



## **Folk belief and landscape in Connacht: accounts from the Ordnance Survey letters**

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Abstract:

The Ordnance Survey of Ireland, carried out in the early-nineteenth century, was not just the process of mapping and collecting place names for translation as it is frequently depicted. The director of the Ordnance Survey, Sir Thomas Colby, decided to also use the Survey to carry out statistical, antiquarian, and geological surveys. The results of this trigonometrical survey include the so-called Ordnance Survey Memoirs and the Ordnance Survey Letters. Both sources provide valuable information about life in Ireland in the 1830s and early 1840s.

Focusing in particular on the province of Connacht, this article argues that the Ordnance Survey Letters should be considered an important source of information about folklore and folk beliefs which were still extant or had been until shortly before the Survey visited the locality. This essay examines how, in a period of change and decline, the Ordnance Survey wrote local cultural heritage and identity onto the landscape.

Keywords: Folk belief, Ireland, Antiquarianism, Ordnance Survey, Place names.

Introduction:

This article focuses on the connection between folk belief and the landscape in Ireland, as depicted in the *Ordnance Survey Letters*. The term ‘folk belief’ has been chosen as the term covers “supernatural belief systems and traditions as held by the folk,” which were considered to be different from “supernatural or magical beliefs, as expressed in religion.”<sup>1</sup> Henderson points out that when ‘folk belief’ was under attack in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this was the agenda.<sup>2</sup> In the context of this essay, this includes supernatural entities such as fairies, banshees, and witches, which will be discussed below.

Ordnance Survey Letters exist for twenty-nine of the thirty-two counties.<sup>3</sup> This article will focus on the Letters relating to the province of Connacht, which consists of the counties of Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, and Roscommon. This province has been chosen as the focus as five counties provides a good-sized study without becoming unwieldy, while containing a variety of environments. Linguistically, the province was also richer in terms of the number of Irish-speakers and it is interesting to examine if there is a link between the dominance of Irish as a vernacular and a large practice of folk beliefs. Erin Kraus states that the East was associated with “Anglicisation and urbanization,”<sup>4</sup> indicating that there may not have been much folk belief still in practice in this area as the nineteenth century progressed. This was certainly the view of later commentators on folklore in Ireland, such as William Wilde, who linked a belief in fairies and charms with the inhabitants of the West.<sup>5</sup>

The Ordnance Survey of Ireland resulted in two series of documents alongside the maps and the Name-books – the so-called Ordnance Survey Memoirs and the so-called Ordnance Survey Letters. The Memoirs were collected by the Sappers who travelled around the country collecting names for the original Name-books until the Topographical Department was formed in 1830 to provide able scholars to aid with the collection of names.<sup>6</sup> Although the Memoirs contain some references of antiquarian interest and some references to landscape in the various parishes, they are more largely concerned with population, economy and society. The Memoirs provide a vast amount of detail into life in the early-nineteenth century, including folklore and superstitions, alongside “leisure pursuits, [...] costume, drinking habits, and even sexual behaviour.”<sup>7</sup> They also provide valuable insight into community memory and the transmission of the account of events over the years; for example, in some of the parishes of Antrim, Down, and Londonderry, the events of the 1641 rebellion were still in circulation.<sup>8</sup> Though the Memoirs provide us with a rich source of information, they will not be discussed in the present essay. Only two of the counties included in this study have a small amount of material in Memoir-form, which does not make it worthwhile to include only those two. Another reason is that the Memoirs do not suit our present purpose, which is to examine the links between folk belief and the landscape itself. As mentioned above, the Memoirs were mainly accounts of the people living in the parishes visited; the Letters dealt with the landscape itself. Features in the landscape and the stories they told were gleaned by the Topographical Section via their names or through local intermediaries. The article begins by briefly explaining nineteenth-century Irish antiquarianism and the background to the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, before discussing the Letters and the role of landscape in Irish culture. It will then turn to the anecdotes of folk belief outlined in the Letters and how these anecdotes are connected to the landscape in Connacht.

#### Background:

The Ordnance Survey was formed in June 1791,<sup>9</sup> several years after the commencement of the Military Survey of Scotland. Surveys were also carried out in England and Wales.<sup>10</sup> A similar survey was begun in Ireland in 1824. Where the Ordnance Survey of Ireland differed from that carried out in Great Britain - and which was possibly influenced by the problems of Welsh toponymy encountered in the surveys of Wales in the 1750s and the 1820s<sup>11</sup> - was in the creation of a department to deal with toponymy. The importance of place names in the Survey of Ireland is exemplified in ‘Colby’s Instructions for the Interior Survey of Ireland’, where he states in instruction 33 that “the persons employed on the survey are to endeavour to obtain the correct orthography of the names of places by diligently consulting the best authorities within their reach.”<sup>12</sup> And with this idea in mind, the Topographical or Historical department of the Ordnance Survey was founded in the early 1830s,<sup>13</sup> employing the best Irish scholars of their day.<sup>14</sup> It is worth highlighting here that it was the recruitment of Irish scholars that determined the dichotomy of Irish and English in Irish toponymy; in the early years of the Topographical department, the Old-Norse scholar George Downes was recruited, though ceased working for the department shortly afterwards. This resulted in a focus on a bilingual linguistic landscape, when, in reality, Irish toponymy involved far more linguistic influences. This focus on Irish and English meant a lack of knowledge with regards to place names of Old Norse or French origin.

The Topographical department employed both scholars and artists to research the Irish landscape, all working under the antiquarian and artist, George Petrie (1790-1866). Two in

particular rose to prominence; John O'Donovan (1806-1861)<sup>15</sup> and Eugene O'Curry (1794-1862).<sup>16</sup> While it may seem a contradiction to have two antiquarians working on contemporary matters, nineteenth-century Irish antiquarianism also involved the study of modern Irish. This was because scholars, including O'Donovan and O'Curry, were aware of the decrease in Irish-speakers (even before the Famine). "This meant that the language itself, along with oral lore and songs could become subjects suitable for antiquarian study as shortly they would be as historical as Old and Middle Irish."<sup>17</sup> Both O'Donovan and O'Curry were from Irish-speaking backgrounds and were aware of tradition; O'Curry to a greater extent as the son of Eoghan Mór - a celebrated singer, Irish scholar, and manuscript collector. Patrick O'Keeffe, a young scholar to whom O'Donovan had taught Irish, joined the department in 1831; Thomas O'Connor, a hedge-school master from near Carrickmacross, County Monaghan, joined in 1835, as did O'Curry's brother Anthony. One can see a sort of conflict in the lives of the department members who worked out in the field. With the exception of O'Keeffe, who was from Dublin, all of the researchers were from rural communities, who had moved to the capital. They were all keenly aware of the tradition they came from; for example, the Irish-literary tradition, the manuscript tradition, etc, yet, as antiquarians they sought to make their investigations into Ireland's past as scientific as they could. Thus, folklore was hard to reconcile to this idea. As part of the Survey, they moved in an Anglo-phone world, but had been employed for their knowledge of Irish. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin considers O'Donovan and O'Curry to be "sympathetic to the native tradition", which aided the aims of the Topographical Department immensely.<sup>18</sup>

What are referred to as the Ordnance Survey Letters (also referred to as the Letters and referenced as OSL) are the letters that John O'Donovan, Thomas O'Connor, Patrick O'Keeffe, and, occasionally, Eugene O'Curry sent back to Dublin, usually to Larcom, from their work collecting place names and correcting those that the Sappers had collected previously. It also includes some letters from Larcom and Petrie back to O'Donovan. Incredibly detailed, hence the necessity to narrow our focus here, the Letters give a broad depiction of life in Ireland in the early-nineteenth century in relation to the landscape. The Letters were originally stored at the Ordnance Survey headquarters before being moved to the Royal Irish Academy due to their perceived value for future scholarship, where they remain. The Letters not only cover the work required for the Ordnance Survey, but also, in the letters authored by O'Donovan, his views on matters such as religion, previous antiquarian scholarship, and philosophical matters.

### The role of landscape in Irish culture

John Wylie claims that, through the late 1980s and early 1990s, new cultural geographers began to apply the "interpretative techniques of literary and cultural theory" and to view landscape as a text rather than a historical record.<sup>19</sup> While this is not disputed here, landscape as a historical record is emphasised as are place names as markers of histories. As Sarah Covington describes it: "landscape had always functioned as a mnemonic device in Ireland,"<sup>20</sup> citing Kent Ryden who describes the process as "place enfolds relationships, relationships shape memories, memory sparks stories, [and] stories cling to place with such tenacity."<sup>21</sup> This is comparable with the Irish concept of *dúchas*, which is commonly translated as 'heritage'. In his expansive study of the term, Peter McQuillan explains that, while *dúchas* is commonly found in connection to a word for land, such as *tír* (land/country; *tír dúchais* – hereditary land), in the medieval and early modern periods, the word *dúchas* was found by itself embodying this concept in two senses of the term; the first more practical,

as in a portion of land which was inherited; and the second in more symbolic terms – a portion of land which embodies a person or a family’s heritage.<sup>22</sup> He goes on to explain that one of the lesser associated meanings of the word is that in using it, someone is conveying a sense of something which “is right, sanctioned by custom (and therefore natural and inevitable).”<sup>23</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the first chapter in Seán Ó Súilleabháin’s *Handbook of Irish Folklore* instructs collectors to gain as much information about the settlement, the local area, the townland, and their histories as possible.<sup>24</sup> The importance of landscape and place in the Irish psyche is emphasised by Nollaig Ó Muraíle, who writes that:

It is almost a truism to say that the study of Irish placenames is an essential, integral part of Irish culture - not just in our own day but stretching back through medieval times to the very dawn of our history (to the time of the first historical records in or about the 5th century of the Christian era). It has indeed become something of a cliché that a central characteristic of much of Irish literature, old and new - from *Táin Bó Cúalnge* to the poetry of Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill - is 'a sense of place'.<sup>25</sup>

Ó Muraíle goes on to describe the medieval Irish genre of *dinnsheanchas* (also referred to as *dinnseanchas* and *dinnshenchus*; Old Irish: *dindshenchus*). This is a corpus of material usually translated as the “lore of places,” which exists in both prose and poetic form. It should be remembered that this is a literary genre and that the compilers of the works often invented stories for why a place name was such, but it serves to remind us that there is a long and important link between the Irish and the landscape. Such a view is emphasised by Lawrence J. Taylor, who describes locals of an area narrating a landscape,<sup>26</sup> pointing out that:

For both surveyor and storyteller, landscape and language are interdependent. [...] The stories preserve the enchanted landscape; the [holy] well and other places like it literally hold the stories. Those raised with the stories only hear the name of a given place or else see it to rehear the story that is tied to the place – or at least know that there is a story that someone else “has”. Perhaps it is less of a question of whether or not one “believes” the story than of a landscape that has stories in it – stories it can tell you – versus a landscape that talks about other things or is mute.<sup>27</sup>

Taylor’s arguments about the Irish landscape are similar to those of Keith H. Basso, who states that to the Western Apache “constructions of place reach deeply into other cultural spheres, including conceptions of wisdom, [...] and certain [...] ways of imagining and interpreting the Apache tribal past.”<sup>28</sup> Basso’s claims can certainly be applied to the work of the Topographical department, who needed to have an awareness of *dinnsheanchas* and the way that the landscape of an area conveyed local history. O’Donovan stated in one of the letters that he understood his remit as “to connect history with topography, and thus give it a particular or local instead of a general interest,”<sup>29</sup> and demonstrated this in another letter: on discussing the place names of Umallia, a former territory in western County Mayo, he stated that “some of them are as ugly as any names in Khamptschatka [recte Kamchatka], but they are all beautifully significant and descriptive.”<sup>30</sup> As the experts of their day in medieval Irish literature, O’Donovan and O’Curry were uniquely placed to investigate Irish toponymy – O’Donovan especially, as he would later come to publish translations of several toponymical poems, which he had begun working on during the Survey. With the knowledge of the importance of the links between the Irish and the landscape, O’Donovan and the other

workers for the Topographical section were ideal to examine localised folk beliefs related to landscape features.

### Folk belief in the Ordnance Survey Letters

As was mentioned above, this article discusses the beliefs of the folk in Connacht in the 1830s as mentioned in the Letters. Due to considerations of space, here it can only involve a belief in supernatural entities, such as fairies and banshees. The term ‘folk belief’ can also encompass a belief in the powers of Catholic practices not officially sanctioned by the Church, which has been linked to fairy belief by modern commentators, but this will have to be discussed elsewhere due to space considerations. Two things should be borne in mind with regards to folklore and the Ordnance Survey Letters. The first is that to some modern scholars, the Ordnance Survey could have collected far more folklore than it did. Stiofán Ó Cadhla sees the Ordnance Survey as having had more of a focus on translation and he lays the blame for this at the feet of the British establishment.<sup>31</sup> The second is that O’Donovan himself had little interest in oral tradition, referring to it as “a blundering booby who has clouded memory and muddy brains.”<sup>32</sup> The Memoirs were to be filled with detail about the people of the various localities, including their stories, traditions, and beliefs, but Petrie, recognising how suited O’Donovan, O’Curry, O’Conor, and O’Keeffe (but particularly the first two names) and their linguistic skills were, ordered them to “get as much of everything as you can, manners, customs, traditions, legends, songs, etc,” adding that “the opportunities at present afforded may never occur again.”<sup>33</sup> Thus O’Donovan *et al* became almost a sort of travelling folklore collector, as was becoming increasingly common in the Nordic countries during the nineteenth century, and would be in Ireland in the twentieth.<sup>34</sup> Where they differed is in their centralisation of the landscape in their collection; the materials that they collected are all based on a feature in the landscape. Even where interviews with people were recounted, it is solely to illuminate the background or importance of this feature.

As the Memoirs recounted the beliefs of a locality, it would be desirable for the study of fairy belief and belief in the supernatural to be able to cross-reference the information from the Letters with that of the Memoirs. Due to the lack of Memoirs for the western counties, this is unfortunately not possible. Despite this regrettable lack of extra information, there are several references to fairies and other supernatural creatures in the Letters. As Angela Bourke points out, belief in fairies, in the Irish mindset, were and are prevalent, even if they are discussed with a hint of mockery or denial. She compares fairy-legend as “interlocking units of narrative, practice, and belief” to a pre-modern database, highlighting the explanatory function of fairy belief, particularly in terms of medicine and transgressions of societal norms.<sup>35</sup> Eugene Hynes argues that “rather than as survivals of earlier religious systems, however, fairylore must be understood as an element of the specific social arrangements and mental worlds where it is found.”<sup>36</sup> Fairies have long been associated with features in the landscape,<sup>37</sup> and the accounts in the Letters serve to highlight this point. As well as fairies, they are also referred to in the Letters as the “Shee” and the “Gentry”. In one letter, O’Donovan gives an account of what he understood fairies to be:

There is no holy well in the Parish called after such a Saint Mo Laura or any other old soldier of the Word of God. Tobar na Shee (fons τῶν geniorum) [Fountain of the Shee from the Irish; fountain of the spirits from the Latin/Greek – my translation] is named after the fairies, who were the gods of the earth, and dwelt in Shee and mountains and

haunted streams and wells (as minor (Fauni) gods) until Saint Patrick destroyed their divinity, since which period they have been looked upon by some as the souls of the departed, and by others as some of the fallen angels who expect still to be recalled to their original place of bliss, and therefore, are sometimes kind to mortals. The generality of the peasantry however, especially those who know nothing of theology or theogony, look upon the fairies in the same way as the Mahomedans do upon their genii, and this was probably the pure Pagan Irish belief before the Christian Religion introduced the idea of fallen angels and human souls wandering on this earth to be purged of sins by the storms, the rains and the lashes of ariel demons.<sup>38</sup>

It is worth reproducing in full here as, firstly, it informs us as to what common understanding there was about fairies and how they are depicted in the Letters and, secondly, it is in connection with a well in the parish of Kilmolara, which once may have now been dedicated to a saint, but is now named after the fairies. This is the only account of such in the Connacht Letters. O'Donovan's account of the fairies as originally having been "gods of the earth" and having dwelt in wells helps to explain what seems to be a strange connection. In this extract, O'Donovan recounts two theories about the origin of the fairies in Ireland; one is the common belief that fairies were fallen angels, who sought to obtain salvation,<sup>39</sup> though as Jenny Butler points out, the stories were only ever committed to writing by Christian redactors, hence stories about the origins of the fairies have only ever been seen through a Christian lens.<sup>40</sup> This also is valid for another origin story, not recounted above, which holds that the fairies are the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, who moved into the fairy mounds after the invasion of the Milesians<sup>41</sup> as recounted in the pseudo-historical text, *Lebor Gabhála Érenn*. The other origin story related by O'Donovan holds that the fairies were tutelary spirits, worshipped by druids, who were removed from their sacred status after the coming of Christianity with St Patrick. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin links the practice of leaving offerings at holy wells with those left to the fairies – both practices are rooted in the local power of both saints and fairies.<sup>42</sup> This is the only connection between fairies and water in the Letters for Connacht. It is more common for fairies to be linked with caves, hills, and constructions. One letter concerns the so-called fairy chief of east Connacht, Finn Bheara, a fairy king, who is associated with the hill of Knockmaa, near to Tuam in east County Galway. Finn Bheara is claimed to be a friend of a John Kirwan, "who repaired his cashels for him." He was also apparently friendly with Mrs Kirwan.<sup>43</sup> Kirwan and the fairies are also mentioned in another letter from O'Donovan, this time from the county of Mayo, who wrote that "The fairies of Cnoc Meádha near Tuam, very good neighbours, and used to borrow wines from John Kirwan of Castlehackett, and make him a return in some other way."<sup>44</sup> Fairies are also related as appearing to a Mr O'Connor of the townland of Glenbally in the county of Roscommon. O'Donovan writes that: "This is a great district for fairies. Mr O'Connor's herd used to see them at night kicking a football on the Plain and going through various exercises. But he'd be afraid to tell what they did lest they might injure his person or property."<sup>45</sup> In some townlands and parishes, such as the parish of Dunmore in east County Galway, a local fairy, Mór Ní Mhanannáin, was responsible for the daily destruction of Dunmore castle until the owner, Haiste, consulted with a magician, who claimed that Mór was desirous that Haiste build his castle on the site of her own fort. This he did and during the construction, Mór prevented any fairy from damaging the castle.<sup>46</sup> There was also a similar occurrence in Mullaghnashee [Mullach na Sí – Fairy Mount] around the construction of the castle there, which "the fairies would not suffer it to be completed."<sup>47</sup> Not all accounts of fairies in the Letters highlight their destructive nature or favours only to certain people; in the townland of Creevaugh North in the parish of Cong, there is a cave referred to as *Muilleann Luprachain* or the Fairy's Mill, as the waters passing through the cave sounded like a mill grinding corn. O'Donovan wrote that

the “fairy of this mill was very kind to the natives before they became so cunning as they are now, and that any corn left in this mill would be found ground (millte!) in the morning.”<sup>48</sup> So far, fairies have been associated with parishes and townlands inland, but there is one account of their activity along the coast. It depicts a shee or fairy mound on an island that O’Donovan called Ross-Murvey Island in Clew Bay called Siadh Muirbhighe, now sandy, but shortly before the Survey’s visit, it was green. According to the locals, it “is the residence of the gentlest and most harmless of the fairies of Umhall for they were never known to hurt men or cattle! Blessings on them!” There is a verse about them, which O’Donovan recites and translates:

Sidh Muirbhighe an dtonn  
Sidh riamh nach deárnadh feale  
Sidh aoibhin na mban fionn

Shee Murvey of the waves  
A Shee, which was never guilty of treachery  
A delightful Shee of fair-haired damsels etc.<sup>49</sup>

O’Donovan concluded this discussion of Siadh Muirbhighe by stating that “the people still firmly believe in fairies here.”<sup>50</sup> This is the only instance of O’Donovan commenting about a strong belief in fairies, with a reference to people in the plural, rather than a particular person. This indicates that a public profession of belief must be becoming a rare occurrence - even the comment above that Glenbally in County Roscommon was a “great district” for fairies is passive. The account mentioned is linked with one person only from which one could conclude that fairies are numerous in this district, but only in connection with one mortal.

Given that during the early modern witchcraft trials that took place across Europe, Ireland only saw four trials (with one resulting in execution),<sup>51</sup> it seems surprising that there would be accounts of witches in the Letters. All the accounts given are related to Ballintubber Abbey in southern Mayo and the surrounding area. The trigger for the account of witchcraft in the area is the discussion around the founder of the Abbey, the king of Connacht in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, Cathal Crobhdearg Ua Conchobair [Cathal the red-handed O’Connor]. A Mr Hannelley, who kept a school in the Abbey related the story of Cathal’s birth from a local girl, who had been taken as a concubine by the King, as his wife was barren. The wife then turned to the witches in the area to try to prevent the birth of Cathal, or to ensure that he was born deformed. After tying a piece of string which they had cursed, Cathal was born with a red hand. He was forced to flee into Leinster, but on the death of his father, the people of Connacht demanded that they should be their king, which he became. The re-telling of this story spurred O’Donovan to ask if the reciter thought it to be true, as the gentleman was “a man of sense” and “a man who knows a good deal of what the real nature of things is”<sup>52</sup> implying that O’Donovan thought it to be a fine story, but nothing more. Mr Hannelley (the school-master) said that he believed it to be as:

any one that is conversant with the Irish and their manners and customs will perceive that they still retain many of their old heathenish practices, such as bewitching men at their marriages, and rendering them impotent, robbing dairies of their butter, and many other practices.<sup>53</sup>

It should be highlighted that all uses of the term ‘witch’ are by the local informant. Although fairies can also be responsible for stealing butter, witches are also familiar with this practice,



and sometimes it is not possible to tell who was responsible, as was reported in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs.<sup>54</sup> Sneddon describes the figure of the ‘butter-stealing witch’ as being a common trope,<sup>55</sup> though his examples from the nineteenth-century of ‘butter-stealing witches’ are all from Ulster. As Gearóid Ó Crualaoich points out, women are associated with butter-stealing, as they were the ones involved in its production.<sup>56</sup> Bourke highlights that, even after it was commonplace to scorn the existence of fairies and their role in stealing dairy products, there was still a belief that certain women were capable of this.<sup>57</sup> A common accomplice of the figure of the butter-stealing witch is a hare familiar, but there is no mention of this creature in the Connacht Letters. After this general introduction to witchcraft in Ballintubber by Mr Hannelley, he then relates a case that took place in the locality in 1831, where a gentleman left a beautiful lady of his own rank to marry an ugly woman who possessed an *Iall Steill* - the tanned torso skin of a man raised out of a tomb. The *Iall Steill* had to be tied to the legs of the intended while he was asleep, then taken off, tied together, and secreted in a safe place. While it remained in her possession, the owner would have full control over the affections of the man.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting that the only mention of a witch (and referred to by that term) should be so recent to the collection of the story. One might perhaps expect more references to witches, as the Witchcraft Act of 1586 included activities common to fairy doctors or cunning folk,<sup>59</sup> though as all of the Ordnance Survey Letter writers, barring O’Keeffe whose origins it has not been possible to trace, came from Catholic backgrounds and rural communities, they may have been more familiar with these practices and may have come into contact with wise women themselves earlier in their lives. As Sneddon points out, cunning folk were more likely to be associated with the fairies in Catholic areas.<sup>60</sup> There is, indeed, no reference to fairy doctors or cunning folk at all in the Connacht Letters. Even a search in the areas of more famous fairy doctors/wise women, who were known by the time of the Survey, has come to naught.<sup>61</sup> Ó Crualaoich’s argument that *mná feasa* or wise women existed on the periphery of society due to their traditional wisdom being seen as something malevolent by patriarchal societies in the guise of the Catholic priest perhaps indicates why the term ‘witch’ is used in these stories related above.<sup>62</sup> It is perhaps easier to apply the term to the more recent story of the woman who used the *Iall Steill*, as an aspersion of necromancy could be more closely aligned with darker practices. Not normally associated with places unless they attain a level of notoriety, as characters such as Bidy Early did,<sup>63</sup> it is interesting to discover in this extract the association of a purported witch with an abbey, though this is only through a story relating the foundation of the abbey, which happened to have witches featuring in it. For our present purposes, it is relevant to note that, despite this lack of association, Ó Crualaoich highlights the mythical ancestor of the wise woman, the *cailleach*, as being “the shaper who has formed the features of the landscape.”<sup>64</sup>

Another type of supernatural being is mentioned in the Letters – the banshee. The foremost expert on this figure, Patricia Lysaght, explains that the banshee is different from other types of fairies, as she is a solitary figure, unlike fairies who exist in communities; and that her single aspect is that of a death messenger. She adds that while fairies interact with whatever mortal comes across their path (though sometimes they have favourites, as demonstrated in the extracts above), the banshee only interacts with the family she attends to.<sup>65</sup> Lysaght also highlights that while fairies are used to police community norms and values, the banshee does not fulfil this function.<sup>66</sup>

There is only one occurrence of the banshee in the Connacht Letters; in the parish of Kiltullagh, County Roscommon, O’Donovan remarked that “whenever any of the O’Flyns [recte O’Flynn] of Ballinlough O’Flynn are on the point of death a Banshee is heard most plaintively lamenting on the banks of the Lough.”<sup>67</sup> It should be pointed out that this is all

O'Donovan has to say on the matter and, unusual for him, there is not mention of a source for this information, unlike all of those given above. This anecdote is of interest for several reasons; firstly, that the banshee is associated with the banks of O'Flynn's Lough. Banshees are traditionally linked to a particular family and herald their deaths – they are not normally found in specific locations. However, an investigation into the O'Flynn's reveals that they had been associated with the area since at least the twelfth century, as an entry for 1104 in the *Annals of the Four Masters* reveals. They owned the lough, as well as the nearby town, Ballinlough until, following the Cromwellian invasion and the Confederate Wars, they began to be dispossessed of their land. In 1703, the last of their lands were sold to two Dubliners, after the condemnation to death of their incumbent, Fiachra O'Flynn for refusing to bend to crown demands. This left only a branch of the family, that was based in County Galway,<sup>68</sup> though O'Donovan meets by chance a member of the O'Flynn's in the area.<sup>69</sup> It is intriguing to discover an occurrence of a banshee in an area where the family has not been living for over a century, and an occurrence so closely linked with a particular locality, i.e. the banks of the lough and not the nearby town where they had their castle. It is also interesting to note that the O'Flynn's were not one of the families in Lysaght's list of those given in the oral tradition, which are said to have a banshee following them.<sup>70</sup> As Lysaght describes, banshees are commonly associated with bodies of water, though they are not considered water beings; the most common being lakes and rivers. As well as being liminal spaces in their own right, lakes and rivers – being common landmarks – were frequently the borders between townlands, parishes, and counties, thus amplifying the concept of liminality.<sup>71</sup> O'Flynn's Lough lies near to the Mayo border and the town of the O'Flynn's – Ballinlough/Ballinlough – is situated halfway between the towns of Ballyhaunis and Castlerea.

This depiction of a banshee ties in with Gabriel Cooney's claim that "in the eighteenth century there were competing perceptions of the Irish landscape. The traditional Gaelic perception was based on oral tradition, on the landscape as embodying the long history and genealogy of families and events."<sup>72</sup> The family may not own the landscape, but the occurrence of the banshee's activity links the history of the physical landscape with the folklore associated with it. Cooney's argument also echoes McGuillan's investigation into the concept of *dúchas* and that alongside heritage, the term also meant ancestral lands. Lysaght argues that in some accounts, the banshee is said to visit these ancestral homelands, even after the family has left the area, reinforcing the link with landscape.<sup>73</sup> Both of these suit O'Donovan's aim of attempting to outline the ancient territories of Ireland, which were based around familial claims to land.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Originally intended to be learned discussions on the correct form and orthography of Irish place-names, the Ordnance Survey Letters reveal a surprising amount of folk belief in the west of Ireland and it is hoped that they will be considered as a valid resource for information about folk belief in Ireland before the Famine. Due to space constraints here, it has not been possible to introduce other aspects of folk belief, such as folk religion – Catholic practices which have not been sanctioned by Church authorities. The Letters offer up much information in this respect about the decline in practice, and they highlight in which areas these practices are still prevalent. In several letters where the fairies are discussed, O'Donovan often remarked that the country was "very Irish" if there were still a majority of speakers of that language, as he did in a letter to Thomas Larcom, dated 14 July 1837.<sup>75</sup> Thanks to O'Donovan's comments on localities, such as these, it is possible to investigate

whether fairy and folk beliefs were stronger in Irish-speaking areas, or if there is no connection. As there are Letters extant for twenty-nine of the thirty-two counties, it is possible to make a comparative study. It has been lamented throughout this essay that there are no Memoirs to enrich the collection in the Letters, though, as we have discovered, there is enough to make a fruitful study. For the four counties of Ulster that have both Letters and Memoirs, it would be interesting to see how the two work together and complement each other.

The link between folk and landscape expressed in a belief-system has long been known by those who have studied such matters, but the Ordnance Survey Letters helped to develop this and to add an extra layer. They are the results of an investigation to discover how much folk belief influenced a locality that a place was named after the phenomenon associated with it, or with a feature in the landscape. What the Topographical Department of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland did was to collect anecdotes of folk belief associated with places in the minds and oral traditions of the locals and it physically inscribed it upon the face of Ireland. These associations were written onto maps and collected in place names; they were held in the repository that is the Ordnance Survey Letters and were studied. The Ordnance Survey of Ireland, far from being a mere exercise in translation literally wrote heritage onto the landscape.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lizanne Henderson, 'Studying the Supernatural History of Scotland', in *Fantastical Imaginations: The Supernatural in Scottish History and Culture*, ed. Lizanne Henderson (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2009), p. xvi

<sup>2</sup> Lizanne Henderson, 'Folk Belief and Scottish Traditional Literatures', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Traditional Literature*, ed. by Sarah Dunnigan and Suzanne Gilbert (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> There are no Letters for the counties of Antrim, Cork, and Tyrone.

<sup>4</sup> Erin Kraus, *Wise-woman of Kildare: Moll Anthony and Popular Tradition in the East of Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, his 1867 publication on Lough Corrib and its environs, in which he claimed that "there is still plenty of fun, frolic, and folk-lore in the West." (William Wilde, *Lough Corrib: Its Shores and Islands* (McGlashan & Gill, 1867/reprinted Kevin Duffy, 2007, 4)

<sup>6</sup> They only exist for the counties of Antrim, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone, though there is a small amount of material for Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Louth and Sligo. The latter set of counties have yet to be published; the former have been edited by Angélique Day and Patrick McWilliams. The Memoirs have been the subject of two essays - Angélique Day's "'The Habits of the People": Traditional Life in Ireland, 1830-1840, as Recorded in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs', *Ulster Folklife*, 30 (1984) and Alan Gailey's 'Folk-life Study and the Ordnance Survey Memoirs' in Alan Gailey and Daithí Ó hOgáin (eds.), *Gold Under the Furze: Studies in Folk Tradition* (Dublin: Glendale Press, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Andrews, 'Review of Angélique Day and Patrick McWilliams (eds.) *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 12/1 (1992), p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Ciaran McDonough, 'Investigating Irish Antiquarianism: A Comparative Study of Protestant and Catholic Antiquarian Cultures, 1830-1876', (PhD diss., National University of Ireland, Galway, 2017), pp. 58-9.

<sup>9</sup> Hewitt, p. 113

<sup>10</sup> For the history of these surveys and their relationship to the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, see Rachel Hewitt, *Map of a Nation: A Biography of the Ordnance Survey* (London: Granta Books, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 191-4.

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Andrews, 'Appendix B', *A Paper Landscape: The Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), pp. 309-21.

<sup>13</sup> Gillian Doherty (*The Irish Ordnance Survey: History, Culture and Memory* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), pp. 19-20.

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<sup>14</sup> Both Andrews and Doherty give full accounts of the work of the Topographical department and the history of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland in their respective works, so it is not necessary to do so here. For members of the Topographical department prior to the scholars discussed in this essay, see Art Ó Maolfabhail, ‘Éadbhard Ó Raghallaigh, Seán Ó Donnabháin agus an tSuirbhéireacht Ordanáis 1830-4’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Section C – Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, Volume 91, C, Number 4, (1991).

<sup>15</sup> The standard biography of O’Donovan in English is Patricia Boyne’s *John O’Donovan (1806–1861): a Biography* (Kilkenny: Boethius, 1987), though there are several more in Irish, including Bráthair Críostamhail, *Sioladóirí .i. Eoghan Ó Comhraidhe agus Seán Ó Donnabháin* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1947) and Éamonn de hÓir, *Seán Ó Donnabháin agus Eoghan Ó Comhraí* (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> There is no full-length biography of Eugene O’Curry in English, but one exists in Irish; Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (ed.), *Eoghan Ó Comhraí saol agus saothar: Ómós do Eoghan Ó Comhraí* (Maigh Nuad: An Sagart, 1995). This contains an essay by Art Ó Maolfabhail on O’Curry’s work on the Ordnance Survey – ‘Eoghan Ó Comhraí agus an tSuirbhéireacht Ordanáis’. See also, Breandán Ó Madagáin, ‘Eugene O’Curry (1794-1862): Pioneer of Irish Scholarship’, *Clare: History and Society*, ed., Matthew Lynch and Patrick Nugent (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2008), 425-448.

<sup>17</sup> McDonough, p. 23. For more on antiquarianism and the study of folklore, see Kelly Fitzgerald, ‘Folklore in Ireland: Early Occurrences and Understandings’, *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 140 (2010), 65- 71.

<sup>18</sup> Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, ‘The Fairy Belief and Official Religion in Ireland’, in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed., Peter Narváez, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> John Wylie, *Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Covington, ‘“The Odious Demon from Across the Sea”. Oliver Cromwell, Memory and the Dislocations of Ireland’, in *Memory before Modernity*, ed., Erika Kuijpers *et al* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 152-53.

<sup>21</sup> Kent Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape. Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Peter McQuillan, *Native and Natural: Aspects of the Concept of ‘Right’ and ‘Freedom’ in Irish* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Nollaig Ó Muraíle, ‘Some Thoughts on Matters Onomastic’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 53 (2001), pp. 23-4.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence J. Taylor, *Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1995), p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), p. xv.

<sup>29</sup> Letter John O’Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 27 July 1837 in *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Roscommon Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837*, Vol. I (hereafter *OSL Roscommon I*), ed., Michael O’Flanagan (Bray, 1927), p. 120. For consistency, all references to the Letters are taken from Michael O’Flanagan’s transcriptions, made during the 1930s. While Herity’s editions of the Letters are the more recent, they don’t exist for every province and, as our concern here are the Letters themselves, which transcription used is of no major consequence.

<sup>30</sup> Letter John O’Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 17 July 1838, in *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Mayo Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1838*, Vol. II (hereafter *OSL Mayo II*), ed., Michael O’Flanagan (Bray, 1927), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Stiofán Ó Cadhla, *Civilizing Ireland. Ordnance Survey 1824-1842: Ethnography, Cartography, Translation* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), p. 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Letter John O’Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 28 October 1835, in *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Donegal Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1835*, ed. Michael O’Flanagan (Bray, 1935), p. 146.

<sup>33</sup> Letter George Petrie to John O’Donovan, dated 7 July 1837, in *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Roscommon Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1837*, Vol. II (hereafter *OSL Roscommon II*), ed. Michael O’Flanagan (Bray, 1931), p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> Susanne Österlund-Pötzsch, ‘The Peregrinations of Early Finland-Swedish Folklore Collectors’, *Journal of Folklore Research*, 51/3 (2014), 253-276.

<sup>35</sup> Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story* (London: Pimlico, 2006), pp. 28-9.

<sup>36</sup> Eugene Hynes, *Knock: The Virgin’s Apparition in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), pp. 12-3.

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- <sup>37</sup> Patricia Lysaght, 'Fairylure from the Midlands of Ireland', in *The Good People: New Fairylure Essays*, ed., Peter Narváez (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), pp. 29-30.
- <sup>38</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 6 August 1838, in *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Mayo Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1838*, Vol. II (hereafter *OSL Mayo II*), ed. Michael O'Flanagan (Bray, 1927), pp. 86-7.
- <sup>39</sup> Bourke, p. 28.
- <sup>40</sup> Jenny Butler, 'The *Sídhe* and Fairy Forts', in *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies, 500 AD to the Present*, ed., Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook (London: Gibson Square, 2018), p. 96.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> Ó Giolláin, p. 202.
- <sup>43</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 28 August 1838, in *Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Galway Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1838*, Vol. I (hereafter *OSL Galway I*), ed. Michael O'Flanagan (Bray, 1928), p. 9.
- <sup>44</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 17 August 1838, in *OSL Mayo II*, p. 5.
- <sup>45</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 14 July 1837 in *OSL Roscommon I*, p. 89.
- <sup>46</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 30 August 1838, in *OSL Galway I*, p. 13.
- <sup>47</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 30 June 1837 in *OSL Roscommon I*, p. 52.
- <sup>48</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 31 July 1838, in *OSL Mayo II*, p. 46.
- <sup>49</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated, 17 July 1838, in *OSL Mayo II*, p. 4.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> Andrew Sneddon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 71.
- <sup>52</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 20 July 1838, in *OSL Mayo II*, p. 20.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>54</sup> The Memoir collector Lieutenant G. H. Mallock wrote that people in Carrickfergus believed that their cows were relieved of milk by either being "elf-shot" or by being "blinked". The "evil eye" was considered to be in "here." (*Parishes of County Antrim XIV, Vol. 37, Parish of Carrickfergus*, 77, cited in Sneddon, p. 136.)
- <sup>55</sup> Sneddon, pp. 3-6.
- <sup>56</sup> Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch, *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise-Woman Healer* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007), p. 109.
- <sup>57</sup> Bourke, pp. 100-1.
- <sup>58</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 20 July 1838, in *OSL Mayo II*, pp. 20-1.
- <sup>59</sup> Sneddon, p. 148.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> This includes Ann/Nance Roche in Kerry, who came to trial for murder in 1826 and Bidy Early in the Feakle area of County Clare.
- <sup>62</sup> Ó Cruaíoch, p. 11.
- <sup>63</sup> See, for example, the numerous stories about her related to Lady Augusta Gregory in *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (London: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1920/Gerrard's Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe Ltd, 1970).
- <sup>64</sup> Ó Cruaíoch, p. 11.
- <sup>65</sup> Patricia Lysaght, 'Aspects of the Earth-Goddess in the Traditions of the Banshee in Ireland', in *The Concept of the Goddess*, ed., Sandra Billington and Miranda Green, (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 152-4.
- <sup>66</sup> Patricia Lysaght, *A Pocket Book of the Banshee* (Dublin: O'Brien Press Ltd, 1998), pp. 10-11.
- <sup>67</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 5 July 1837 in *OSL Roscommon I*, p. 67.
- <sup>68</sup> Robert C. Simington, ed., *Books of Survey and Distribution, Being Abstracts of Various Surveys and Instruments of Title, 1636-1703: County of Roscommon. With maps c.1636 of the Baronies of Athlone and Moycarnan and of parishes in Ballintober*, Vol. 1 (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1949) p. 20.
- <sup>69</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 5 July 1837 in *OSL Roscommon I*, p. 65.
- <sup>70</sup> *A Pocket Book of the Banshee*, pp. 93-4.
- <sup>71</sup> Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger* (Dublin: The Glendale Press, 1986), pp. 129-30.
- <sup>72</sup> Gabriel Cooney, 'Social landscapes in Irish prehistory', in *The Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape: Shaping Your Landscape*, ed., Peter J. Ucko and Robert Layton (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 46.
- <sup>73</sup> *A Pocket Book of the Banshee*, p. 58.
- <sup>74</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 5 July 1837, in *OSL Roscommon I*, pp. 68.
- <sup>75</sup> Letter John O'Donovan to Thomas Larcom, dated 14 July 1837, in *OSL Roscommon I*, p. 89.