It was, I believe, Mr. Andrew Lang who summarised Scotch Folklore as “all witches” and Irish as “all fairies.” The latter at least is the popular idea on the subject. It is correct to the extent that belief in fairies (Sidhe) is general in Ireland—all the varieties, from the Fairy Host to the Leprechaun. The varieties, it must not be forgotten, are more than a differentiation of local nomenclature. The Fairy Host, according to tradition, consists of the fallen angels. One version of their origin is as follows:

The Devil was admiring himself in a looking-glass, and he said, “I am very beautiful. I am very beautiful. I am more beautiful than God.” He went on saying this till God got in a tearing rage and turned the Devil out of Heaven. A lot of the angels laughed at this, and God was so angry at their laughing that He threw them out of Heaven also, bailing them out by handfuls. So they fell down, down, down. But St. Michael interfered and begged for them to be spared. So they were allowed to stay where they were. And some were on earth, some were in the sea, and some were in the sky. So they became the Fairy Host.

A great deal has been written about the Banshee, therefore I will only give you a story of the origin of Banshees I met with in Wicklow the year before last:

“Banshees were out in my day, so I never heard one, but I heard tell of them. It was this way they came to be. When a man with a bit of money was going to die he would send for the keeners, maybe three or four, as many as he could pay. The rich man he would have many keeners at his burial. He would give a pound to the one, and a pound to this other, and tell them he wished them to keen for him, and for any more of his family that might die. And some were better keeners than the rest, and they would be kept to keen for all of a family, and they would promise always to keen when one of that family died. Then when they came to die they still went on keening when one was dead. So they became Banshees. I did hear,” my informant added, “of a terrible loud screeching that was to be heard once for miles. It could not be a man was doing it, for they who heard at the same time was miles away.”

“Screech owls,” I hazarded, but was suppressed with, “There be none of them bastes here.”

The accuracy of this ornithological information is open to question. Also, if this man had not heard a Banshee there is a plenitude of information from others who have, and details of various death portents.

Irish fairy-lore has been exploited almost to the exclusion of any other, so there is no need to enlarge on this segment of Irish folklore. For it is but a segment. On the other hand, the witch-cult of
the country has been practically ignored. There has been an absence of literature on the subject, and Ireland never developed a witch-cult of her own. Fairy-lore and witch-lore have, moreover, been confused. People use the words “witch” and “bewitched” when speaking of fairies. Yet, though it affected the island only partially, Ireland has not been exempt from the universal witch-cult, and I have found belief in both witches and fairies held by the same individuals, but clearly distinguished by them. For instance, a Queen’s County man who told me that the will-o’-the-wisp was “a little dwarf that lived in the bog and waved,” also told me the following tale:

“There was a man was a friend of me father’s, John Daly he was, and ’tis often I heard me father tell the tale. John Daly told him, and me father firmly believed it to be the truth. There was a suspicion that someone was taking the milk from a cow, so they put a pony in the field to watch it. One morning early, say about three of the clock, there was a great noise heard, and John Daly creeping up to see what the mischief might be saw a hare taking the milk from the cow, sucking at her teats. John Daly had a big stick in his hand, a bit of a bludgeon with a knob to its top, and he crept, and he crept, silently up till he let out a great smack with his stick at the hare and broke her thigh. She limped off at that, and John Daly was content. ’She’ll not be taking any more milk I’m thinking,’ says he. Now a week after that as John Daly was driving barley to the market very early in the morning he wanted a light to his pipe. There was no ditch along that road as there would be on the pike-road, so he drove up to a cottage he saw down by the bog and went in. There was two old women in the cottage, and one of them sat by the table sipping tea. ‘Will you take a sup o’ tay ..?’ says she to John Daly.

‘No, thanks,’ says he, ‘I must get along to the market.’

‘’Tis lucky for you John Daly,’ says the old girl in the corner, ‘that you did not taste her tay, for she’ll not be forgiving you breaking her thigh, and ’tis all your life you’d be remembering it’”

Hares are certainly beasts of ill-omen, universally to be regarded with grave suspicion. As one-time whip to a pack of beagles I am tempted to digress and ask why? Has it anything to do with the hare’s custom of running in a ring when hunted, and the uncanny way in which Puss will turn and jump right through her pursuers? Not so many years ago none of the country folk would go down one of the avenues of ——, my cousin’s home in Co. Tyrone, because it passed by a wood where a black hare had been seen, and a man was not ashamed to confess he would “never go on his loneness” there after dark, for the black hare was certainly a witch. As hares are witches they should be stoned on May Day. A Limerick lady told me, “It was only a few years ago they burnt a woman for a witch, I remember. She started digging potatoes with her left foot of a Monday morning. That would be bring-ing a curse on the crop, so they stoned her in the field and burnt her.” This was “since 1905.” Cross-questioning elicited nothing more definite, but the time tallies with the even vaguer mention of a recent witch-burning made by a man in the Royal Irish Constabulary, and rumours of witch-burning are to hand within the last ten years in Clare, Kerry, Sligo, and Roscommon.

I have no details, but some at least could be found in the records of the R.I.C. Speaking of the south and west a police sergeant told me two years ago, “There be many witches in those parts. There was a quack doctor, Quin was his name, in Tipperary, and he took a woman and burnt her for a witch.” Nor was this the notorious Clonmel case, when a woman was burnt because she was supposed to be a fairy changeling.

The difference between the work of a fairy and a witch appears to be that the fairy changes by kidnapping the person and leaving a substitute to impose on their relatives and neighbours: the witch does not kidnap, but may work radical and evil alteration in the victim. Sometimes the Devil takes a direct hand in the mischief-making. Ballinagarde, the home of the Crokers, is under a meeah (curse), for the Devil dined there, being invited somehow by mistake. Such tales might be multiplied endlessly, but I will only quote one, from Cork:
“This is the tale of the Widow O’Brien’s pig. ’Twas the finest pig in all Mallow, and the pride of her soul. There was not such another pig ever to be seen. And she, going to the sty one day, did find he be missing. ’Tis not there he is. He be lost. Sure and herself was kilt with misery, and ’twas not long but she did call the boys together to send them a hunt for it. Then away they went hopping and lepping to hunt for the Widow’s pig. And they hunted and they hunted, but not a sign of a trace could they find of him. He was lost entirely. And the next day was the Sunday, so the Widow went to Mass, and ’tis herself did not pray for a pig I’m thinking. Now when they came out of Mass there was the jewel of a row, a shrieking and a screaming from all the Protestants that did be going to church, and out with a squealing and a squalling came running the pig. Now would you believe it, ’tis true I’m telling you, they’d found him asleep in the Protestant pulpit. So the boys they knew the divil was in him, and they consulted together what would be the way to be driving him out. And they took the pig down to the tide, and they washed him, and they laved him, and they scrubbed him all over. But ’twas no good. The pig died. The divil was in him.”

However, the subject of this paper is not Irish Folktales, but Characteristics of Irish Folklore. I have started with the tales, because they are the part that looms largest in popular recognition. The reason of this error, and it amounts to an error, is that collectors record tales and not customs. The temptation is obvious. But none the less it is to be deplored. The branches of the tree have been hidden by the leaves, or, one might almost say, the flowers. Surely the anthropological value lies as much, or more, in contributory causes and the manner of the telling than in the tale. Yet book after book of tales may be opened wherein no mention is made of the ceilidhs, or gatherings round the fireside on winter evenings when tales are told, and told again. A man will come into a neighbour’s house, saying, “God save you all”—he may add, “barring the cat!” If the answer be, “God save you kindly,” he sits down among the assembled group. If other answer is given he must go away. In this fashion people pick out some dozen of their friends and make a merry party. If a man wants to prove an alibi, should he get into trouble, he will at once say he was keeping his ceilidh, or “kallying.”

“I was a smakin’ klally.” “I was a soundin’ ceilidh.”

Another social gathering is known as a join. At a join the guests either subscribe for a barrel of porter, or each brings his own drink, and they play cards. Somewhat similar, though with more serious import, is a mehil. If someone is ill, or very hard up, his neighbours come for a day’s digging, and he supplies them with boxty and drink. Boxty, as made in Cavan, Leitrim, and Fermanagh, is raw, grated potatoes, wrung through a cloth, mixed with flour, boiled first, then stewed and fried. Bullockeen (veal) and boxty are the traditional wedding breakfast in Cavan and Leitrim. [5]

A section of Irish folklore that deserved better study, and record, and may now be largely irrecoverable, is the herbalist lore of the island, a true native cultural tradition—or traditional culture. If herbal charms and herbal medicine were inextricably combined, that is not a peculiarity nor exclusively Irish, whereas the general botanical knowledge was considerable, and Lady Wilde counted it a national characteristic. [6] It is only to be expected that numbers of herbs employed, of days whereon the potion be given, have weight in the potency of the cure, with concomitant value attached to seasons of gathering, times of year or day when compounded and administered. Certain “ harbs” here, as elsewhere, were credited with super-extra virtues above and beyond scientific limitations. Belief in charms and potions is for the finding in all parts of Ireland, and whatever strides the modern pharmacopeia may be making, the “quack doctor,” the cow doctor, the wizard, and the wise woman have yet their clientele. “Witches,” as I have heard Ulster folk call both the latter, will make charms to protect the owner from many ills, especially from the evil eye—though certainly it is not only in the north that a person may “ill-look” you.

There is a measure of daring in the employment of magical remedies. Nor is there reason for surprise at the fear popularly connected with the administration of a love potion for instance—“a very awful act and full of danger,” wrote Lady Wilde [7]—when one finds ten leaves of hemlock dried and powdered went to the making.

The charm is not always complex, though many are. I once asked an Ulsterman if he knew any. “I come from the civilised parts,” said he, but added as an afterthought, “They Catholics are very
superstitious. There was a neighbour of me father’s now who would always put the eggshells on top of the coop when the chickens were hatched. He would keep them there or the chickens would die.

In *Folk-Lore*, vol. xvi. p. 200, is an excellent account of the cow doctor, and of his charms compounded with “three mearne water,” a silver coin and “erribs.” One day when a cow doctor had been summoned to treat a sick cow—this was in Munster a few years ago—two sceptical young people came to see the performance. When the charm, a small leather bag, had been passed over and about the animal and left on its back, an excuse was made to get the cow doctor away for a moment. During his absence they opened the bag, and found it contained only three small stones. Despite the interference with the charm the beast recovered.

Mention should be made of the supposed curative powers of certain wells, springs and pools. There is the famous well of Doone in Donegal, surrounded by votive offerings of rags and crutches. In Co. Tyrone, at Altedavan (Ordnance spelling of the Irish *Alta dhioull*—the Devil’s glen) is a well which I remember long ago was filled with pins and buttons, and is still resorted to by the sick in firm belief that dropping a pin or a button in it will relieve them of disease. The so-called “well” is a hollow basin in an out-jutting rock, and is filled with rain water only. It is, however, “holy water” in the country people’s eyes. Besides curative, it used to be credited with magical powers, and I remember I dropped a pin in with my eyes shut, and wished a wish—to this day not accomplished!

A point that calls for some comment is the prevalence of cattle-folklore. This is especially noticeable when one examines into Irish Calendar Customs. On the other hand, though it might be expected, in view of the importance of Irish herbal lore, that agricultural customs would bulk largely in the Irish Calendar, so far as I am aware this is not the case. There are, of course, references in plenty to the time or season of gathering herbs; and flowers and branches enter considerably into folk customs; but of purely agricultural hardly any seem noted. A stone from the bonfire on St. John’s Eve should be thrown for luck over on the potato field.[8] Parsley should be sown on Good Friday, because it goes down into Hell seven times before it comes up. I have also references to a few harvest customs,[9] but, taken as a whole, there is a lack of agricultural folklore. Possibly weather conditions have some share in determining this, economic certainly have had.

The origin of this paper was a conversation with my friend, Miss Burne, who asked me if I could account for the singular lack of Calendar Customs in Ireland. The alleged lack surprised me. Of all parts of the—still—United Kingdom I imagined my own island—where folk-memory is amazingly long—would provide the richest harvest for the Brand Committee. I mentioned the puzzle to a fellow-countrywoman, “And are there none? But I’m sure we could invent some,” said she, and therewith furnished me with a peg for *Characteristics of Irish Folklore*. The remark was so entirely characteristic. Here was a Sassenach wanting information. It was up to Ireland to supply it. Such supply was demanded by politeness, and for the honour of the old country it must be forthcoming. Calendar Customs are presumably desirable things—unlike snakes—therefore the chapter thereon in the new *Brand* must not resemble the proverbial one on snakes in Irish Natural History.

It is an old trouble; age old.

To explain it is to explain centuries of misunderstanding between the two peoples—to analyse it is a nice problem for the student of psychology and metaphysics. Here it suffices to say that, as in all things Irish, the reasons are both complex and contradictory: something of good nature, a measure of disdain, much pride, a touch of despair, genuine curiosity, and a leavening of wit. It was curiosity largely that led me to plunge into a study of what has been written on the subject. I thought, and herewith to my present conclusions—for I still think—that there must be “lashings and leavings” of calendar material for the seeking, nor are they only to be found in what an Ulsterman designated “they backward parts.” But the search is beset with an unusual allowance of difficulties. It would almost seem as though writers on Irish customs had entered into a conspiracy not to write about Irish customs. This may be taken as “so characteristic of the Irish,” but we are by no means the only offenders. You may put it down to the natural perversity of the beast when the author of *Irish Local Legends* (O’Hanlon) devotes several pages to a diatribe against Joseph Chamberlain and the British
South African policy! But if this is perversity, only blank ignorance explains many sins of omission and commission set to the account of English writers. A favourite remark of both Irish and English is that the customs at X do not differ from those at Y, and that those at Y are too well known and generally observed elsewhere to need description, and therewith more folk-tales and nary a custom. Certain peculiar ones have attracted attention, such as Hunting the Wren on St. Stephen’s Day in the South. A century ago this was said to be dying out, or even obsolete, [9] but I have heard of Wren Boys from friends within the last three or four years, and have several variants of the Wren Boys’ song. One, from Co. Cork, was sung first thing in the morning by small boys, who carried a bush with bits of rag stuck about it, but my friends saw no sign of a wren:

“ The wran, the wran, the king of all birds,
St. Stephen’s Day was caught in the furze.
We hunted him up and we hunted him down,
And the best of the wran boys knocked him down.
               Sing holly, sing ivy, sing ivy, sing holly,
               To keep a bad Christmas it is but a folly,
               For Christmas comes but once a year,
               And when it comes it brings good cheer.

“ Mr. ——— is a worthy man,
And to his house we’ve brought the wran.
So up with the kettle and down with the pan,
And give us a penny and let us be gone!
               Sing holly, etc.” [10]

In a County Clare version the singers, who had blackened faces and carried a bladder, altered the last lines to:

“ Although he’s little, his family’s great,
So rise up young ladies and give us a treat.”

Another account, from West Cork and Kerry, gives:

“ At Calaghan’s Gate we knocked him down,” [11]

and the Wren Boys there, if they could not find a wren, killed a robin. [12] The wren’s breast was always smeared with blood.

A paper on Irish bird-lore has already been published by this Society, [13] so I will only add a note on a point of bird-lore personally known to me, viz. the dislike, obviously imported, of the magpie—obviously, as the bird was not known in Ireland before the eighteenth century. Derrick, in 1578, wrote:

“ No pies to pluck the thatch from house.
Are breed in Irishe ground.” [14]

I remember once a Mayo man, just as our party was starting out shooting, caught sight of a magpie. “Bedad!” says he, “if it’s bad luck at all it’ll be bad luck to the magpie!”—and he shot the bird on the spot.

Another custom frequently noted is the bonfire or bone-fire. Accounts of May or Midsummer bonfires may be found in many eighteenth-century books, and as early as the days of Colonel Vallancey, speculation was rife as to their significance and origin. On May Eve and Mid-summer Eve bonfires are general. Shaw Mason mentions them on St. Peter’s Eve and St. James’s Eve in Co. Wexford, [15] and there is a note in the Cork H.A.S.J. of bonfires on the south-east coast on St. Peter’s Day and Lammas Day. [16] Personally I know them best in connection with political not calendar events.
The first points that suggest themselves to the student of Irish Calendar Customs are the marked division of the year at May and November [17] (the “ dead month”), and the importance of the Eves. To make a rough order of merit, based on the number and variety of observances, May Eve and Day in my note-book come easily first. There are herbs and dew to be gathered for charms, boughs and branches for protection—in the South they are placed not only on houses and sheds but on the railway engines, chestnut boughs for choice; flowers, especially primroses, or sometimes marsh marigolds—yellow, as best befits a butter festival—to be sprinkled on doorsteps and window-ledges, as offerings to the Good People, whose magic music can be heard on this day by mortal man. Shee (Sidhe) power predominates on May Day, at Whitsuntide, Midsummer, and Hallowtide. Fairies have no power on Fridays—according to some; it would hardly be Irish if all were in agreement! There are spells to be wrought, and divinations. The druktheen has been described by Lady Wilde and others. I myself know of a comparatively recent case in Co. Cork, where the little slug was hunted for and found early on May morning, placed on a plate sprinkled with flour, and baked alive in the oven that its writhings might trace in the flour the initials of the future lucky man.

I have mentioned May as a “butter festival.” Precautions must be taken to protect the milk and butter at all times, but especially on May Day. “There be in many places in the south and in the midlands people who will take the butter, so you may churn the milk for a week and no butter will come,” said my Queen’s County informant. This power is independent of May Day pilfering or importunacy, and is also common to the fairies. The belief in this is so general as to give many opportunities for the dishonest. An old friend of mine when living near Newport, Co. Tipperary, found the milk disappeared mysteriously from her dairy. Dairyman and dairywoman alike had but one explanation—fairies; but investigation provided very human origin for the loss, none other than the dairyman himself being proved the thief. As for churning, if any one came in during the process and did not take a hand at the churn the fairies would at once send all the butter astray, and there would be no butter.

“If you put a gad just above the water level of a river or stream on May Eve,” said Miss Hunt to me, “and go to look at it in the morning you will know if the year is to be a fat or a lean one. If the water has risen and touches the gad it will be a bad season and crops will be bad and cattle not thrive.” [18] This is a Cavan custom. In Co. Cork children go round on May Day with May baskets, gaily trimmed and decorated with flowers and bits of ribbon. In the basket is a saucer for coins, and the children beg a penny for the May basket. They do not sprinkle primroses, as they do in Counties Mayo, Cavan, etc.

As an instance of Calendar Custom in the making, it is of interest to note that primroses in Dublin are sold by the flower-girls on 19th April. It is “Primrose Day,” and the proper thing is to sell and wear the flower. Needless to say they have not the faintest idea of the political significance attached to the wearing, or the flowers would be thrown tatteret in the Liffey.

But I cannot attempt to recapitulate here all the May customs, and must pass on to my next lists, Midsummer and Hallowtide. Though there are bonfires, and also certain prohibitions governing fire on May Day, viz., it may not be given away, [19] must not be lit before noon, or till smoke is seen from the priest’s house, [20] etc.; fires are of more general importance at the Midsummer festival, when flowers are less in evidence. At Midsummer cattle customs again are noticeably important. But not only cattle pass through the fires on St. John’s Eve. Friends tell me they remember seeing couples jump hand in hand over, or through, the bonetfires [21] at the cross roads on the top of a hill near Timoleague. In Co. Clare I have also heard of this jumping through the fires, and there the materials for the bonfires are collected for six months beforehand. At one time the bonfires were not relegated to country districts, but actually lit in the streets of the towns; for we find, in Warburton’s History of Dublin [22] that the Lord Mayor had to forbid the practice because of the danger from fire, and as a substitute candles were stuck in bushes in the streets.
The importance of the Eve as compared with the Day, noticeable at Midsummer, is even more marked at Hallow-tide. Hallow Eve is observed everywhere, though I was told in Co. Tyrone that there is “less silly mischief and monkey-tricks nowadays. Gardens are no longer trampled down, or gates taken off their hinges”—contingent on cutting cabbages, Ulster girls being as ready in the old days to go out at midnight and cut a cabbage, as their sisters in Munster were more recently to celebrate “Snap-apple Night” by filling their mouths with oats and going out to the door or gate to hear the name of their future husband called; or to melt lead and pour it through the wards of the hall-door key into a basin of cold water, to discover their fortunes. But divinations (it is to be noted they are usually done in the Devil’s name) though they attract public interest—and hence the pen of the ready, and often only too superficial, writer—are by no means the serious business of this season. November is the month of mourning. It is above all things, by both Pagan and Christian ruling, the time of the dead. They may leave their graves and dance on Hallow E’en. They revisit the scenes of their earthly life. Sacrifices were made to them on All Souls’ Day. Blood must be spilt. [23] Sacrifice and blood-spilling are particularly observed on Martinmas Eve, which has its own prohibitions. To this day in Co. Mayo a chicken should be killed and its blood offered to St. Martin on his Eve, but, "no one would think of killing any kind of feathered thing on St. Martin’s Day. [24]

The Christmas Customs I have notes on, almost without exception, suggest post-Christian influences. Bonfires are absent from my list, but candles take their place. Lighting the Christmas Candle is an act not to be omitted in many a house, and not only in the peasant’s cabin. In Co. Mayo a candle is placed in the window of each cottage and left to burn all night: no Christmas Candle is ever put out, it must burn itself away. The door is left open. In West Clare the candles are lit in the windows on Little Christmas Day, or Woman’s Christmas (Cork), that is to say, Twelfth Night. Those who die at midnight on Christmas Eve escape Purgatory, and a case is quoted in MacDonagh’s Irish Life and Character (pp. 376-7) of a dying man being assisted by his relatives with a pillow to attain this desirable end.

Though Shrovetide, Easter, Whitsun, Lammas, and Michaelmas, may not offer the Brand Committee as much material as those seasons already noted, they will yet not fail to contribute an Irish share in the compilation. Shrovetide (Scraft) is the chief marriage season in the country, as after it no weddings may be celebrated, at least among the Roman Catholic population, till Easter, and Easter comes in the press of Spring work, if any work can be said to press in Ireland, outside the corners dominated by modern methods and commerce. Matrimonial customs therefore culminate, and end, on Shrove Tuesday, Pancake Day, Skellig Night. So on that day the boys go from house to house to get the girls to come out and dance with them, or did quite recently, in the South. The Skellig list, being entirely Irish in origin and observance, demands more than casual mention, though the Skellig pilgrimages, from whence came the name, have been dealt with by more than one writer. [25] The list at its simplest summarises the names of couples who, in the opinion of their neighbours, should be engaged. A man from Macroom described more elaborate proceedings to me, and told how bands of youths ducked the unmarried in the river. A party would sally forth to catch unwary—or too wary!—bachelors, boys who, the village considered, should have settled down as respectable Benedicts. Say that one Paddy Leary had dallied unduly before taking his mate: the party, holding a rope, would watch for his approach, and then divide, and half would go one way, the rest on the other side round their victim, to wind him in the rope. Meanwhile a song would be improvised, to the effect that “Paddy Leary is an old man and ought to be married,” setting forth the merits and demerits of the accused, his worldly possessions, and the reasons why he ought to marry. This in rough rhyme would be chanted, and the doggerel sent round to the neighbours that they might sing and laugh him into matrimony. Satire has not lost its age-old influence in Erin. [26]

There may be penance about the Skellig list of to-day, but there is little solemnity, yet the name comes from the old custom of solemn penitential pilgrimages to the Skellig Rocks off the coast of Kerry, where no bird had power to fly over the ancient chapels, but must first alight and “walk gently over and then take wing.” [27] When the matrimonial element intruded on what Lecky calls these “perilous devotions” at “the Stone of Pain,” [28] I have no clue, but by degrees the pilgrimage, like many another, became less of a pilgrimage and more of a junketting, till the proceedings grew so
notorious that the authorities intervened. No pilgrim adventures on the dangerous pathways of the Great Skellig to-day, and only rumour tells of old maids being taken off in boats to the rocks. Some-
what similar was the Waterford custom of Drawing the Log on Ash Wednesday, noted by the Halls in their Tour (vol. i. p. 315), a log being ducked, not a man, after it had been drawn by a rope through the streets to a chorus of:

“Come draw the log, come draw the log;
Bachelors and maids come draw the log.”

The Skellig list customs are entirely confined to the South, and even the name is for the most part unknown in Ulster. Chalk Sunday—when the boys chalk the backs of the unmarried—is, however, observed in all four Provinces, though I have only heard of Puss Thursday from Munster and Connaught. [29] Puss Thursday being the first Thursday in Lent, so that those who are not already married will probably continue so throughout the year—hence their disconsolate looks. “A puss on you” means an ugly face.

Ulster has her own peculiar Calendar Customs—though their observance is not entirely limited to that Province. One might revise the phrase and say Protestant Ireland has its own peculiar customs, with a passing note that, so deeply has religious severance gone, days recognised mutually by Protestant and Roman Catholic in England, for example Ash Wednesday—may be almost completely ignored by Protestants in Ireland. The annual Orange celebration of the 12th July is, without doubt, the most important Calendar Custom of the North. I would like to write more fully of the garlands of orange lilies everywhere prominent, and all that I saw when I myself “walked” on one memorable 12th, but time forbids, and I can but mention the drums—beaten from early morning, not with ordinary drumsticks but canes, and so energetically it is by no means unusual for blood to stream from the wrists of the drummers; indeed it used to be almost a point of honour to go on drumming till it did! The drums are as significant to an Orangeman as blowing bottles—in lieu of horns—to the Nationalist boycotter. More local customs are the mimic representation of the Battle of Scarva, re-enacted every year, and the commemoration of the closing of the gates of Derry. The regrettable fights that in the past too often have marred these celebrations are, after all, Calendar Customs! They are but a variant of the faction fights [30] which have existed from time immemorial.

The characteristic points which will be noticeable in the new Brand, may be roughly summarised therefore: the importance of herbal lore; the prevalence of cattle-folklore; the marked distinction between married and unmarried, and the overwhelming number of local saints—whereof anon.

Many of the customs I have referred to, and very many more unmentioned ones, go to prove that Irish folklore must be well examined by any student who wishes to specialise on primitive social organisations. The distinction between married and unmarried enters very largely into Irish folk-life. Girls whilst unmarried are at the disposal of their parents. Should a woman lack the courage and initiative to set forth on that search after fortune service in America or elsewhere may offer, life holds but sorry prospect for her when marriage is not her destiny—in other words, if no marriage portion can be secured her. This, in very many cases, is provided by the portion brought into the family by the son’s wife. Nor is it only the peasants who have suffered from this cause. Many an estate has been drained to ruination by the heavy charges made upon it for the support of dependent members of the owner’s kin, to an extent I believe quite unknown in England. A man in popular phrase is a “boy,” whatever his age, if unmarried. The distinction even penetrated into military and civil organisations. The Dublin bachelors were under the Captaincy or guardianship of an annually elected “Mayor of the Bull Ring,” who held authority to punish them for any moral lapse. “When any bachelor citizen,” wrote Warburton, quoting from Harris’ Hist, of the City of Dublin, pp. 152-3, “happened to marry, the custom was for the mayor of the bull ring and his attendants to conduct the bridegroom, upon his return from church, to the ring, and there with a solemn kiss receive his homage and last farewell: from whence the new married man took the mayor and sheriffs of the bull ring home to dinner with him, unless he were poor; in which case the mayor and his bachelors made a collection for him, which they gave to him at the ring, upon receiving his homage. But this office seems to have been ludicrous, and established merely by custom, without any foundation of authority.” [31] In the same city the local military forces were mustered annually on Easter Monday, May Day, Midsummer Eve,
and St. Peter’s Eve. “The charges of these musters were defrayed by fines levied on such freemen as had been married the foregoing year. The mayor and principal citizens sat at these musters under a pavilion or tent erected on the top of a butt; and every person so married, being below the estate of paying a fine in money, presented the mayor with an orange, as an acknowledgment for the fine, which by the constitution and custom of the city he was liable to.” [32]

I would draw attention to the gift of an orange, and to the occurrence in Irish folklore of wreaths and balls in connection with matrimonial observances. Unfortunately, so far as I have ascertained, these interesting rites de passage have been but little noticed. But Colonel Vallancey informs us that on May 3rd, “each bride married within the year makes up a large ball covered with gold or silver tissue (in resemblance of the Deity), and presents it to the young unmarried men of the neighbourhood, who, having previously made a circular garland of hoops, &c. (to represent the zodiac), come to the bride’s house to fetch this representation of that planet. To such a pitch is this superstitious ceremony carried, I have known in the county of Waterford a ball to have cost a poor peasant two guineas.” [33] Lady Wilde tells of hoop and balls carried by the dancers round the May bush; [34] the Halls describe how a decorated tree and ball was taken to a bride the first May Day after her wedding; [35] and Crofton Croker mentions the gift of a goaling ball on May Day. [36] In this con-nection it will be remembered that Arthur Young in his Travels in Ireland, after an account of the well-known custom of “horsing the bride,” proceeds to tell of an annual hurling match, when a girl was given as prize to the winner. [37] Lecky quotes Young’s note of this occurrence at Londonderry in a paragraph dealing with “a form of crime which was once inveterate in the national life, but which has been so completely extirpated that its very memory and tradition have almost passed away. I mean forcible abduction.” [38] Lecky was not a folklorist, or that phrase might have been revised. On a previous page the historian, again giving Young as his authority, refers to the existence of what in a country with so high—and so deservedly high—a moral reputation, one would little expect to find—the recognition and practice of droit de seigneur. [39]

But all this would provide material for a paper in itself.

Still more would the local saints. This subject, in fact, is so large, so difficult, in that it demands such special knowledge of not only the people but of Irish history and literature, that, failing any such knowledge, I would gladly omit all but the mere mention of this section, were it not eminently characteristic of Irish folklore. A glance at the weighty volumes of O’Hanlon and other writers on Irish saints discovers the difficulty, while another glance suggests it is almost insuperable. There are indeed saints galore—lashings and leavings of saints—several for every day in the year, and enough over to satiate the appetite of the most greedy of hagiologists. The most important result of this plethora of native claimants is that the observation of fast and festival connected with foreign and better-known saints never made great headway in this country. Roman Catholicism in Ireland was but a palimpsest, Christianity but a seventh-century refurbishing of age-old faiths and customs. The water spirits—though this is not peculiar to Ireland—reappear in the disguise of patron saints, and, according to Colonel Wood Martin, at least one has emerged from saintly trappings and reassumed sway of the erstwhile “sacred” well at Toberconnell. [40]

As a rule the observance of saints’ days are entirely local, and a minor native saint may oust a greater on their mutual “Day,” in the vicinage of places connected by birth or residence. A very good instance of this may be quoted. January 31 is kept for the most part as St. Bridget’s Eve—that virgin sharing with St. Patrick marked precedence throughout the land. But in Co. Cavan January 31 is the peculiar property of St. Mogue. He was born in the ancient kingdom of Breffny, so in his native place “the last day of January must be kept, or the breaker of this custom gets a bad day for his funeral.” [41] But leave Breffny and cross into Connaught and in Co. Mayo you will find the girls carrying round dolls dressed up gaily in coloured ribbons, to gather a little money for a dance because it is St. Bridget’s Eve.

Another instance of this, one might almost say non-recognition of the more orthodox calendar saints, is found on February 14; popularly St. Valentine’s elsewhere. Now of Valentine observances I can find little or no trace, and the only matrimonial custom so far known to me at this season is in
connection with an Irish local saint, for those who stand on the moat of the Boys’ Fort near St. Gobinet’s Well, on St. Gobinet’s Day, will be married within the year. [42]

St. Gobnate, Gobinet, or Gobinata, Abbess of Ballyvourney, near Macroom, Co. Cork, is venerated, O’Hanlon states, in the South of Ireland, but there is conflicting evidence as to her day. Some of this I have tabulated—it does as another instance of the difficulties bristling round the collector of Calendar Customs dealing with Irish local saints:

According to the calendars, says O’Hanlon, her Patron day is February 11th, [43] and he mentions a cattle fair at Kilgobonet, Co. Waterford, the Fair of St. Gobinet’s Well at Kilgobinet, Co. Limerick, when rounds and prayers are made at the well. But the Protestant Rector of Ballyvourney gives February 12 as the day when pilgrimages were made to the well, and the bark was stripped by the pilgrims off the surrounding trees.

To complicate the matter further, John Richardson, writing in 1727, records under date St. Valentine’s Eve, [44] “superstitions” connected with an “idol,” which was kissed by the devout, who made offerings, rounds, and prayers at the well.

Richardson noted of the image—or as he has it, “idol” of St. Gobinet, that in addition to the annual customs, “the image is kept by one of the Family of the O’Harlehs, and when any one is sick of the Small-Pox, they send for it, Sacrifice a Sheep to it, and wrap the Skin about the sick Person, and the Family eat the Sheep. But this Idol hath now much loft its reputation, because two of the O’Harlehy’s died lately of the Small-Pox.” [45]

But the Saint’s day is yet to settle, and a fourth authority, Smith, the historian of Co. Cork, gives February 14 as the Patron Day of Ballyvourney, Muskerry, and Kilshanick, where another holy well is dedicated to St. Gobinet. [46]

Whitsuntide further complicates the matter, for the saint is honoured also on O’Hanlon says Whit-Sunday, Richardson Whit-Thursday, and Smith Whit-Monday.

It is little wonder that confusion should arise over a question of chronological exactitude, where customs have had such a plenitude of official interference as in Ireland. In the second year of the reign of Queen Anne an Act was passed putting down “Pilgrimages by vast Numbers at certain Seasons; by which, not only the Peace of the Publick is greatly disturbed, but the Safety of the Government also hazarded by the riotous and unlawful assembling together of many Thousands of Papists, to the said Wells and other Places.” Therefore, the Act decreed: “All such meetings and Assemblies shall be deemed and adjudged Riots and unlawful Assemblies and punished as such.” Punishment for attendance was a 10s. fine or a whipping; for any who “build Booths, sell Ale Victuals or any other Com-modities,” 20s. fine. Pilgrimages were—and in a lessened degree still are—made to lakes, ponds, wells, trees, stones, crosses, images, relics—in nearly every case connected with a local saint—the Patron—hence the name “Pattern.” That they degenerated—or should one say reverted—into scenes of licence and riot is very manifest, and had the Parliaments—equally at St. Stephen’s Green and St. Stephen’s—legislated to suppress no other folk customs there would have been less valid plaints, many just grievances would never have arisen, much national unhappiness might have been spared us. But decade after decade, century after century, legislation betrayed all the intolerance and bitterness bred of ignorance, nervousness, and fear. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

Time forbids examination of the results on education and other matters due, for instance, to the Penal Laws, interference with “hollydays,” suppression of Sunday games, [47]—the national game of hurling was forbidden, and it is even recorded in the histories of Galway that “No woman shall make no open noise of an unreasonable chree, after the Irisherie, either before ne yet after, the death of any corpses.” [48] The dead were deprived of the rights of burial ceremonies did they belong to the forbidden creed. [49] The Halls mention in their Tour seeing piles of stones by the wayside in Connemara, especially in the neighbourhood of Cong, and give a reproduction of a rough inscription
on one as proof of their monumental origin at this sad period. [50] Now I remember well noticing these grey heaps years ago. The jarvey told me they were monuments of the dead— I think he said of people who had been killed, but the friend with me, a local landowner, laughed and said this was a special fairy tale kept for the benefit of visitors from England.

In short, any popular assemblage, anything that might bring a concourse of people together, was ruthlessly suppressed, even potato diggings, gatherings of the neighbours to dig anyone’s potatoes as a mark of esteem and popularity, fell under the ban of the law. [51] And it will be remembered how in Samuel Lover’s tale of Rory O’More the priest broke up the party at the hero’s wedding, saying, “*Go your ways home in time, and keep out of harm’s way:* it is not like the good old times, when we could stop till the night was ripe, and we could throw the stocking, and do the thing dacently, as our fathers used to do before us; but we must make the best of a bad bargain, and go home before the sun is down.” [52]

“His riverence” in this case sympathised with folk customs, but this was hardly the general clerical attitude. Evidence is not lacking that the priests had more to say to the cessation of pilgrimages than had the Penal Laws. Persecution was ever a potent apostle, and it is possible—I am inclined to use a stronger word than possible—that Catholic Emancipation did much to destroy old customs the laws had failed to uproot. Moreover, the great poverty and the increased price of drinks made the peasants less anxious for holidays. [53]

If, then, Ireland’s share of British Calendar Customs should not prove equal to those of other parts of the Kingdom the reasons are not far to seek. Religious and social conditions, economic and political events, must have made alike for a paucity rather than a wealth of folk customs, and to-day we find genuine folk beliefs merged on the one hand in clerical superstitions, on the other shorn ruthlessly away. Ireland has been doomed to a lack of continuity in everything but trouble. On social conditions I have hardly touched—in part they explain the difficulty in obtaining records of Irish folklore. Oral traditions are swamped in time, especially in a land where class division was marked by so unbridged a gulf Ireland knew no middle classes. There were “the quality” and the peasants—between lay a nondescript *omnium gatherum* of those who grasped a fleeting and fictitious importance and power through the curse of absenteeism—petty officials, agents, middle-men of all sorts—a blight everywhere, and nowhere in the world more than in Ireland. The solid Yeoman class that has contributed so largely to the prosperity of England cannot for a moment be compared to the Irish squireens. [54]

Yet, despite the changes and chances of Ireland’s particularly troubled world, customs *have* lived through strife, rebellions, terrors, famine, and disease, to die out when more peaceful and prosperous times smiled on the land. Some have died because, in the turmoil of events, they had lost all meaning and sentiment for even the most conservative; many that linger are clearly verging into this category. [55] A friend who told me that her father always “lit the Christmas candle—one in the dining-room and another in the kitchen for the servants—tried to discover a reason for the practice, but could not gather more than “it was ’something to do with the Virgin Mary.”” In the middle of the Bog of Allen, the country people will point the Gobawn Seer’s grave, and say “a terrible big man” was buried there, and “nothing he didn’t know”—but beyond that their knowledge is nil—and the country folk are not alone in this limited acquaintance with the great architect. The friend who told me of it knew nothing more, and I’m afraid before she told me I knew even less!

Customs, in Ireland as elsewhere, lingered while the grandparents handed on the tales and traditions they had learnt from their own aged progenitors. But Rebellion and Famine made ghastly breaks in Irish home life; subsequent immigration bit deep, and, so far as folklore is concerned, brought in the potent action of ridicule. The emigrant found his cherished notions ignored in more progressive lands, “And scorn and laughter together are the sire and dam of change.” He, or she, laughed at there, returned to Ireland—what exile from Erin is without that dream of eventual homecoming?—to ridicule what was once a treasured tradition. It is not to them we must look for records.
Yet the Irish have long memories, unlike the English, who are good forgetters. William III. to Ulster folk is as much of an actual entity as George V. Rather more than less, for William has always been a vivid presence to them, George Rex is a recent addition. Fields and farms are called by the names, and considered the rightful property of, men who left them forty, fifty, even eighty years ago. The people talk of friends and events seemingly of to-day, and you find on investigation they are talking of thirty years ago.

The grave is no final repository for those who have passed from us—it is not even a matter of importance, as all too many unkempt cemeteries bear witness. At midnight at the full of the moon the dead of one parish may visit a neighbouring churchyard for a hurling match with those who lie there, and come to play visibly, for they force a living man to keep goal for them. [56] For the dead never die. Intangibly, but really, they are with us still, and so, on All Souls’ Eve the chair is left empty by the fireside, the pail of water placed handily, for the spirits of lost friends, dead relatives, when, in the silence of the night, they come to revisit the scenes of mortal life. In Ireland the Past never dies.

I began with a laugh—I fear that I end near tears, for, like the sunshine and showers of its climate, smile and sigh are inextricably blended in all things Irish. Sorrow, if not a necessity to wit, would appear to be a good fertiliser of humour. Strained to a certain point human endurance must smile or succumb. So Ireland’s distresses, to my thinking, have largely contributed to Irish wit. A prosperous Ireland may be a duller and more sober affair. It will inevitably be a more prosaic one, and Ireland’s plain—unless radical change can be wrought in Irish nature as well as Irish economics—will be, “‘Twas better to sit in the sun and be free in our dreaming.” An unhappy fate has ever dogged the “most distressful country that ever yet was seen,” and if you want to be thoroughly depressed I recommend you to study the records of, say, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and even if your people were not concerned in those doings—as mine were—it cannot be other than saddening to read history that confirms such horrors as children kept alive for days by feeding on the body of their dead mother. [57] And the Irish have long memories. Two years ago a man from one of the northern counties told my brother-in-law that he was a Nationalist because he remembered his grandmother, who was “starved to death outside the gates of Derry, and she but a child of eleven at the time.”

D. H. Moutray Read.
Is guarded by the holly-tree.
     Sing holly, etc.

“ The wran, the wran, the king of all birds,
St. Stephen his Day was cot in the furze.
And though he’s little his family’s great,
So arise, good lady, and give us a trate.
     Sing holly, etc.
“ Yet if you do fill it of the small.
It will not do for our boys at all;
But if you fill it of the best,
We hope in heaven your soul may rest.
     Sing holly, etc.”

Variant II.

“ The wran, the wran, the king of all birds,
St. Stephen’s Day was cot in the furze.
Although he’s little his family’s great,
Put your hand in your pocket and give us a trate.
     Sing holly, etc.

“ And if you dhraw it ov the best,
I hope in heaven yer sowl will rest,
But if you dhraw it ov the small
It won’t agree wid de wran boys at all.
     Sing holly, etc.”


[12] Calaghan’s Gate is a meet of the Carberry Hunt.

     Are God’s two holy men.”


[17] See also Shaw Mason, iii. 75.

[18] See for half-yearly hirings, Hall, iii. 124; Shaw Mason, i. 125, iii. 176; Charleton, iv. 330-1; Young, etc.


[21] O’Hanlon gives an actual instance of bones being burnt at Ballymaddock (*Hist. Queen’s County*, i. 277), and Latocnaye in 1797 mentions fires of bones on “certain” holidays in his *Promenade en Irelande*.


[25] *J.C.H.A.S.*, 81 ; Wilde, etc.

[26] O’Curry notes, “ from the remotest limes down to our own its power was dreaded in Erin. ... Of the antiquity of satire in Erin and the belief in its venomous power, we have the very important authority of Cormac’s Glossary.” (Vol. i. p. 217.)


[29] Chalk Sunday appears to vary, and be either Quinquagesima or the First Sunday in Lent, as in some places—Co. Mayo, *per ex.*—the boys waylaid and chalked the coats of eligible bachelors when assembling for Mass, as a sign that they ought to have married before that Sunday. Elsewhere it was done to show they should get married before Lent set a period to such doings.
If faction fights are as much “past” as some would have us believe. As late as the eighties the FitzGeralds wheeled for the Moriartys “for betraying the cause of Ireland.” In other words, a sixteenth century tradition that the Moriartys betrayed the Desmond (MacDonough, Irish Life and Character, p. 57), and Harris Stone mentions a faction fight he witnessed in 1905 between the Joyces and the Martins at Clonbur (Commemara, p. 115). But an efficient Police Service—and there is no more competent body in the world than the Royal Irish Constabulary—has done much to end these “divarshions.”

Hist, of Dublin, i. 112-3.

Harris, pp. 150-2.


Ancient Cures, p. 102.


Fairy Legends, pp. 149-50.


Hist, of Ireland, vol. i. p. 370.

Young, ii. 126-8; Lecky, i. 286.

Hist, of Sligo, p. 92.

Told me by Miss B. Hunt.


ii. 467.

This is the only reference to St. Valentine I have come across in any book on Ireland.

The Great Folly, Superstition and Idolatry of Pilgrimages in Ireland, pp. 76-7.

Vol. i., bk. ii. p. 185.

Sunday games were punished by a fine of 1s. or two hours in the stocks for any offender.

Labourers were compelled to work Saints’ Days, or had choice of 2s. fine or a whipping.

Cf. Locker Lampson, Consid. of the State of Ireland.

Caldwell, Old Irish Life, p. i6.

Ibid. p. 27.


Rory O’More, p. 384.

Young, ii. 192.

cf. Shaw Martin, iii. 28.

In the usual course of things these men are not often to be found in the society of gentry ... At election times, however, these persons rise into sudden importance with all who have views upon the country,” Edgeworth, The Absentee (Morley’s Univ. Lib. Edit.), p. 154. Further, to get any grasp on Irish folklore, one must study the various” settlements,” from prehistoric times to our own.

Patron at Kilmanman.

MacDonagh, Irish Life and Character, p. 377.

Lecky, i. 8.

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