless quailed before the possibility of earning Columcille's curse. It shows in what veneration he must have been held, when we find his name used so freely for this purpose. The wise people of old, looking around for the most potent preventive, could find none greater than Columcille's curse, and this curse was greatest dreaded because Columcille was most highly venerated.

I shall not attempt to recount here all the things that Columcille is accredited with having cursed. Naturally most of these are things evil in themselves, but some are things not intrinsically bad. For instance, he is said to have cursed anyone who should completely bake one side of a cake before the other side got a turn. The cakes common at this time were oat cakes, which were baked upright before the fire. On one occasion, is it said, Columcille, weary and hungry, came into a house where a bannock of bread was being baked before the fire. Columcille asked for some of the bread. The woman replied she could not give it, as only one side was baked. Thereupon the saint left his curse with anyone who should ever again bake a cake in this manner. So the God-fearing housewife thenceforth regularly turned the bannock giving each side alternately to the fire. But the truth is that this is the only scientific way to do it. If one side is kept all the time to the fire until it is fully baked it contracts so much that the bannock becomes concave, like a deep saucer, and the other side can never be fully or uniformly baked: indeed the bannock is apt to break into pieces. Whereas if the two sides are turned alternately they contract equally, the bannock retains its flat shape, and can be perfectly and uniformly baked. All this argument, however, would be wasted on a rough or careless woman or servant, but Columcille's curse made the worst of them attentive.

In exactly the same way he is said to have cursed anyone who should let a well be polluted, and thus the saint's supposed malediction has guarded the purity of thousands of wells, for the health of the people, for fifteen hundred years after he had laid down his weary pen, and said "Let Baithen write the rest."

Another superstitious belief, that belongs very probably to the same category, is that a person who hears the cuckoo for the first time in any season, before he has broken his night's fast, is sure to die during the course of that year, or before the cuckoo comes again. To this day I know people who entertain such a fear. To young people, or lazy people, who should be inclined to lie abed of mornings in that bright and busy time of year, here was a powerful incentive to get up early, and have breakfast over before the first notes of the "melodious cuckoo" were heard. And the habit, once formed, might well last throughout the whole summer, which, with the old Irish, lasted up till Samhain or 1st of November.

Taken in conjunction with so many other similar observances it is hard to think the belief ever had anything behind it other than the cunning of the elders of the people in taking advantage of the credulity and natural faith of simple folk, in order to train them in a good habit, which nature inclined them against.

This by no means exhausts the list, for a careful investigator and observer in any district will find other similar beliefs, in all of which the end may be said to justify the means, or at any rate was regarded as a justification by those who originated them.

I will now mention another superstition of a wholly different kind and of quite a different interest. About a year ago I happened to be near Tuam in the County Galway, and I saw a young baby a couple of months old shown to a very old woman. The *cailleach* took the child in her arms, and the first thing she did was to spit on it. I at once saw in this strange proceeding some superstitious observance, and I asked

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her to explain why she did it. She was rather taken aback at having been observed in the act, as she tried to do it covertly, but the only explanation I could extract from her was that it was lucky and the right thing to do on first seeing any young baby. I inquired further and found that spitting on babies was also known as a custom in parts of Cork and Kerry, and that there it was accompanied by some formula of Irish words which I have not so far succeeded in obtaining.

Somewhat later in a book on Uganda I read that it is a custom with some of the tribes or races of that country when friends are meeting or parting to spit on one another.¹ And the friendlier they are the more generous is the ceremony. "Spitting," explains the author, "has a very different signification with the Masai from that which prevails with us. With them it expresses the greatest good will and the best of wishes. It takes the place of the compliments of the season, and you had better spit upon a damsel than kiss her." Now it appears to be more than a probability that the old Galway woman's spitting on the baby is the last remnant of the same custom still in full force in Uganda, which may have also existed among our own ancestors at one time, and which, having gone down before advancing civilization, has still been retained for babies, who of course cannot protest, by that most conservative type of human beings—old women.

But beyond the babies and old women everyone in Farney a generation ago used to spit on their right hands before shaking hands with one they wished to welcome. Handshaking was not as commonplace then as now: it was reserved for great occasions, such as welcoming strangers, or friends long absent, and the usual formula was first to spit on your hand just as you were about to offer it to the new-comer, and say "Musha leave it there, but its yourself that's welcome," or "but you're a hundred thousand welcomes." This custom is also observed in parts of Connacht. There are other examples also of spitting for luck or goodwill. A man in the fair on selling an animal usually gives back a coin for luck, called a "luck-penny," and custom prescribes that he must spit on this coin. Some buyers would not accept it otherwise. It is common to hear at a fair "What luck-penny will you give me?"

"Oh, I'll spit on the usual shilling for you."

Among card-players also it is quite common for players to spit on the "hand" of cards they get, as also on the money they stake on the game particularly, if it happens to be their last coin. It is but right to state that the spitting in all these cases is a mere convention, and is done with the expenditure of the smallest possible amount of saliva.

Most readers will also recall the instances in the New Testament where Our Lord used spittle in curing the man born blind, and the deaf mute. In doing this we may be sure He merely adopted some of the usages of the country and the time.

Two years ago in this JOURNAL I showed that we had here in Ireland remnants of customs still practised by the aborigines of Australia; and that certain words in Irish and in German pointed to once common customs in the Celtic and Teuton races.

All this goes to suggest the deep interest that lies hidden in these unnoticed and unregarded, and now regularly despised beliefs, customs and observances, which carry us back to the infancy of the human race, when people now inhabiting different continents, and blackened or browned or whitened by different climes, once believed the same things, and practised common rites and ceremonies.

HENRY MORRIS.

1. See *Uganda for a Holiday*, by Sir Frederick Treves, London, 1910, p. 90; also *Through Masai Land*, by Joseph Thompson, London, 1885, p. 290.