

Irish Storytelling – Part 1

Good Patrick of Macha stood at the end of his mission. He had built seven hundred churches and ordained three thousand priests. Ireland was a Christian land, free of stone idols, specters and snakes. Before him stood Oisín, the last of the Fenian warriors, bent, broken and old. St. Patrick asked him to relate "the ancient tales, "the tales of Ireland's men and women, mountains and rivers. Brogan, Patrick's scribe, took them down in the thousands. Then Patrick recoiled from the pleasure he took in pagan things. He poured forth his worry to his guardian angels. Fear not, they told him, listen to the tales, record them in the very words of their tellers for they will prove a delight to good people until the end of time. (Irish Folk Tales, edited by Heniy Glassie)

Many years later, one of those "good people" was Patrick Breslin. "My father took me to see Neil Duffy, the 'shanachie,' or local storyteller," recalls Patrick in his article "Ireland's Shanachies Are Gone Now, But Their Legends Live On." He was only eleven years old but he remembers seeing an old man, white haired and stiff jointed who searched him with a stem glance and he knew that this was a special occasion, that "respect was being paid." He says that there were others there that night, though he only remembers them as dark shapes when they crossed before the hearth. He does remember clearly, however, Neil Duffy, leaning back against the pillows and talking slowly of the high kings of Ireland, of the heroes of the Fionn MacCumhaill cycles, of St. Patrick's miracles and of the doings of the fairy people. Looking into that man's eyes and hearing his voice, he got the feeling that thousands of years of Irish history, story, culture and tradition were within his grasp.

Those two wonderful images, in many ways, give us a good idea of the longevity and intimacy of the Irish storytelling tradition. It is one that goes back thousands of years, for we do know that there were twelve levels of storytelling and that one had to move through these various levels before one could "tell" for the chieftain of the clan. And although we know that Ireland is thought of, primarily, as a Catholic country, its traditions and stories are a blend of pagan and Christian influences.

St. Patrick, expressing a desire to hear the ancient tales, is a very powerful image. So, too, is the image of the shanachie being given a very special place in the community and being listened to with great reverence and respect. The shanachie, not only in the Irish storytelling tradition but in the traditions of cultures around the world, is the instrument by which has been carried through the ages the theories, explanations, and the images of our world and how it functions.

In the years when printed books, magazines and newspapers were rare and neither radio nor television had been invented, the people of Ireland, like those in other lands, had to provide their own entertainment. In Ireland, conversation, music, singing, dancing and sports filled their lives, and storytelling, especially in areas where the Irish language was spoken, was extremely popular. A good storyteller, a large repertoire of tales stored in his/her memory (in general women storytellers were less numerous than men), seated by the fireside in an honored place was assured of an attentive audience on winter nights.

The primary setting for storytelling was the fireside. The man of the house had the right and the duty to tell the first story and he would be followed by other tellers. According to folklorist Sean O'Sullivan, storytelling in the day time was said to be unlucky, but many men have described how they learned their tales while haymaking or digging potatoes. Stories were told also by fishermen waiting for their time to haul in their nets and women passed the nights telling stories to each other. In crowded wake-houses, tales were told to attentive groups in quiet corners or to a smaller general audience when those who had attended earlier left for home. Lodging houses were great centers for storytelling and the new stories that were brought home by travelers were eagerly awaited by all. Traveling seasonal laborers (spailpini) also spread folk tales from one area to another.

After the Famine of 1845-47, thousands of homeless people had to take to the roads seeking food and shelter, and even in the early decades of the present century, individual remnants of these wanderers

were still to be met within rural areas of Ireland . If one of these wanderers had the reputation of being a good storyteller, he/she was assured of a hearty welcome and a house would fill up quickly at the coming of a shanachie. Nights would be passed listening to the tales brought by the traveler and they would be learned almost as quickly as they were told. Listeners would follow the teller to the next parish to hear him tell the same stories again.

As there are thousands of tales of various kinds throughout the world, it became necessary to categorize them. Antti Aarne, a Finn, published in Helsinki in 1910 a list of "international" tales and proposed a definite ordinal number and a title as a label on each type of tale. In 1929, Aarne and the American folklorist Stith Thompson brought out an expanded edition in English of Aarne's work entitled *The Types of the Folktale*. This register is usually referred to as Aarne Thompson. Many countries, including Ireland , have now issued catalogues of their own folktales. The Irish catalog, entitled *the Types of the Irish Folktale* (O'Suilleabhain and Christiansen), was published in 1963. The Irish catalog listed about 43,000 versions of seven hundred or so "international" tale-types which had been found in the oral currency or in print in Ireland up to the end of 1956. Since that time, this large number of versions has been added to considerably and recorded.

(In future articles, the author will discuss the variety of Irish stories and the folklorists who collected them and, thankfully, made them available for all of us to read and enjoy.)

(Written by Jim Hawkins, February 2000)

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