

IRISH SUPERSTITION  
JANET LANGLOIS  
INTRODUCTION TO FOLKLORE  
WINTER QUARTER

PAT O'DOWD



## Introduction

### Statement of Purpose:

Superstitious and magical beliefs of the Irish people is the type of folklore I am dealing with. I selected this topic because my mother was born and raised in Ireland and I grew up fascinated by the stories I heard from her. It also afforded me the opportunity of recording my mother's Irish brogue and cherishing this recording for many years to come. Perhaps long after my mother is gone I will be able to listen to a loving familiar voice. Another reason for selecting my mother as the focal point of my paper is to immortalize her in the Wayne State University Folklore Archives.

My method of gathering information was living with my mother all my life and now finally recording all those wonderful stories.

### Statement of Method:

This personal interview took place around my kitchen table one Sunday afternoon.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON INFORMANT

My mother, Anne Marie Lee Brown was born in Kilkerrin, County Galway, Ireland in 1906. She now lives in Westland, Michigan and is retired. She raised three children alone because my father died in 1945 when I, the eldest, was seven-years-old. She came to the United States when she was 21 years-old. Her brother sent her the money from this country as was the tradition and she sent for her sister a few years later.

Education stopped after the eighth grade. My mother came from an area in Ireland, very rural, that spoke the Irish language. This was unusual at that time. Most of the people had spoken English for years, ever since England ruled Ireland. However, the rural folk held on to their language and culture which includes the belief in magic and superstition laced with religious overtones or intermingled. You must remember that Ireland was originally a pagan country before St. Patrick and when they were converted to Catholicism they incorporated their new religion to fit their own beliefs. In other words they intermingled their own superstitious beliefs with religion. For this reason Ireland is a country rich with lore that probably goes back to pre-history and then modified by religion and English rule. Modern civilization hasn't had the effect or affected change to any substantial degree because of their geography, economics and political isolation. Northern Ireland, of course, is quite different but we are discussing Southern Ireland here.

My mother is a quiet non-drinking Irishwoman who takes a traditional shot of whiskey twice a year, one when she puts the turkey in the oven at Thanksgiving and the other on Christmas Eve. There is one more exception to this rule of abstinence and that is when she visits her brother and sister-in-law in Ireland. (the same house where she grew up) Her comment about that is, "When you can't fight them, join them."

During these visits the conversation is carried on in Irish and they often talk about old times; when they were children living under the rule of a stern father and recalling to mind events that took place or the legends and stories they heard as children. Conversation is still the favorite pasttime of these rural Irish people.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Name of Researcher: Pat O'Dowd

Name of informant: Anne Marie Lee Brown

Date, time and duration of interview: March 11, 1979 1:30 pm - 4:30 pm

Place and circumstances of interview: My home, the kitchen while drinking tea.

## TRANSMISSION, FUNCTION AND MEANING

My mother learned these stories from her father, a neighbor or her personal experiences in Ireland where she grew up.

Prayers were used to get rid of the devil when no other reason could explain a particular <sup>phenomenon - thing</sup> phenomena. These prayers were answered or so they believed when the circumstances changed and the fear was eliminated thereby reinforcing their belief system.

My mother still believes these stories. However, no new ones have been added during her life in this country. She no longer believes in "fairies" or so she says.

Tea leaf reading, according to my mother was a social pasttime in Ireland. Some of the people believed that it was a way of predicting the future. However, my mother does not and never did.

TEXT OF INTERVIEW

Me: How old are you mother dear?

Ma: 72 .

Tom: Eyes of blue

Me: Eyes of blue

Tom: 72 and eyes of blue, folklore specialist

Ma: This thing is going isn't it?

Tom: It's supposed to be going

Me: It's going to be great when I'm blowing my nose into it and I've got to put down, I'll have to put down sh...sh...sh... on my typewriter, (laugh) it will be two lines of sh sh sh (laugh)

Ma: Did I ever tell you about an old lady in Ireland and she is supposed to never tell a lie (noise) so some men from England, you know those sports, sport men?

Me: Yeh

Ma: They came over to Ireland to go hunting and (cough) and she was, she was a maid there

Me: You never told me this story, I never heard this one

Ma: I, she was a maid, and then they had to get up early in the morning. And before she went to bed, she always polished their shoes. I don't know how many there was, those Englishmen, sportsmen. I guess Ireland was a good place to hunt. So one night, I don't think she had a clock in those days, that was many years ago. They might have had a watch, but, maybe had a watch with a chain on it or something. So she got up, she woke up and she



wanted to fix them their breakfast before they went out hunting. And when she woke up she, God, thought they were gone, you know the moonlight I guess, she thought, She thought it was late. So she came down stairs, she was all panicky you know, came down stairs and she saw their boots, their shoes or boots weren't, well, they were gone. The boots were gone. And she said, "Oh my gosh I'm in big trouble." Well as soon as that happened she heard the walking upstairs. She heard walking upstairs. She said "Oh my gosh they didn't go but where are the boots?" . . . their boots... So she opened the door and she went outside, and there are the boots outside.

Me: Who put them out?

Ma: Ha? this was a haunted house

Me: Oh I see

Ma: I wouldn't go up past that house at night for anything in the world. We were so afraid of that house.

Me: You believed it was haunted?

Ma: Yes, she said, she believed it was haunted too, because the boots, she said and she says to them when she found they weren't up yet.. Gosh I did and they thought it was haunted too.

Me: What was the story, what was the deal?

Ma: The deal? That the boots were outside of the house instead of being in the house.

Me: Who put them there?

Ma: Who put them there?... the (grasts) ghosts(fairies).

Me: Was that near your place?

Ma: It wasn't too far away... a mile... I don't think it was even a mile, it was a house all by itself. It was supposed to be a haunted house. So she said she was desperate... She was almost crying when she was telling us many years ago

about it.. many a year afterward.

Me: Did she have any more stories about that place? Did she live in that house?

Ma: Well she lived there while they were there.

Me: I see.

Ma: yeh... well I guess it was rented you know for those other people.

Me: Were there a lot of stories like that... a lot of story tellers like that in Ireland at that time?

Ma: Well about... yeh... they used to tell stories ... my my grandfather.

Me: Was he a story teller?

Ma: Well he told about himself. My father was telling about my grandfather.

But a ... he was a mason, a stone mason. I guess that is where my father took it up... and he was living... I mean... he would be five miles from this place... they were building a barrack... so instead of my grandfather coming home five miles he went to his uncle's place which was about three miles away... and is closer and stayed there. So one morning he got up, he had to get up early, they didn't have any clocks or watches or anything only by the moonlight or you know by the... so he got up and the same thing happened like you know he thought he over slept or something ... and there when the moon is bright it's like day-like. So he came along... he thought he was late. And he was walking along, you know, fast and all of a sudden some big tree rolled in front of him, probably fell by the wind. And he said, he was so afraid. He made a circle with a stick or something and he make the sign of the cross with it and he stood inside there and he said if this is the devil go away.

Me: Did he say that in English or..

Ma: Irish probably Irish... so it rolled way back on him... now he's so scared and there isn't too many houses in between you know they're far apart, the houses... he kept walking until he came to this house... first house... and he knocked

at the door and of course they were asleep... and it was in the middle of the night... and they said, you know, it's not day yet they said this is night. And they made him sit down and they threw salt over his shoulder, threw salt over his shoulder... and he stayed there until it was daytime you know.

Me: What was the salt being thrown... what was that for?

Ma: The salt is to take the demons... to scare... I guess the devils away.

Me: And what was the circle and the cross for?

Ma: The cross was for because it was religious.

Me: Yeh sure yeh.

Ma: And he probably made it large enough so that he could get in there... his own idea I suppose... or he probably heard it from someone... so then he stayed there until it was time to go to work to build his barrack... so that was that story...

Ma: And then about the black woman they used to see all the time...

Me: Oh yeh tell me about that one.

Ma: They always saw a black woman with a black shawl on near a well a spring well by the side of the road only about two blocks from our place where the barrack was... this is a different barrack now than my father, my grandfather was building and where I lived... and this one always at nighttime somebody would see her, you know way up in the middle of the night. So this time these couple were coming by in a cart, they had to go to a station... that time they didn't have any what you call lorries or lorries... they called them lorries back there. Tracks to go and get the stu... you know the flour a thing like that they have to get a hor... horse... flour and stuff... and that was about thirty, forty miles away. So then it would be late when they come home. This guy he saw that black woman and he heard before that they used to see

her... so he told the priest, the priest, you, I was telling you about it, and the priest said a mass for her and she hadn't been seen after that.

Me: Was it like somebody's ghost?

Ma: Yeh like some dead person that came back.

Me: Did anybody knew, know who that was? Did they think they knew, know who it was?

Ma: They never mentioned it. I don't know if they knew who it was.

Me: Or why she came to the well?

Ma: But one time we were, Baby and I were playing, my father was playing cards... at this neighbors place... remember I was pretty small not very high and there was a bunch of them... we were playing down there and this man's wife was dead and he had two little girls, two kids, so Baby and I went down there, it was, you know, not dark, it was kind of a moonlight... and we were playing in kind of a little boring back there you know a little path near their house... we were there and a playing around and a one of the little girls... she said "Oh there's mommy I saw mommy in another field," and the mother was dead.

Me: Oh my god did she tell the fa... I

Ma: I don't know what happened after that, if she told or not

Me: Did you all run? (laugh)

Ma: Yeh I... we were kind of scared... she said, "Oh I saw mommy, there's mommy"... We looked around and we didn't see anything... there was bushes and all you know all those stone walls around. I didn't pay any attention to them because they were only about six and seven like that and the youngest one is Betty's age and the other one was Michael's or Patrick's age... well anyway there was... we were bigger... so a that was that... and my other uncle you know this is a lot... my mother was telling me about her brother (backgroundtalk) he was

going out to cut to to cut... they had to get up early, two, three o'clock in the morning cutting seaweed for the, for the fertilizer, for the potatoes and things and he got up she said in the middle of the night to put the boat out so you know before the tide would go out... you had to put the boat out you know (me: I understand) so it wouldn't be stranded... so he saw when he was coming along, he saw a big lake, big lake rolled, the rolled in front of him and he started praying and praying and praying and all of a sudden it rolled back and back again... so he went back home he was scared and never (me: never went out) never went out to the boat scared... so... then my grandfather... another thing my grandfather did... they used to... they don't do that any more... they used to watch cows out on a hill in the mountains at nighttime, they used to watch... and he built kind of a, they called it a braugha there, a little hut I suppose, and he went in there and he slept, he slept in the hut, and in the middle of the night he felt something so heavy on him he couldn't even move, it was something (static) oh he couldn't even move and he was scared to death so I guess he said to the other, he prayed and he said, "If it's the devil get away," and then got off of him. All them are out in those mountains you know there is no house at all... That's it... oh another, now they say this is true... I don't know... now this family, they lived not too far away from us... anyway there was three daughters and a little boy and the mother died when he was born, when the boy was a baby... I don't know probably a year or two old... well somebody... she used to be seen at night and someone said that she said that he told them that she said in Irish (Irish sentence) Translation: It means I see my Martin, Morteen is the Irish for Martin, I see my Martin every Friday. Now you'd think anybody wouldn't put a lie, tell a lie about that.

Me: Who said that?

Ma: Some neighbor around there. I don't know who exactly said it but it was told to us.

Me: That she saw her boy.

Ma: That she sees him every Friday (Me: Every Friday)

Me: And she believed it.

Ma: Who believed?

Me: The woman that said that she saw him every Friday. Did you believe it?

Ma: Well I believed it then.

Me: So there's a lot of superstition a lot of a

Ma: Yeh, and then the lady an old lady died there back there when I was there oh first before I ever came out and I went to the wake you know

Me: Go on just for fun...

Ma: So I go over there and then when it was time to come home (cough) there was a bunch of the neighbors coming, all of them, different ways and you could hear that crying, the Banchee, it must be, (long crying wail) going back and forth over (long wail)

Me: And you heard it?

Ma: Yeh I heard it

Me: Oh my god

Ma: (wail) Unless it was some kind of a bird. They say that you know when somebody died that you would hear crying like that.

Me: That was the belief there that when somebody died you'd hear the Banchee

Ma: I don't think you heard it all the time just sometimes (wail) real loud (wail) then you'd hear it over there and then back. I heard it that time.

Me: You heard it yourself?

- Ma: Yes I...
- Me: Is it the only time you heard the Banchee?
- Ma: Yeh
- Me: God... We don't have a lot of that in this country you know I think that's too bad because (laugh) that's fun.
- Ma: Oh it's a good thing that you don't have it because we'd be so afraid even to go outside... my god... we'd have to go out to get turf or water after telling stories.
- Me: (Laugh)
- Ma: Oh my god and they'd say go on out and get some water for the morning have it in here or go out and get turf oh and the turf would be close to the house not far but you'd have to go out and get it and you'd die when you're like this (laugh).
- Me: How did they fix their, like did they fix their tea any special way a different if they were going to read tea leaves or did they fix it the same way?
- Ma: No, in those days they use to have a black, a tea...a...a aluminum... aluminum pot or a teapot but it was always loose tea. (me: Yes) And they didn't have that a that thing that separates the tea leaves (me: no) from it that separation thing and then when you would pour it out you would get tea leaves you know.
- Me: So they never... they didn't make their tea, did you... did you always read tea leaves after you had your tea or did you always look in your tea cup... no don't say it that's perfectly good.
- Ma: No... a few times I did it for the fun of it like that to see if any would come out .
- Me: But did anybody read tea leaves back there?
- Ma: Yeh they use to but I don't think... I don't know if anything ever came out

(me: true) true.

Me: but they use to do it once in a while.

Ma: Yeh, they use to... ones would say oh she can read tea leaves you know like that... oh and everybody would say read my tea leaves but I forget... they'd say might say something oh I don't see for your ... oh... pretty good for you... something like that or they'd say not so good or something like that you know (me: yeh).

Me: Did they do anything or did they just pick the cup up and read it or what did they...

Ma: After they were through drinking their tea

Me: Let me pour out your tea and get you down to the tea leaves 'cause you won't drink this, this is as strong as a horse.

Tom: Do you want me to play this back to see if it's playing?

(interference)

Me: Now what did they do? When you finished your tea...

Ma: O.K. They weren't that much tea... they would have a little bit like that to turn it around like that probably to see what they missed they wished they'd drank. (laugh) (Mother shakes the leaves around in her cup)

Ma: Someone is going skiing...

Me: (laugh) mother those are your tea leaves... (laugh)

Me: I'll give you my tea leaves... you have to shake the cup around a few times...

Ma: I mean to get it because the leaves stay in one place.. that it's why they do it. We use to have big tea leaves... Well somebody is going on a plane ride... your going on a plane ride...

Me: Where do you see that Ma? (laugh)

Ma: It is up high on the side... (the tea leaves)



Me: Oh I see, it's up high on the side, what else?

Ma: And your not going alone...

Me: Who are you going with?

Ma: I guess Tom, he is bigger, larger size, Tom... I see a lot of birds flying around and you're going to use a hammer, Tom or someone is going to use a hammer. Any unfinished business around here? Maybe somebody is going to be building a home. That's probably it. And there will be a lot meeting you... a lot at the airport.

Me: Is that it? You don't really have to, the purpose is to, you know, ...if you don't see anything, you don't see anything.

Ma: Of course I don't see anything

Me: Are you going to read Tom's tea leaves now?

Ma: Yep... Tom is going to build a big house... on a mountain... and he is going to dig turf too because I see a big stack of turf there... that's all.

Me: That's it.

Me: Tea leave reading wasn't a serious business there at all and, or a er did some people do it, were they serious?

Ma: Not anymore, before they use to... I don't know if they were serious or not. They would tell people ... say... that person is a great tea leaf reader... (undistinguishable)

Ma: Like I was telling you before, my father was building a house for somebody, he was building a house one place on an Island, he use to go away and come back on the weekends, you know, and go away again. Anyhow, this lady where he was building the house, a neighbor of the one he was building the house for, they told her, an old lady, they told her that my father was a great fortune teller, that he would tell her fortune, that he was great, fabulous telling

fortunes. Then she told him, one of these days I'll come over and you will tell me my fortune. So then the neighbors told my father everything about her, (laugh) everything about her. And then she came over one day and he was telling her, oh it was fabulous, oh, you know he knew everything about her and but one thing he told her that wasn't right, he said and now you move your turf, a big stock of turf, you move that from one place over to the other place, corner. And she did that now, he should have never told her to do that. Now he added that on to it...

Me: Why did he tell her to do that? So that some good fortune would happen to her?

Ma: Well he told her that it would be bad luck if she wouldn't do it.

Me: Oh, she did it?

Ma: Yes

Me: Oh my gosh, she believed him

Ma: Yes because he knew everything about her. She wondered about, you know, how he could tell about so many things, how many family she had and a lot of things, you know, that she never suspected they'd tell. (undistinguishable)

## CONCLUSION

Throughout her stories there was a reoccurring theme, moonlight nights and supernatural events accompanying them. She was not aware of this motif although I feel there was a great deal of fear and anxiety about nighttime among the Irish people and they used their superstitious beliefs to dispell this fear.

I also feel that their magical and supernatural beliefs were as natural to them as going to the well to fetch water. There was no distinction between what we feel is real and the unreal world. It was all real to them.

Pat O'Dowd