



PROJECT MUSE®

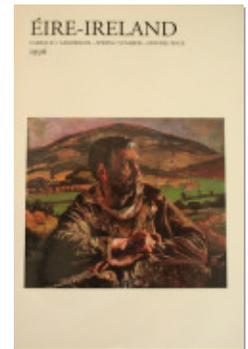
The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend

Angela Bourke

Éire-Ireland, Volume 31, Number 1&2, Earrach/Samhradh / Spring/Summer
1996, pp. 7-25 (Article)

Published by Irish-American Cultural Institute

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.1996.0001>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/666861/summary>

THE VIRTUAL REALITY OF IRISH FAIRY LEGEND¹

ANGELA BOURKE

IRISH FAIRY legend is a vast body of narrative which still circulates in the two languages spoken in Ireland.² Made up of short, vivid, easily memorable and interconnecting units, it floats like a web of story above the physical landscape, pegged down at point after point, as incidents are recounted of a piper lured into a cave here; a young girl found wandering mute on a hillside there; a lake where a cow emerged to give miraculous quantities of milk, and disappeared again with all her progeny when ill-treated; a hill where mysterious music could be heard after dark. Hovering in this way above the human community, the web of stories is also like a kite controlled by one or many storytellers. Under the delicate shadows it casts, places are singled out for avoidance or attention; people are identified as deviant, dangerous, afflicted, or knowledgeable.

By any standards, the fairy legends that make up this fabric constitute a marginal verbal art, subaltern discourse: the opposite of the dominant modes of speech and thought, the elaborated codes by which most privileged ideas are conveyed, especially in print. Gapped and discontinuous, lacking a tradition of exegesis, they are almost entirely confined to oral communication, and almost never taken seriously. They belong in social

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the 1996 Vernam Hull Memorial Lecture at Harvard University. I am grateful to Harvard's Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures for the invitation, and to Professor Art Cosgrove, President, University College Dublin, for a discretionary research grant which enabled me to prepare it for publication.

² The best collection of transcribed and translated Irish-language texts is Ó hEochaidh, Mac Néill & Ó Catháin, *Síscéalta*. For discussion see Narváez, esp. (for the English-language tradition), Lysaght, "Fairylure." Closely similar traditions are found in Scotland: clergyman Robert Kirk's *The Secret Common-Wealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies* was written more than three hundred years ago; Scott, *Minstrelsy*, includes an essay, "On the Fairies of Popular Superstition," (439-73), and the periodical *Tocher* contains many modern examples. For North American reflexes see Rieti.

situations whose participants hold many of their experiences and assumptions in common and where much may be left unspoken, and so share the major characteristics of restricted linguistic codes.³

Fairy legends are told to amuse adults and frighten children, to entertain tourists, and to mark the distance we have come from the supposed credulity of our ancestors.⁴ In some cases they may be shibboleths: indicators of adherence to older, repudiated modes of thinking and living, markers of contamination (Bourke, "Reading" 583; cf Gibbons 153-5). Even within the groups where fairy legends are most elaborately told, they are rated less valuable, less important, than other kinds of narrative, notably the long, episodic hero-tales and the international folktales or *Märchen* (Delargy, *Story-teller* 6-7), a situation noted by the celebrated Irish-language prose writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain. As a young schoolteacher, Ó Cadhain collected and published oral legends from his neighbours in Connemara, County Galway, and remarked that "a story-teller, whose reputation has been made on his skill in telling the old-time Fenian tales or other [M]ärchen, is, as a rule, somewhat scornful of these short trifles and must be pressed to recite them" (Delargy, *Béaloides*). Much that has been written about Irish storytelling echoes these pejorative terms, and while they have undoubtedly served to validate the taste and preoccupations of collectors and scholars, they also clearly reflect a vernacular aesthetic, at least among those proficient in the telling of longer tales.

Still, fairy legends are so ubiquitous and so tenacious, and ultimately so consistent, that they merit serious consideration (see Almqvist). Rich sources of inspiration for poets—from W. B. Yeats writing in English to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill who writes in Irish—by their very obliqueness they offer a possibility of expressing things that are generally unspeakable: for Yeats, a painful tension between imagination and life (Kinahan 41-84); for Ní Dhomhnaill, violence, sexuality and language loss (Bourke, "Fairies"; "Silence"). But these poets make explicit what is already implicit in oral tradition. Lacking only an exegesis, fairy legend is an intricate system of expression, already highly elaborated in its own terms.

Fairy legends are simple and memorable when taken one at a time—humble in their demands on the listener—yet they connect with one another in

3 For the use of Basil Bernstein's work on linguistic codes in cultural analysis see Douglas 41-8 and *passim*; Ong 106; Wuthnow 190-91; 205.

4 Glassie, *Irish Folktales* 166: "The fairy tales were a matter of entertainment. And I think again it was really to scare young people. . . ." (Peter Flanagan, Co. Fermanagh, 1977).

reticulated systems that are both elegant and economical. Their terms of reference are shared, roughly the same all over Ireland, and in Scotland and Newfoundland, while related narratives are found elsewhere in the oral tradition of northern Europe, as well as further afield. Broadly, they tell of encounters between humans and other beings variously named as “good people,” “liddle people,” “hill people,” or simply “fairies.” Purporting to be true, they begin in the ordinary, with human protagonists engaged in everyday tasks or journeys. They move quickly to the extraordinary, as people disappear, or appear from nowhere, or meet with extraordinarily good or bad luck. These stories generally finish back in the ordinary, while the storytellers may or may not reflect on the meaning of what has happened.

The term “fairies,” although it risks distracting the modern reader, is the one commonly used by folklore scholars and the most convenient for this discussion. The fairies of Irish oral tradition have little in common with the illustrations in children’s books or with the twinkling ballerina of Disney’s Fantasyland. Nor are they usually imagined as homosexual, although they are mostly male and there is some evidence of semantic overlap between the categories they represent and the slang term for a gay man (Narváez 336, 360–1; Bourke “Hunting”).⁵ Instead, fairies mirror the rural society that tells stories about them, in both its seen and unseen aspects, and while some accounts represent them as tiny, most depict them as similar in size to humans. They share space and time with the human population, but use both differently. They live under the earth, or beneath the sea, or exist invisibly in the air, while among them “a hundred years is only like a day” (Glassie, *Ballymenone* 546). With some crucial exceptions, their physical and social characteristics resemble those of humans.

The fairies keep cows and milk them, ride horses, eat, drink, fall in love, play music, dance, wear shoes and clothing, play ball and card games, fight, steal, and hold funerals for their dead. But they abhor salt, iron, and the Christian religion, and whatever runs in their veins is not blood (e.g. Glassie *Ballymenone* 151). Fairies have no hope of salvation, according to the promises of Christianity, so in the Catholic world-view of rural Ireland, they are forever outside human culture, exempt from control by its rules. But they do hope to be saved, so instead of ranging themselves in opposition to human society, fairies are always prowling on its edges, lurk-

5 The expressions “in the fairies” and “away with the fairies” can be used as euphemisms for a wide range of refusals or failures to conform to prescribed norms. My essay, “Hunting out the Fairies,” traces analogies between the Oscar Wilde scandal of 1895 and the contemporary case of Bridget Cleary, burned to death in County Tipperary as a fairy changeling.

ing above and below it, marking its boundaries, impinging on it from time to time with consequences that make the material of stories. They abduct people (mostly children and young women) and cows. They borrow milk and other goods and ask for human help in various enterprises, from delivering babies to shoeing horses and fighting battles. When displeased, fairies wreak havoc, causing illness and death, and blighting crops, but they generously reward those who treat them well. They are most often encountered in deserted or dangerous places: at the tops of cliffs, on lonely roads, by fishermen at sea.

Fairy legend narratives are offered to listeners as more or less believable, and much of the storyteller's effort is occupied in negotiating a claim on the credulity of the audience. Some are certainly told with a wink to the initiated, while many offer the listener a trade-off between hearing a good story and appearing gullible.

Mayo storyteller John Henry claimed in May 1976 that a legend about a fisherman who found cooked cabbage on his hook was "a true story." Happening close to his own home, the event indicated, according to Henry, that some sort of domestic life was being carried on beneath the sea. A few minutes later on the same evening he told a second legend, about a live baby hooked in similar circumstances. This time, however, he added the disclaimer: "*Ní thig liom a ráit anois ar fírinne nó bréag é*"—"I can't say now whether it's true or false" (Ó Catháin 51-2; 54-5). John Henry's story of cooked cabbage is unlikely to be believed, but may be accepted without great cost to the listener. His second story, offered much more tentatively, raises the stakes considerably while borrowing credibility from the first. Storytellers interviewed in Ireland and Newfoundland have independently suggested that although hardly anybody of their own age believes stories like these, earlier generations did. Many confess that they themselves believed when they were younger. As fairy legends are often used to discipline children or to shelter them from disturbing realities, it is likely that each generation has tended to overestimate the credulity of its ancestors (Lysaght 36-8; Rieti 2, 104).

Within any audience, some listeners will be more skeptical than others. The metanarratives of folklore recognize that the transaction between teller and audience depends on listeners' willingness to suspend disbelief if offered a good enough story. In the *Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade prevails upon her royal husband to spare her life by telling him stories. Elsewhere, in a tale that traces the delicate line between truth and fiction, suitors must entertain a princess with stories, but will lose their heads if

she interrupts to say, “That is a lie!” The successful suitor, of course, is the one who succeeds in telling her a story so outrageous that she is too fascinated to interrupt.

In the telling of Irish fairy legends, the payoff for a willingness to suspend disbelief is an impromptu excursion into the world of fiction, with all it has to offer. The teller of fairy legends asks to be believed—or at least for disbelief to be deferred—by using a low-key conversational tone, by speaking about a known and most probably adjacent landscape, and by including considerable circumstantial detail: names and occupations of people or descriptions of work and weather, for instance. But just as fairies are alive and yet not alive, so people can both believe in them and disbelieve. Some legends recount events that are merely odd, while others are downright preposterous, yet it is difficult to say when the boundary from reported fact to inventive fiction is crossed. It is partly in this ability to reconcile the impossible with the unexceptional that the legend-teller’s skill lies.

Sean O’Sullivan’s *Legends from Ireland* (1977) offers an example which will illustrate this point. Told by Éamon a Búrc, of Carna, Co. Galway, one of the best storytellers known in Ireland in this century, it is just two pages long—representing only a few minutes’ telling. O’Sullivan’s translation of the original Irish is called “Midnight Funeral from America.”⁶ The storyteller never mentions fairies, by name or otherwise, but the whole sense of his narrative depends on their existence (cf. Rieti 15–19).

SUMMARY

A man recently emigrated to America is on his way home to his lodging one night after a visit to Irish friends. He encounters a funeral, and according to rural Irish practice, turns to walk three paces along with it, whereupon he finds himself back home in Ireland, at the graveyard in Garomna, next to the house where he grew up. He goes into his old home, where the occupants are all out for the evening, and eats some potatoes from a pot being kept warm beside the fire. Then he goes back to the graveyard, attends the funeral, and afterwards finds himself back on the street in America, but not before driving his knife, on which his name is carved, into the ground beside his father’s headstone. He writes to his family in Ireland, telling of his adventure. They remember missing some potatoes from the pot that night and, when they go to the graveyard, find the knife stuck in the ground as he has described it.

6 O’Sullivan, *Legends* 64–66, recorded 22 September 1938 in Carna, Co. Galway, from Éamon a Búrc, then aged 72.

Garomna, where most of this story is set, and Carna, where it was told, are two remote communities on the deeply indented Connemara coast of County Galway, separated from each other by many miles of road, but only by a few miles of Galway Bay. Garomna is in fact an island, connected to the mainland by a causeway, but both it and Carna are literally and figuratively *off the beaten track*.

“There’s no lie in it,” Éamon a Búrc says at the beginning and end of his story. The knife left stuck in the ground, like the book left in the car by the ghostly hitchhiker in the modern urban legend (Brunvand 26), is offered as fictional proof, as though it were physically present. The story is impossible to believe, yet we have been sucked in; but neither we nor the original audience have anything to gain by protesting, “That is a lie!”

The essence of fairy-belief legend is ambivalence: a play between belief and disbelief, summed up in a well-known anecdote about an American anthropologist and an Irish informant. The Irish woman, asked whether she really believed in fairies, is said to have answered, “I do not, Sir, but they’re there!” (see e.g. Kiberd 2). However the precise location of “there” is problematic, for the Irish fairies inhabit what is effectively *non-place*. People encounter them on boundaries: either in space—between townlands or on beaches between high and low tide; or in time—at dusk or at midnight; on Hallowe’en or May Eve. Other boundaries marked by fairy intervention are social: occasions of transition and ambiguity in human life, such as the few days which used to elapse in rural areas between formal betrothal and marriage, or the period between the birth and christening of a child.

In the legends told about fairies, the art of oral fiction works on the paradox of *space* versus *place* to turn “nowhere” or *non-place* into a virtual place, in which things can happen. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). So these stories provide fictional characteristics for otherwise anomalous or unknowable places. They deepen the native’s knowledge of her physical surroundings, but also thriftily use the gaps in the known environment for the elaboration of an imagined world where all those things that are in Heaven and Earth and yet not dreamt of in rational philosophy may be accommodated.

Fairies belong in no-man’s land; they live in no time at all. In the story summarized above, the dark American city streets where the man walks home alone replace the scary, lonely, misty, or boggy parts of the Irish landscape where most other tellings are set. Moving between his Irish friends’

home and his own lodgings, this man's adventure happened as he passed through the *non-place* between two familiar and safe *places* in an otherwise alien environment. Significantly, the story was told, not in Boston or Brooklyn, but in rural Ireland—to an audience imagining emigration, not living it.

This ability of fairy legends to deal with so much of the betwixt-and-between—the liminal, the marginal, and the ambiguous, whether in time, in the landscape, or in social relations—makes them important cognitive tools. The very excesses which make them sometimes ridiculous to the literate mind are knots in a rope of memory, put there to save the stories from forgetfulness. Walter Ong's *Literacy and Orality* reminds us that people in oral cultures must "think memorable thoughts." Those images of hot potatoes missing from the pot on the hearth and the man's knife with his name on it, stuck in the ground by the gravestone, are wonderfully, tangibly, memorable (Ong 34). Mention of the missing potatoes is a masterly touch. Connemara households cooked such vast quantities of potatoes daily, for human and animal consumption, that it is hard to imagine anyone noticing that a few were missing; the knife by the gravestone, on the other hand, is either there or not. However the heat and taste of the potatoes serve to guarantee their tenure in memory while reinforcing the "proof" offered by the knife.

We must also reckon with the possibility that this story frames an elaborate practical joke, and that Éamon a Búrc could shrewdly calculate which members of his audience might be taken in by it. Leaving one's favourite knife stuck in a significant place is just the sort of symbolic or sentimental act people have always performed on the eve of emigration, especially in the days when emigration meant likely permanent exile. Such a knife would not easily be spotted in the long grass of a west-of-Ireland graveyard, but it would be there to be found when the emigrant wrote a letter home, as indeed the story says he did. The protagonist of this legend, recently emigrated from Connemara, could tell a story amazing enough to have his home community remember him, or his immigrant community take notice of him, while also giving voice to homesickness and nostalgia, emotions which might be unacceptable if more directly expressed.⁷ Meanwhile, those people left at home could possess a piece of fiction through which to remember him as well as to contemplate, perhaps rehearse for, the experience of emigration.

7 For protective codes in folk culture, see Radner.

Most fairy legends told in Ireland are short and easily trivialized, but in Éamon a Búrc's repertoire many of them become long, thoughtful, and graceful narratives, showing an adult intelligence skilfully negotiating a shared system of symbols and metaphors in a context of orality. This shared system is more than the oral-formulaic patterning elucidated by Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and their successors (see Lord): it is an intimate and detailed parallel of physical and social life, rendered in three dimensions and with full attention to bodily sensation—not so much a grammar of words and formulas, more a grammar of ideas. We may imagine it as a sort of garment: a precisely tailored artifact which will fit over human experience, as a sleeve fits an arm—and move with it. This image inevitably recalls the bristling helmets and gloves of virtual-reality technology, which translate human impulses into a domain of fiction. If virtual reality is an imaginary environment with which the user can interact realistically, then the fairy world of these Irish legends is a vernacular virtual reality.

Stories like Éamon a Búrc's "Midnight Funeral from America" are clever games, hugely relished by their participants, but they are much more. Preoccupied with real-life boundaries and transitional states, fairy belief or half-belief also marks symbolic boundaries, which more widely facilitate the organization of knowledge and thought outside the culture of literacy.

Sixty years ago Conrad Arensberg argued that Irish fairy tradition forms "a symbolic order overlying the values of social life" (166, 188). Thirty years later came Mary Douglas's influential *Purity and Danger* (1966), which focused on *boundaries* as essential to the ordering of human behavior. More recently, and following Douglas, Robert Wuthnow has suggested that symbolic boundaries may be used to make sense of areas where problems in moral obligation may arise, and to explain the persistence of what he calls "folk piety" in the interstices of modern society (70).

My concern here, however, is not so much with the ordering of society or with so-called superstitious practice, as with the ordering of thought—the organization of knowledge in individual human minds and its exchange between them.

Most commentary on Irish oral tradition is influenced by colonial or postcolonial assumptions, which alike subscribe to binary oppositions between the literate English-speaking metropolis and the oral culture of rural Irish speakers. Rural culture has been so consistently presented as homogeneous and unchanging, often by conservative forces within the Irish state, that we are not accustomed to think about its verbal art in terms of

the agency or oppositional interests of performers and audience (see Ó Cruaíoch 48, 50). The effects of such uncritical representation are far-reaching: long after it became politically incorrect to stereotype African Americans, Native Americans or other ethnic groups in even apparently benign ways, it is still acceptable on both sides of the Atlantic to characterize the Irish as stupid and pugnacious.⁸ Irish-Americans appear to tolerate these demeaning stereotypes by containing them within cultural frames of the ludic—the St Patrick’s Day Parade, the Notre Dame football game, the phrase, “Irish for a day.” Within Ireland, on the other hand, stereotypes are deflected in typical postcolonial fashion onto less advantaged members of our own society: jokes told in England against the Irish are told in Ireland against Kerry men (by people who don’t know how good life can be in Kerry), while the full force of “No Irish need apply” is visited with shameful regularity on Travellers (see e.g. McLaughlin). Such unexamined thought-patterns also mean that labels applied to all the Irish by Victorian print-colonialism have been left sticking to Irish oral tradition, despite the elevation of folklore to the status of national icon under native governments (Ó Cruaíoch; Ó Giolláin).

Well into this century, especially in Irish-speaking areas, rural Irish society accorded high status to its oral storytellers. More than simply an entertainer, the skilled storyteller was valued as outstandingly wise, thoughtful, and knowledgeable. The intellectual property these practitioners valued so highly, and to which they and their neighbours devoted so much time and energy, deserves careful attention; but such attention has not always been forthcoming except among folklore specialists. A major obstacle has been that the intellectual property in question consists of stories about invisible beings, without the respectability which an organized religion or tradition of exegesis might lend to such material. For hundreds of years, as rational discourses have ranged themselves in opposition to all forms of “superstition,” any suspicion of belief in fairies has been enough to label individuals and whole communities as backward, naïve and ignorant (Bourke, “Reading”).

Such wholesale dismissal of oral tradition by the culture of literacy is not conducive to serious study. However in *The Savage Mind* (1962), Claude

8 American greeting-cards for St. Patrick’s Day are a case in point, and the use of Ireland, rather than the Deep South, as setting for the sequel to *Gone With the Wind* is perhaps another. The same thinking may also explain what is to me the breathtakingly offensive chapter-title, “The Bog Irish,” in Mary Douglas’s otherwise admirable and elegant *Natural Symbols* (1970).

Lévi-Strauss noted that “[e]very civilization tends to overestimate the objective orientation of its thought” (3); and literate modern societies are no exception. It may in fact be more useful to imagine not that people in rural Ireland remember and tell fairy legends because they believe them, but that they tell them (and sometimes believe them) because they remember them. That is to say, being able to find one’s way around such an intricately interconnected set of narratives as fairy legend provides may be a valuable intellectual practice in itself.

Lévi-Strauss discusses the minute taxonomies of botany and zoology found in non-literate, what he calls “savage,” cultures around the world, finding many species thus catalogued that hold no discernible usefulness, beauty, or danger for the peoples involved. He observes that “animals and plants are not known as a result of their usefulness; they are deemed to be useful or interesting because they are first of all known.” They form, he suggests, the intellectual framework around which other knowledge can be organized in an oral culture (9). An incident in a Navajo home in Utah, described by American folklorist Barrre Toelken, illustrates how the traditional string-figures taught to every child perform the same function.

A teenage Navajo girl told three visiting folklorists, “The Spider Woman taught us all these designs as a way of helping us think. You learn to think when you make these” (95). Later, her father elaborated (Toelken’s translation):

These are all matters we need to know. It’s too easy to become sick, because there are always things happening to confuse our minds. We need to have ways of thinking, of keeping things stable, healthy, beautiful. We try for a long life, but lots of things can happen to us. So we keep our thinking in order by these figures and we keep our lives in order with the stories. We have to relate our lives to the stars and the sun, the animals, and to all of nature or else we will go crazy, or get sick. (96)

String-figures in Navajo culture, like fairy legends in Ireland, are at once games, works of art, illustrated textbooks, metaphors, and mnemonics.

“An oral culture has no texts. How does it get together organized material for recall? This is the same as asking, ‘What does it or can it know in an organized fashion?’” (Ong 33). Operating within the culture of literacy, we find it difficult to grasp modes of thought which do not find their analogy in the two-dimensional world of the printed page and the linear logic of the book. But in the last years of the twentieth century, as pointing and clicking on icons takes over from the linear perusal of printed

texts, it may be possible to bypass the linear thinking of chirographic and typographic literacy. Instead we can look at traditional narratives as reflexes of a three-dimensional system for organizing knowledge in oral culture, simultaneously responsive to aesthetic, intellectual, and practical requirements. Irish fairy legend, especially among people who do not write, constitutes a shared intellectual resource, available for many functions from amusement to the modeling of intractable abstract problems. Meanwhile, our increasing familiarity with the way computers work offers a way of sidestepping the constraints of literate thinking to understand oral modes of thought.

A commonplace of folklore scholarship is that good storytellers possess remarkable memories. Folklorists also accept that oral cultures manage memory in ways largely inaccessible to the world of literacy (see Lord 124-138; Ong 31-6). And most commentators acknowledge that oral performers are artists, fully in command of their material (e.g. Delargy 10). In the last twenty years, however, as the literate world's familiarity with computers has grown, the received sense of the word *memory* has shifted, from something immaterial, even spiritual, to something finite that can be measured, filled, emptied—even added to.⁹ Paradoxically, such an instrumental view of memory invites a return to understanding its workings in the terms of preliterate culture. It becomes possible again, as it was for the rhetoricians of the Middle Ages, to think of memory as an art (Yates 1966).

The insights into oral tradition and memory-management made available by the work of Milman Parry, Albert B. Lord, and their successors depended heavily on sound-recording technology (Lord 3, 279). Later, Walter Ong's work on orality in the 1970s and early 1980s drew attention to the phenomenon he called "secondary orality," fostered by the electronic media, including the telephone (135-8). Secondary orality has profound implications for cultural expression by formerly colonized or potentially marginalized groups in the late twentieth century. Inexpensive cassette-tape recording has allowed migrant workers from the Philippines to stay in touch with their families back home without first negotiating the world of literacy; it permits traditional musicians in Ireland to learn

9 The *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, published in 1977, shows how far we have moved, counseling that "the neutral term *store* is to be preferred to *memory* to avoid the danger of anthropomorphizing computers" (603). Rather than turning our computers into people, however, we have tended during this period, as social satirists keep telling us, to turn ourselves into machines.

songs and airs from people they may have met only briefly, or not at all. In these instances, the weary detour through the tortuous—and distorting—passages of the written or printed word has been avoided. The result is not the same as in an uninterrupted oral tradition: people don't speak to (or listen to) a tape-machine exactly as they do to an interlocutor who is present; a song learned from a tape will be based on just one performance in identical repetitions, rather than on a series of performances (Partridge 140-2; cf. Valley). Nevertheless, for illiterate migrant workers and for traditional singers and musicians, as for many blind and partially sighted people all over the world, cassette tapes deliver the possibility of an autonomy undreamt of when print ruled the world.

In the last twenty years, computers have begun to offer the same kind of freedom from large centralized institutions as cassette recordings do, but on a far more complex scale. Meanwhile the cultural criticism that has developed as a discipline hand in hand with the rise of the personal computer has drawn attention to the invisible assumptions and intellectual models which underpin so much of our received knowledge. For over a century, many of the dominant ideas in metropolitan culture have been expressed in terms of linear progress and hierarchical structures. Lines could be traced to where they converged in a single point of origin, but that model is now being superseded.

A hundred years ago the train was not just an important mode of transport and communication; trains and railways held a central place in the popular imagination. We have only to think of model railways—of *Anna Karenina* and all those trains, of *Sherlock Holmes* and his *Baedeker*. Nowadays, however, a similar symbolic importance attaches to the World Wide Web. As more and more people experience it for themselves, the Web penetrates into ever more areas of everyday speech, thought, and metaphor. This substitution has far-reaching implications for the culture of literacy and for our understanding of other modes of thought (cf. Godzich 11).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the train was a powerful symbol of progress, and the “modern” world was mapped with the branching black lines of railways, along which progress and newspapers could be delivered from metropolitan centres to outlying areas as literacy spread among ordinary people. In America the train was an instrument of colonization, which enabled the displacement of native inhabitants and their replacement by European settlers. In Britain and Ireland, however, trains changed the lives of people who were already there, for population dis-

placements had taken place centuries earlier. But everywhere the railway brought with it a sense of authority derived from elsewhere; of standard clocks and timekeeping; of subordination to a series of urban centres, increasing in density and importance as the line drew closer to the metropolis. Small towns were no longer the centres of their own hinterlands, but points on a line, polarized up and down. It is surely no coincidence that the railway map with its hierarchical structure so remarkably resembles other nineteenth-century institutions like the Darwinian model of biological descent, the *stemmae* of manuscript scholarship, the derivation of the Indo-European languages, and the family tree as reckoned through the male line—not of course a nineteenth-century invention, but much invoked then, and used as a powerful metaphor of colonization.

The effect on oral storytelling of what we may call the mental railway map was cataclysmic. Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," begins with the words: "Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant" (83). Benjamin committed suicide, believing he was about to be captured by the Nazis, in 1940. At that time, Éamon a Búrc, whose legend about the fairy funeral we considered above, was alive and well, though elderly, telling stories to appreciative and discerning audiences. Benjamin was right nevertheless: Búrc lived in a remote part of Ireland, a neutral and self-sufficient country where draconian censorship kept most European news at bay (Ó Drisceoil). The environment which valued his stories *was* remote from the metropolitan world, and already all but forgotten by it, although this storyteller was an avid radio listener and deeply interested in world affairs (Ó Ceannabháin 17).

Benjamin identified two kinds of background for the storyteller: traveling and staying at home, both of which Éamon a Búrc had done by the time he began to tell stories. The Irish aphorism, *siúlach, scéalach*, gives this same idea of the traveller as one who has something to relate. We might render it as "travellers tell"; for a traveller is an observer, whose eyes stay open in wonder, even after they should have closed in sleep, and s/he may have amazing stories to tell—*far-fetched tales*, in both senses of the word. But just as print dealt a serious blow to oral tradition and to the Irish language, to which it came late, so mass transportation almost did away with travel.

When the railways came in the nineteenth century, commuters began

to replace travelers.¹⁰ Bored repeaters of the same journey, commuters have no tales to tell. Instead they read. In Ireland and Britain from the 1840s, railway-station newsstands fostered a huge expansion in periodical publication, which led in turn to the rise of the short story (ideal for the commuter's journey) and the novel, written in weekly instalments for those same commuters.¹¹ In Ireland, literacy levels rose steadily after the Famine of the 1840s: the proportion of people aged over five who claimed to be able to read increased from 47 per cent in 1841 to 53 per cent in 1851, and to almost 90 per cent in 1911. Letters written and newspapers and magazines read increased as well, and the number of newspaper editors and writers quadrupled between 1861 and 1911 (Ó Gráda 240–1). With negligible exceptions, literacy in this period meant the ability to read English, not Irish. As in England, where the booksellers W. H. Smith made their fortune in railway-station concessions, the growing prosperity in Ireland of their counterparts, Eason and Son, was due to improvements in both literacy and transport facilities (Ó Gráda 241).

Universal literacy was a democratic ideal at the end of the nineteenth century, a means by which all men—though not necessarily all women—would eventually share in the decision-making which affected their lives. Just as the railways carried modern men dryshod across bogs and rocks, so the printed word delivered to them certainties and regulations, the answers to all questions. In this world of advancing popular literacy, the fairy legend fitted awkwardly at best, an embarrassing relic of a discarded way of thinking (Bourke, “Reading”). A hundred years later, however, with the rise of fragmented and specialized “Englishes” and the decline of reading, universal literacy is beginning to break apart (Godzich). How may we now understand the fairy legend?

This essay has offered various analogies and metaphors in an attempt to answer the above question by releasing it from the preconceptions dictated by reading and by print. Most of them, notably the central analogies of the Web and of virtual reality, offer three-dimensional imagery in place of the two dimensions of text. This contrast—between two-dimensional and three-dimensional thinking—comes better into focus if we consider the life and art of a single storyteller.

¹⁰ Paul Theroux shows this contrast vividly in a series of train-travel books, notably *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975).

¹¹ See, for example, Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* (189) for a discussion of how railroad travel affected reading and verbal exchange in the nineteenth century.

Éamon a Búrc (1866-1942) was a man of remarkable intellectual and personal resources, with none of the simple-minded credulity which popular colonialist discourse associates with the Irish teller of stories about “the little people.” He lived alongside, but not through, the transition from orality to mass literacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for according to the best information available, he was unable to read.¹² Both trains and nets—webs?—played important parts in his life.

When Éamon Liam (Éamon, son of Liam) was born in April 1866, in Carna, County Galway, it was an almost monoglot Irish-speaking community, more easily reached by boat than by road or rail. His father, Liam, was a noted storyteller, but when Éamon was a child, the family emigrated from the rocky seaside landscape of Carna, with its small thatched houses and subsistence farming and fishing, to the United States, where they settled far from the ocean, in St Paul, Minnesota.

The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St Paul were growing rapidly, just beginning to attract immigrants from Europe, and building the prosperity they still enjoy. By 1871, St Paul, on the east side of the Mississippi, was connected by railroad both to Duluth on Lake Superior and to Chicago. It was the gateway to the prairies, the last link with the East Coast. Many of the new Irish immigrants worked at building the railways, which were opening up the West during this period, and several commentators have remarked on the numbers of serious injuries they sustained. By 1883 the Great Northern Railroad linked the Twin Cities to Seattle and the West Coast; and Éamon Liam, at the age of seventeen, had lost a leg in a railroad accident.

His family brought him back to Ireland, to his home parish of Carna, where he lived for the rest of his life. He was trained as a tailor (as lame boys often were, just as blind boys were taught music), but much preferring to be outdoors, he worked most of his life as a highly skilled sailor and fisherman. He could move around freely, easily vaulting, with the help of his crutch, the stone walls that are everywhere in Connemara. Once, in his early thirties, he sailed a three-and-a-half ton traditional fishing-boat through a severe storm with only two young boys as crew. In his account of that ordeal it is hard to say which is more impressive: his seamanship or the vigorous, precise language in which he narrated his experience to Liam Mac Coisdeala in 1938 (Ó Ceannabháin 25–28).

¹² Ó Ceannabháin 17, & personal communication with the author. Ó Ceannabháin mentions the storyteller’s absorbed interest in the radio news in 1938, when radios were still relatively rare in the west of Ireland.

Mac Coisdeala, who became a fulltime collector with the Irish Folklore Commission in 1936, first came to the Carna area in 1928 as a twenty-one-year-old teacher interested in collecting folklore. He soon discovered Éamon Liam, who at 62 was well known among his neighbours as the most talented storyteller for miles (Mac Coisdeala “In Memoriam”; “Im’ Bhailitheoir”).¹³ From then until the storyteller’s death in November 1942 at the age of 76, Mac Coisdeala visited the area regularly and wrote down or recorded some 200 stories from him, one of which ran to 34,000 words and took three evenings to tell (O’Nolan; cf. Delargy 16).

Although his fame in his own lifetime depended on his ability to tell long, formulaic, swashbuckling hero-tales and *Märchen*, Éamon Liam was also a consummate teller of fairy legends, creating enigmatic narratives that are full of striking visual detail as well as remarkable psychological and social insight. His protagonists are believable characters, the practical details of whose ordinary lives play an affecting counterpoint to the extraordinary events which befall them. One is a net-maker, so outraged by the fairies’ abduction of a human child that he blocks the way in and out of their hill by constructing a web of ropes across it, in a narrative that addresses questions of love and bereavement against a background of conflicting obligations. Another is a young girl, whose alienation from her family is expressed in the language of fairy metaphor (Bourke, “Fairies”). Still others are fishermen who come into contact with a world beneath the sea, behind the refraction of the water’s surface that can make a straight oar appear to hinge in the middle (Bourke, “Fisherman”). Its fairy inhabitants are at home in that dangerous and unknowable environment in which Éamon Liam as sailor and fisherman was such a fearless expert. As storyteller, however, we can observe him contriving to preserve for future generations a wealth of technical detail and practical information, by the simple expedient of using them as scaffolding for fantasy.

If the literary short story is a form which offers us fully furnished lives, briefly glimpsed before disappearing from sight, it may be because of the effect on the middle-class imagination of those sudden views into lit railway carriages bound in other directions, where a tired mother tries to control a child, people quietly play cards, or a man appears to strangle a woman. Generally speaking though, traditional oral storytellers are not regular commuters; nor do they live in city apartments. We do not expect

¹³ Liam Mac Coisdeala died, aged 89, on 10 April 1996 as this paper was being written. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.*

them to produce stories like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). Éamon a Búrc's acquaintance with the railroad in Minnesota left him with only one leg. As a result, instead of spending his adult life in the forward progress of the American Dream, he returned to Ireland and spent the rest of his days among nets and networks, as a tailor, shopkeeper, sailor, fisherman and storyteller. The world of his fiction was not in other people's lit windows; it was in the shared tradition of what is imagined beneath the surface of the everyday.

WORKS CITED

- Almqvist, Bo. "Irish Migratory Legends on the Supernatural: Sources, Studies and Problems." *Béaloideas* 59 (1991): 1-43.
- Arensberg, Conrad. *The Irish Countryman*. Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1968 [1937].
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. and introd. Hannah Arendt. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- Bourke, Angela. "Fairies and Anorexia: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Amazing Grass'." *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium XIII* (1993) [1995]: 25-38.
- _____. "Silence in Two Languages: Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and the Un-speakable," unpublished keynote lecture, Seventh Annual Graduate Irish Studies Conference, "Briseadh Amach / Breaking the Hermetic Seal," Boston College and Harvard University, March 19, 1993.
- _____. "Reading a Woman's Death: Colonial Text and Oral Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland." *Feminist Studies* 21, No. 3 (Fall 1995): 553-586.
- _____. "Hunting out the Fairies: E. F. Benson, Oscar Wilde, and the Burning of Bridget Cleary." *Wilde the Irishman*. Ed. Jerusha Hull McCormack. (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).
- _____. "'The Fisherman and the Fairy Boat' / 'An tIascaire agus an Bád Sí': Temptation and Fidelity in Éamon a Búrc's Sea-Stories." *Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Folk Narrative and Folk Belief in the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Area*. Eds. Séamas Ó Catháin, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, Patricia Lysaght. (Dublin: forthcoming).
- Brunvand, Jan. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1981.
- Delargy, James H. Editorial note, *Béaloideas* IV (1933-4) 87.

- _____. *The Gaelic Story-teller*. Chicago: American Committee for Irish Studies, Reprints in Irish Studies, 6, 1969 (from *Proc. Brit. Acad.* 31 (1945): 177–221).
- Douglas, Mary. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1970].
- _____. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970 [1966].
- Gibbons, Luke. *Transformations in Irish Culture*. Cork: Cork UP, 1996.
- Glassie, Henry. *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.
- _____, ed. *The Penguin Book of Irish Folktales*. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Godzich, Wlad. *The Culture of Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Cape, 1995.
- Kinahan, Frank. *Yeats, Folklore, and Occultism: Contexts of the Early Work and Thought*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966 [1962].
- Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Lysaght, Patricia. “Fairylor from the Midlands of Ireland.” *Narváez* 22–46.
- Mac Coisdeala, Liam. “In Memoriam, Éamonn (Liam) a Búrc (Aill na Brón, Cárna, Co. na Gaillimhe).” *Béaloideas* 12 (1942) 210–14.
- _____. “Im’ Bhailitheoir Béaloideas,” *Béaloideas* 16 (1946) 141–71.
- McLaughlin, Jim. *Travellers and Ireland: Whose History? Whose Country?* Cork: Cork UP, 1995.
- Narváez, Peter, ed. *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*. New York: Garland, 1991.
- Ó Catháin, Séamas, coll., ed. and trans. *Scéalta Chois Cladaigh / Stories of Sea and Shore*. Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1983.
- Ó Ceannabháin, Peadar, ed. *Éamon a Búrc: Scéalta*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1983.
- Ó Cruaioich, Gearóid. “The Primacy of Form: A ‘Folk Ideology’ in De Valera’s Politics.” *De Valera and His Times*. Ed. John P. Carroll and John A. Murphy. Cork: Cork UP, 1983. 47–61.
- Ó Drisceoil, Dónal. *Censorship in Ireland, 1939–1945: Neutrality, Politics and Society*. Cork: Cork UP, 1996.
- Ó hEochaidh, Seán, Máire Mac Néill & Séamas Ó Catháin. *Síscéalta ó Thír*

- Chonail/Fairy Legends from Donegal*. Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1977.
- Ó Giolláin, Diarmuid. "An Béaloideas agus an Stát." *Béaloideas* 57 (1989) 151–163.
- Ó Gráda, Cormac. *Ireland: A New Economic History 1780-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- O’Nolan, Kevin, ed. and trans. *Eochair, Mac Rí in Éirinn / Eochair, a King’s Son in Ireland*. Dublin: Comhairle Bhéaloideas Éireann, 1982.
- O’Sullivan, Sean. *Legends from Ireland*. London: Batsford, 1977.
- Partridge, Angela. *Caoineadh na dTrí Muire: Téama na Páise i bhFilíocht Bhéil na Gaeilge*. Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1983.
- Radner, Joan N., ed. *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1993.
- Rieti, Barbara. *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland*. St John’s, Can.: ISER Books, 1991.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. Berkeley: University of California, 1986.
- Scott, Walter. *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. London: Alex. Murray & Sons, 1869.
- Toelken, Barre. *The Dynamics of Folklore*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977.
- Vallely, Fintan. "The Bucks of Montrose." *Graph*, Second series, issue 1 (1995) 42–51.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.
- Yates, Frances A. *The Art of Memory*. Chicago & London: Routledge, 1966.