

The Baby and the Bathwater: Cultural Loss in Nineteenth-Century Ireland

ANGELA BOURKE

This essay examines the process by which the nineteenth-century ideology of rationality, with its linear and colonial thought-patterns, gained ascendancy over a vernacular cognitive system in Ireland, especially after the Famine. It draws on a variety of lives and images from the nineteenth century to illustrate the rich resources of imagination, memory, creativity and communication that were jettisoned when the Irish language and its oral traditions were denigrated and discarded throughout much of the country. It is an attempt to imagine the baby that was thrown out with the bathwater when the old ways were purged. In 1845, when the South American food plant *Solanum tuberosum*, better known by a version of its Taino name, *batata*, succumbed all over Ireland to *Phytophthora infestans*, the potato blight fungus, the result was famine and cultural cataclysm. The huge population of poor, illiterate, mostly Irish-speaking agricultural labourers which had depended for food on the potato was devastated by starvation, disease and emigration, and a rising, English-speaking, middle class quickly moved to occupy the space vacated. The growing social importance of a Maynooth-trained priesthood, drawn mostly from the families of 'strong' tenant farmers, was only one aspect of the cultural change that followed.¹ Life changed for ordinary working people too. The miserable makeshift dwellings in which so many of the destitute poor had lived were swept aside, to be replaced from the 1880s on by the sturdy labourers' cottages provided for by the Labourers (Ireland) Act of 1883. Increased attendance at National Schools meant that literacy levels rose from 47% in 1841 to around 90% in 1911. As vernacular architecture gave way to standardised designs in housing, so oral tradition gave way to print.

The Latin naming of the potato and other plants both native and introduced, and their organisation into families, genera and species as laid down a century earlier by the Swedish botanist Carl von Linné, better known as Linnaeus, typified the literate, scientific, orderly way of thinking fostered by formal education and widely disseminated after the Famine. It found architectural expression in a range of institutional buildings, whose long corridors and

1 See Kevin Whelan, 'Pre- and Post-Famine Landscape Change' in Cathal Póirtéir (ed.) *The Great Irish Famine* (Cork and Dublin, 1995), pp. 19-33; James O'Shea, *Priests, Politics and Society in Tipperary (1850-1891)* (Dublin, 1983).

uniform rows of windows still recall the administrative structures they were built to house. Its mastery of the natural world was illustrated and celebrated in the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin, Dublin, planned in 1789, and greatly expanded in the nineteenth century.

Today the Botanic Gardens include an area where native plants are given their native Irish names, recalling a wealth of lore which was current before the Famine. When that Famine broke out, however, Glasnevin's whole emphasis was on the orderly, Latinate, rationality of the scientific system, the very basis of its existence. Political ideas too were encoded in its layout. Enormous glasshouses built between 1843 and 1876 allowed the Dublin Gardens, like others at Kew and in Belfast, to celebrate the triumphs of colonialism along with those of science, for they sheltered the many species brought back from tropical climates by explorers, and displayed them, duly named and labelled, for the public's edification.

Richard Turner (1798-1881), was the Dublin ironmaster who created the glasshouse ranges of Belfast, Kew and Dublin. He began as a maker of Dublin fanlights, whose basic form recurs in even his most audacious creations.² When his curvilinear range at the National Botanic Gardens in Dublin was meticulously restored and reopened to the public in 1995, it was somewhat surprising to see Frank McDonald describe it in the *Irish Times* as 'the most important nineteenth-century building in Ireland'. This was, after all, a home for plants and not for people; but consider what else that century had built! Compared with the convents, orphanages, workhouses, prisons and Catholic chapels that grew up so assertively in the Irish landscape during the nineteenth century, the grand sweep of the curvilinear range has a billowing beauty that is at once exuberant and delicate. Its restoration was a celebration of an Irish craftsman artist's creativity, and of his imaginative and daring solutions to the problems of constructing a transparent building in a rainy climate.³ Turner's ability to translate the tested techniques of fanlight construction into a third dimension; bending what had been given; making glass, of all materials, appear flexible, stands in sharp contrast to the rigid authoritarianism conveyed by much of his century's architectural legacy in Ireland.⁴

In the area of popular culture in nineteenth-century Ireland, that authoritarianism was expressed in a furious opposition on the part of the institutions of church and state to the uncentralised and unstandardised forms of knowledge and creative endeavour which still endured strongly in rural areas. Poets, storytellers and traditional healers were well known in their own areas, acknowledged as creators, custodians and interpreters of intangible wealth.

2 Jeremy Williams, *A Companion Guide to Architecture in Ireland* (Dublin, 1994), p. 160.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Maurice Craig, *The Architecture of Ireland: From the Earliest Times to 1880* (London, 1989 [1982]), p. 304.

However they were given short shrift in schools, law-courts, chapels and hospitals. These artists and intellectuals of the vernacular tradition have left no architectural memorial, yet they did create lofty and dazzling three-dimensional constructions, as impressive in their way as Turner's great glasshouses, in which to house information and ideas, new as well as old, and they were adept at guiding their listeners through them.⁵

In the absence of writing, as Walter Ong has reminded us, there is nowhere outside the mind to store information.⁶ Oral cultures have therefore developed elaborate verbal art-forms through which to arrange knowledge and ideas in patterns, partly in order to conserve and transmit them with maximum efficiency; partly for the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of such patterning. Much of what an oral culture has to teach is packaged and conveyed in stories.

By contrast with the Linnaean botany celebrated in Glasnevin, before and after the Famine an Irish ethnobotany of native plants, founded on a combination of practical knowledge and association of ideas, was characteristic of the vernacular tradition and had its most elaborate expression in the Irish language. Although some of its elements were to be found in herbals and other texts, this unsystematised yet detailed knowledge had been transmitted for centuries almost entirely through traditional practices and oral narratives. Some of its stories had been imported from Europe in medieval times and had close connections with medical and religious traditions; others invoked the indigenous 'fairies' or 'good people'⁷

Lus mór is one of several Irish names of the purple foxglove that grows often over a metre high in sheltered places. Printed descriptions of *Digitalis purpurea*, as the Linnaean system calls it, include warnings that all parts of the plant contain glycosides, at once a powerful cardiac medicine and a dangerous poison. In the absence of a formal system of education and accreditation, or of botanic gardens in which to display plants and their properties, vernacular oral tradition stored knowledge about dangerous and useful plants like this one in narrative and ritual practice.⁸ The foxglove is widely reputed to have fairy connections, a belief reflected in names like *méaracán sí*, or 'fairy thimble', and made explicit in the following instruction, recorded in Co. Leitrim in 1895 by Leland L. Duncan:

5 See Angela Bourke, 'The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend' in *Éire-Ireland*, xxxi, no. 1-2 (1996), pp. 7-25.

6 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), p. 39.

7 Nicholas Williams, *Díolaim Luibheanna* (Dublin, 1993); see also Geoffrey Grigson, *The Englishman's Flora* (St Alban's, 1975).

8 Williams, *Díolaim Luibheanna*, pp. 103-8 and *passim*, devotes more space to traditions about *Digitalis purpurea* than to almost any other plant. Lady Gregory collected information about *lus mór*, but glossed it (incorrectly) as mullein. See Lucy McDiarmid and Maureen Waters (eds), *Lady Gregory: Selected Writings* (London, 1995), p. 80.

If you have a cross or peevish child, or one that from being in good health becomes sickly, and you have reason to believe it is a fairy child, the following plan may be tried in order to ascertain whether this is the case. Take lusmore (foxglove) and squeeze the juice out. Give the child three drops on the tongue, and three in each ear. Then place it [the child] at the door of the house on a shovel (on which it should be held by some one), and swing it out of the door on the shovel three times, saying 'If you're a fairy away with you!' If it is a fairy child, it will die; but if not, it will surely begin to mend.⁹

A 'fairy child' meant a changeling substituted for a healthy, attractive human child who had been abducted by fairies. This was a common theme in folk legend; it could be a way of referring to a congenital disability or a failure to thrive,¹⁰ but the legends and the sort of ritual described by Duncan were also often used to discipline or punish children.

Extracts of foxglove were widely used in rural Ireland for medicinal purposes, from what rational medicine considers 'real' conditions, such as heart problems, to 'imaginary' ones like the expulsion of suspected fairy changelings. Fairy belief legend, with its constant theme of ambiguity and danger, could encode both the dangers and the benefits of important plants, drawing attention to them and making them recognisable. Accidents could of course still happen, as they can in a modern pharmacy, and ethnographer Kevin Danaher once witnessed two *banbhs* and twenty-three ducks lying dead in a farmyard, after foxgloves had accidentally been included in their feed.¹¹ This incident happened in the twentieth century however, when the authority of fairy belief legend had been much undermined.

Practitioners of vernacular botanical and medical knowledge in the nineteenth century walked a narrow path between the cautious respect and gratitude of their neighbours and the vehement opposition of the Catholic clergy. Without the collecting and documenting of oral traditions done by members of the Anglo-Irish gentry, the record today would be much poorer. Lady Gregory collected and published information about herbs and herbal cures around Coole Park, Co. Galway, and gathered many stories about Bidy Early of Feakle, Co. Clare, who used to cure by means of a mysterious bottle.¹²

9 Leland L. Duncan, 'Fairy Beliefs and Other Folklore Notes from County Leitrim' in *Folk-Lore*, vii (1896), p. 163.

10 See Joyce Underwood Munro, 'The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children' in Peter Narváez (ed.), *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays* (New York and London, 1991), pp. 251-83.

11 Williams, *Díolaim Luibheanna*, p. 106.

12 McDiarmid and Waters, *Lady Gregory*, pp. 57-74 ('Bidy Early'); pp. 77-88 ('from "Herbs, Charms and Wise Women"').

Biddy Early was an exact contemporary of Richard Turner, the Dublin ironmaster, although it is unlikely that she ever heard of him, or he of her. She was charged with witchcraft in Ennis in 1865, and many stories are told about her confrontations with priests, usually depicted as officious and self-serving until she outwitted them. She was known to have enigmatic powers and was said to have been seen before dawn riding a white horse – a sign of complicity with the fairies.¹³ She was probably the most famous of the ‘fairy doctors’, described by Sir William Wilde and others, to whom ordinary people resorted when ill or in trouble. According to tradition, she went on curing and prophesying until her death in 1874.

As studies of her continuing fame make clear, Biddy Early was not simply a charlatan or quack, nor were ‘herb-doctors’ simply amateur botanists. Certainly Biddy Early possessed knowledge of illnesses, as herb-doctors did of plants, but their moral authority had political, social and imaginative dimensions too. Crucially, the paradigms of their knowledge were radically different from those of the dominant culture.¹⁴

In colonial nineteenth-century Ireland, folklore was fashionable, but only in so far as it could be accommodated within the dominant paradigm. Outside the pages of literary folklore, the storyteller’s art became invisible or even, as we shall see in the tragic case of the burning of Bridget Cleary in 1895, came to be regarded almost as a disease: a symptom of lamentable backwardness. Later, in the twentieth century, a newly independent Ireland elevated oral culture to high status when, like other emerging nations in northern Europe, it embarked on the wide-ranging and comprehensive project which still continues, of collecting and cataloguing folklore of all kinds. Rather than counting storytellers among society’s artists however, it made them models of conservatism, enlisting them as custodians and symbols of a docile and unchanging peasant culture, in the service of what one scholar has called a ‘folk ideology’ in Irish politics.¹⁵

As in the buildings of Richard Turner, which have been celebrated as anticipating present trends in post-modern minimalism, fantasy and technology are linked in oral storytelling.¹⁶ Walter Ong has remarked that narrative cycles are among the roomiest repositories which oral cultures use to store the things

13 See Meda Ryan, *Biddy Early, the Wise Woman of Clare* (Cork, 1978), p. 81; Edmund Lenihan, *In Search of Biddy Early* (Cork, 1987), pp. 79–80.

14 Ryan, *Biddy Early*; Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross, 1970); Lenihan, *In Search*.

15 Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, ‘The Primacy of Form: A “Folk Ideology” in de Valera’s Politics’ in J.P. O’Carroll and John A. Murphy (eds), *De Valera and His Times* (Cork, 1986), pp. 47–61.

16 Williams, *Dólaim Luibheanna*, p. 106

they know and wish to remember, including vast amounts of technical information. In Ireland, as in other cultures, storytellers are the interpreters who make the stored materials palatable to the imagination and memory of listeners through imagination and fantasy.¹⁷ As the nineteenth century progressed, however, and literacy levels rose, fantasy was sternly excluded from acceptable discourse. Fairy belief legend, an elaborate system of fictions through which a significant mode of vernacular thinking is articulated, was clearly in opposition to the modes of literacy, and became increasingly associated with poverty and marginality. Although a growing antiquarian interest in its narratives as oral literature led to their publication in numerous collections, its terms of reference were consistently denigrated and repudiated by educated Catholics as they turned towards English literature. Indeed Joep Leerssen has suggested that a literate interest in fairies was almost confined to conservative Protestants.¹⁸ At best, mention of fairies came to be regarded by middle-class nationalists as frivolous, childish or unsophisticated; at worst, it could be sinister, a shibboleth which revealed adherence to discredited ways of thinking.

'When electric light came in,' many Irish country people have said in this century, 'the fairies went away.' The lives of three people born in the second half of the nineteenth century, straddling class, gender and language barriers, illustrate the shift that was completed with rural electrification in the 1940s: away from the vernacular modes of thought that went with the Irish language, and with travelling barefoot through a waterlogged landscape; towards English, and towards literacy, shoes, paved roads and electric lighting. The gains of course were considerable, but so were the losses.

Mary O'Brien, known as 'Sissy', daughter of a strong farmer from Lough Gur in Co. Limerick, was born in 1858. Her memories of girlhood on the 200-acre farm which her father rented from Count de Salis are told in print by Mary Carbery as *The Farm by Lough Gur*. Although this is a second-hand, idealised account, it remains a valuable document of the devoutly Catholic and proudly nationalist rural middle class in post-Famine Ireland. It points to the sharp contrast in education between this class and the labourers and small farmers who shared their religion:

There were a few small farmers whose land bounded ours who came every Sunday after Mass to hear what was going on in the world from *Freeman's Journal* which my father took in as well as the weekly Limerick paper. Few if any of them could read or write.¹⁹

17 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 140. See also Angela Bourke, 'Economic Necessity and Escapist Fantasy in Éamon a Búrc's Sea-Stories' (forthcoming).

18 Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination* (Cork, 1996), p. 164.

19 Mary Carbery, *The Farm by Lough Gur* (Cork, 1937), p. 27.

The O'Briens spoke English, although many of the poorer people around them – small farmers, labouring people, beggars – still spoke Irish. Unlike most of their poorer neighbours too, they were literate; their whole cultural life centred on the church and on reading. With their mother, Sissy and her sisters read aloud almost every evening: they calculated the total at at least five hundred hours a year, the first hour of each evening devoted to essays, poetry and biography; the second hour to fiction. While Irish-speaking neighbours, and English-speakers too, listened to storytellers tell of the fairies of nearby *Cnoc Áine*, or of the ghostly *Gearóid Iarla*, doomed to gallop around Lough Gur every seven years until the silver shoes on his white horse were worn out, the O'Briens read books written in England. 'Mother enjoyed Maria Edgeworth more than we did', Sissy's account tells us, 'also Jane Austen. We much preferred George Eliot.'²⁰

By the age of seventeen, Sissy O'Brien had spent three years at the convent boarding school of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in nearby Bruff, where she learned French, fine needlework and *bonne tenue*, as the FCJ sisters called deportment and etiquette.²¹ Returning to the farm, she was shocked at what she now saw as the superstition of the young women employed by her family as house- and dairy-maids:

The maids did not get into the other world in the way we did who knew more about it. Although they were thankful for holy days and went to Mass, they were really more interested in an old Irish world where fairies, witches and banshees took the place of our angels and saints.²²

After witnessing the maids' May-eve rituals, when they strewed primroses on the doorstep and took other precautions said to keep the fairies away, Sissy O'Brien lost patience:

'Why do you let the maids be so silly?' I asked Mother when they were out of hearing. 'The nuns say we must never miss a chance of curing people of pagan superstition!' 'You can try', Mother said rather coldly; she didn't like me to quote the nuns at her in my 'superior manner'.²³

This conversation took place about 1875: it illustrates the erosion over one generation of middle-class sympathy for the vernacular tradition, and the part played in that erosion by convent schooling.

20 Ibid., p. 172.

21 Ibid., p. 102.

22 Ibid., p. 158.

23 Ibid., pp. 157-62.

Bridget Cleary, daughter of a labourer in Co. Tipperary, may also have attended a convent school, for the Sisters of Mercy opened a primary school in Drangan, a few miles from her home, about the year of her birth, 1869. She was certainly literate, and was perhaps also taught to sew by nuns, for in her teens she went to Clonmel to serve an apprenticeship as a dressmaker. At the age of twenty-six she was back in her home townland of Ballyvadlea, married to Michael Cleary, a cooper, and living in one of the labourers' cottages recently built by the Cashel Poor Law Guardians.²⁴

As skilled artisans, rather than agricultural labourers, the Clearys were not strictly entitled to rent such a cottage, and in fact Bridget's father, Patrick Boland, was the registered tenant. Their occupancy seems to have been the cause of some resentment locally; rumours circulated that the cottage was on the site of a fairy-fort, one of the circular mediaeval earthworks through which fairy narratives are mapped onto the Irish landscape; strange noises had been heard around it before the Clearys moved in.²⁵ Bridget Cleary was a smartly-dressed and good-looking young woman. As well as working as a dressmaker, she kept hens and sold both eggs and fowl. She appeared successful in all areas of her life, except that she and her husband had no children.

Despite her modern and relatively prosperous way of life, or perhaps because of it, Bridget Cleary was said by some of her neighbours to have an unhealthy acquaintance with another fairy-fort, at Kilenagranagh, about a mile from where she lived, although this may also have been a way of expressing the stigma of her childlessness. People remembered that her mother had known about the properties of herbs, and when she became ill with bronchitis in March 1895, an elderly relative insisted that the fairies were responsible and had spirited her away. Doctor's medicine would not cure her, he said: a herb-doctor must be consulted.

Bridget Cleary's name came to national and international attention a week or so later, when her violent death opened the whole question of Irish people's belief in fairies to general, if muted, discussion. She had been burned to death in her own home by the violent action of her husband, but when the case came to trial, this was presented as the culmination of a process designed to bring her back from the fairies by expelling a changeling left in her place. Instead of being hanged for murder, Michael Cleary was sentenced to twenty years for manslaughter.

The story broke slowly: first, the sick woman was said to have disappeared, and searches were instituted. Then her charred body was discovered in a makeshift grave, and meanwhile rumour took on the contours of oral narrative, producing an elaborate and fantastic story which shocked and fascinated

24 Angela Bourke, 'Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland' in *Feminist Studies*, xxi, no. 3 (Fall 1995), pp. 553-86.

25 Bourke, 'Virtual Reality', and *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (London, forthcoming).

newspaper readers at home and abroad. One of the first papers to cover the story was the *Clonmel Nationalist*, whose account on Wednesday 20 March 1895 was headed 'Mysterious Disappearance of a Young Woman: The Land of the Banshee and the Fairy':

What would read as a kin to the fairy romances of ancient times in Erin, is now the topic of all lips in the neighbourhood of Drangan and Cloneen. It appears that a young woman named Cleary, wife of a cooper, living with her father and husband in a labourer's cottage in the townland of Ballyvadlea, took ill a few days ago, was attended by priest and doctor, and believed to have been suffering from some form of nervous malady, she suddenly disappeared on last Friday night, and has not since been heard of. Her friends who were present assert that she had been taken away on a white horse before their eyes, and that she told them when leaving, that on Sunday night they would meet her at a fort on Kyleneagranagh hill, where they could, if they had the courage, rescue her. Accordingly, they assembled at the appointed time and place to fight the fairies, but, needless to say, no white horse appeared. It has transpired that her friends discarded the doctor's medicine, and treated her to some fairy quackery. However the woman is missing, and the rational belief is that in the law courts the mystery shall be elucidated. I need not say that the authorities have their own notions of the matter, but I shall reserve further comments until events more clearly develop themselves.

The white horse referred to here recalls the one Bidly Early had been seen to ride one morning in Co. Clare, and the white horse on which *Gearóid Iarla* rides around Lough Gur: a vivid image, and a memorable one on which to hang a story.

Fairy abduction and fairy changelings are a commonplace of the legends told in Irish and English which are still to be heard in many parts of Ireland. They are told more often as tall tales than as factual accounts, but behind any of them the idea may linger that something true is being expressed. They were part of the belief-system of the maids on the O'Briens' farm beside Lough Gur, and underpinned the credibility of practitioners like Bidly Early. They could be used in a variety of ways: as cautions to children or adults against departures from society's norms, as euphemisms for anything from tuberculosis to drunkenness to marital infidelity, or simply as entertainment. They provided narrative maps of the physical and social landscape, marking the boundaries of the known and comprehensible world. They served as charters for action in the routines of daily life, explaining why butter was salted; why lone thorn trees were left undisturbed; why a piece of red flannel was sewn to babies' clothing; why certain places and people were best avoided. They were invoked

to account for unusually good or bad luck – and sometimes to account for accidents and acts of violence. We remember that a ‘fairy child’ could either be one who was ill or disabled, or one who was being punished.

The story told at the time of Bridget Cleary’s death, with its detail that the stolen woman could be pulled off her white horse and rescued, bears a striking resemblance to the narrative of the Scottish ballad ‘Tam Lin’. Several versions have been collected in Ireland, including one transcribed in Belfast in 1904 from the singing of Ann Carter, an elderly Irish-speaker, originally from Tuam, Co. Galway. Ann Carter called the song ‘Lord Robinson’s Only Child’, and said she had heard it from an old woman in Connemara:

My name is young Lord Robinson, did you ever hear tell of me?
I was stolen by the Queen of Fairies when I was a young babie.
To-morrow will be the first of May, we’ll all go out to ride;
If you come down to Crickmagh, there we will all pass by.

Let the black steed pass you by, secondly the brown;
When a milk-white steed appears, pull the rider down.
Then hold me fast and fear me not,
I’m Lord Robinson’s only child.²⁶

Like most stories, the one told about Bridget Cleary drew on narratives already known, and believed, or partly believed, by at least some of the people who heard them. Under other circumstances it might have served as euphemism for domestic unhappiness or violence, or as a coded discussion of the issues and personalities involved; but because she died, and because state agencies and means of communication in nineteenth-century Ireland were highly efficient, this vernacular narrative was eventually told far beyond the community where it had been composed and where it could make sense.

Had Bridget Cleary not died of her burns, there might still have been a fairy narrative told about her: she herself might even have constructed it as a way of expressing something about her life. With time however, the story would have become more fictional and less factual as it was assimilated into a pre-existing body of legend. Had the Clearys continued to live in the same area of Co. Tipperary it might have offered an explanation as to why they were more prosperous than their neighbours. Women abducted by the fairies were often said to be infertile on their return, so it would also have drawn attention to the fact that Bridget Cleary had borne no children. Had her body not been discovered it could have provided a reason why her husband was avoided, or an induce-

26 Edith Wheeler, ‘Irish Versions of Some Old Ballads’ in *Journal of the Irish Folk Song Society*, i, no. 2-3 (1904), pp. 47-8 (reprinted 1967). See also Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols (New York, 1965 [1882-1898]), vol. i, pp. 335-58 (No. 39).

ment to him to leave the area. This story would eventually have joined other narratives in marking certain places as significant, and at that point the names of the protagonists might have dropped out. Later it might have been told in other communities and assigned to other families, other 'fairy forts'.

Many of the functions of fairy narrative became redundant when Michael Cleary and several of his neighbours were sentenced to spend terms from six months to twenty years in the prisons of Clonmel, Mountjoy and Maryborough (now Portlaoise). Others became irrelevant when newspapers, rather than oral storytellers, were entrusted with the telling of what had happened. Life was changing, becoming modern, but the peculiar circumstances of this case meant that every aspect of vernacular culture came under grave suspicion. Fairy legend in itself is neutral; a currency, like money, it could be invoked to justify either compassion or cruelty. Even the fairies it depicts are not malevolent, but simply amoral, unreliable, not part of 'our' society. When Bridget Cleary died however, instead of being the medium through which ambivalence or conflict could be discreetly expressed within oral society, fairy legend was dragged into the public view and ranged with the oral, primitive and 'dark' against the literate and enlightened. Even the wild flowers of the Irish countryside were marshalled into the master narrative of print, and stood accused. Much was made of the remedy prescribed for Bridget Cleary by Denis Geaney, a herb doctor who lived on the slopes of Slievenamon, a few miles from the Clearys. 'Was it lusmore?' witnesses were asked. The answers were inconclusive, but antiquarians and folklorists knew at least that *lus mór* (literally, 'big plant') was much spoken of in folklore of the fairies. Poison was suspected, but a coroner's inquest showed no harm caused by the herbs which were given to Bridget Cleary as she lay ill. Nevertheless, the trial with its attendant publicity ensured that middle-class Irish Catholics would distance themselves even more than before from the ways of oral culture.

The great cultural shifts which followed the Famine in Ireland were felt less in *Gaeltacht* areas than elsewhere. Here, in densely-populated areas of mostly poor land, chiefly along the Atlantic coast and on islands, Irish remained as the language of daily life. The influence of priests and police was less than in other parts of the country; there were no large farms; towns were small, and far apart, and the restless young looked to America rather than to clerical jobs in Ireland for prospects of advancement. Singing and storytelling remained as major outlets for cultural expression, as well as important vehicles of education, so that when the collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission began work in 1927, they found a rich harvest.

Éamon Liam a Búrc was born in Carna, Co. Galway, in 1866. At fourteen he emigrated to Minnesota with his family, but at seventeen, jumping on and off trains, he lost a leg. His parents brought him back to Connemara, where he lived until his death in 1942.

Éamon Liam became a tailor: a sedentary occupation for which lame boys were often trained (as blind boys were taught music). Like the famous lame 'Tailor Buckley', Tadhg Ó Buachalla, of Gougane Barra, Co. Cork, he also became a storyteller. He could not read or write, but his physical disability did not stop him becoming an expert sailor and fisherman. Like Richard Turner curving fanlights and enlarging them to make conservatories, he moved proficiently in a three-dimensional world, whether of fabric in his tailoring, of wind and water in sailing, or of the imagination. His memory was formidable, but was only one of the pillars which supported his art. He excelled at the long, complex, episodic hero-tales in which various 'King of Ireland's Sons' kill giants and rescue princesses, but also told fairy legends in thoughtful versions that are much longer than usual, full of social and psychological insight as well as technical and topographical detail.

One of his stories, called 'Seoirse Lap and the Fairy Queen' addresses questions of bereavement and grief, natural and premature death, and the conflict a young man may feel between filial obligation and his own sense of adventure.²⁷ It is full of practical details about the making and selling of nets, yet its plot concerns Seoirse Lap's dealings with a community of fairies who live in the hill beside his house. Led by their queen, they are in the habit of abducting humans who take their fancy, but he manages to outwit them by weaving a net across their exit, sturdily insisting on his right to carry on his trade. The story is told with verve and wit, and recounts how Seoirse travelled through the air with the fairies to adventures far from home, consuming copious amounts of alcohol in the process. The storyteller aims sly digs at city people, their credulity, dependence on money, and standards of hygiene.

Like other tellers of fairy legend, but more than most, Éamon a Búrc plays on the varying degrees of credulity to be found among a complex audience. Details which his audience knows to be truthful are woven together with the frankly preposterous. By telling a story so seductive that no listener would wish to say aloud 'That is a lie!', he subverts his own narrative's claim to authority at the same time as he asserts it, holding out the possibility of access to a club of the adult initiated: like Richard Turner's curved, soaring glasshouses, his elaborate fairy narratives are, after all, designed to be seen through.²⁸

In the three-dimensional structures of fairy belief legend, highly-charged and memorable images like that of Bidy Early, *Gearóid Iarla*, or Bridget Cleary emerging from a fairy dwelling on a white horse are the retrieval codes for a whole complex of stored information about land and landscape, community relations, gender roles, medicine, and work in all its aspects: tools, materials and techniques. The storyteller may spend less time at physical work than many of

27 See 'Seoirse Lap agus Baníon na Bruíne' in Peadar Ó Ceannabháin (ed.), *Éamon a Búrc: Scéalta* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 223-38.

28 Bourke, 'Virtual Reality'.

his or her listeners, and may be branded by the unsympathetic as a dealer in mumbo-jumbo, but as Walter Benjamin remarked, 'an orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers.'²⁹

That the imaginary structures built in traditional storytelling could accommodate the new as well as the old, and the contemplation of emotional as well as practical problems, we see from the stories Éamon a Búrc told for folklore collector Liam Mac Coisdeala between 1928 and 1942, but a story told as recently as 1976 shows that this art is anything but dead. Its disturbing and unforgettable central image also holds out the intriguing possibility that the baby thrown out with the nineteenth-century bathwater may still be swimming somewhere not far away.

On 16 May 1976, John Henry, of Kilgalligan, Co. Mayo, told some stories in Irish for his friend, folklorist Séamas Ó Catháin. One of them, which lasted only a couple of minutes in the telling, is a version of a well-known legend which belongs to a whole complex of stories about fairy dwellings under the sea.³⁰ Skilled storytellers in coastal areas, like John Henry and Éamon a Búrc, have always used such narratives to convey to their listeners some idea of the dangers, beauties and mysteries of the sea, and of the skill and wisdom needed by those who venture out in boats.³¹

In this legend, John Henry tells of three men from Portacloy who went fishing for cod in a small boat off Porturlin. He describes the route they took, and the bait and tackle they used – then tells how one of them hooked a live baby up from the sea. His story quickly moves into the realm of the fantastic, as a woman's head appears above the water, scolding the men and demanding the child's return. They hastily throw the baby back, and make for home, barely escaping from a vicious storm that suddenly blows up.

The details John Henry gives of fishing techniques and navigation at sea give his story verisimilitude: they keep the audience listening. In themselves however, they are important cultural wealth, here kept safe by being stored alongside the intensely memorable image of the baby on the fishing line. Like the rhetoricians of the middle ages, or indeed the modern advertising expert, who marks out memory by means of deliberately grotesque or otherwise startling pictures, the finest storytellers know how to select this sort of image.³²

The baby in John Henry's story underlines the dangers of the sea, and reminds listeners of the separate areas of responsibility and competence allotted to women and to men in traditional society. It expresses some of the unease

29 Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (London, 1992 [1973]), p. 86.

30 'Páiste aníos ó Thóin na Farraige / A Child from the Bottom of the Sea' in Séamas Ó Catháin (ed.), *Scéalta Chois Cladaigh / Stories of Sea and Shore* (Dublin, 1983), pp. 54-6.

31 Bourke, 'Economic Necessity'.

32 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1966) pp. 93-113. See also Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 'The Noetic Role of Heroic 'Heavy' Figures and of the Bizarre', pp. 69-71.

and anxiety caused when these are found to overlap, and also notes, in a wholly non-confrontational, metaphorical way, that crisis pregnancies occur, and that unwanted or unexpected babies do sometimes turn up to change people's lives. That some of these very real babies have been consigned in the past to oblivion in the sea is something we know very well in Ireland at the end of the twentieth century. Following the Kerry Babies case of 1984, innumerable stories came to be told of pregnancies concealed and babies born in ways that showed how inadequate and impoverished was the social ideology of institutions inherited from the nineteenth century.

In terms of imaginative strategies, the baby fished from the sea may represent all that society has chosen to forget. In Brian Friel's play *Translations*, The schoolteacher, Hugh, is given a line from George Steiner when he says 'To remember everything is a kind of madness'. In oral storytelling, however, while much is forgotten, nothing is felt to be irretrievable. Certain kinds of knowledge are consigned to long-term storage, but the storytelling tradition always marks the spot, as fishermen mark their nets and lobster-pots with brightly-coloured buoys. Profoundly ecological in its thinking, the oral tradition recognises recurring connections of kinds to which the linear ideology of the nineteenth century was blind.

Fairy belief legends were a mainstay of popular culture in nineteenth-century Ireland. Their imaginative excess makes it difficult for the literate mind to take them seriously, but it is the essential and beautifully-embroidered padding which has allowed ideas and information to be conveyed without damage and kept safely until they were needed. Walter Benjamin's celebrated essay, 'The Storyteller', points to the differences between artfully-constructed stories and mere information:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.³³

Artists in various media are working again with the images and ideas of storytelling, and the art of storytelling itself seems set for a comeback, such as traditional music, singing and dancing have already witnessed. In the meantime, in published texts of oral stories and in the precious manuscript archive of the Irish Folklore Collection at the National University of Ireland, Dublin, we have a record of the art by which Éamon a Búrc and others like him guided their listeners through an unseen world inside the hills and beneath the sea, as though they made their own landscape transparent.

33 Benjamin, 'Storyteller', pp. 89-90.

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