THE RETURN OF THE FAIRY FOLK:
A VIEW FROM THE TOURIST SHOPS OF IRELAND

TOK THOMPSON

Trinity College, Dublin University, Ireland

Introduction

Where have all the fairies gone? Straight into the tourist shops, it would seem (photo 1).

Recently, the fairies in Ireland have been seen challenging St. Patrick for shelf-space dominance, about 1,500 years after he supposedly banished them from the former positions of power. Earlier still, the Gaels were said to have vanquished them, too (of course, if this were truly the case, one is left wondering why St. Patrick had to do so again).

Photo 1

Modernity, also, supposedly drove them out of existence, the fairies not being able to stand the loud noises and bright lights. Their resilience seems remarkable – they keep popping up after each supposed banishment in slightly different, though still quite recognizable, forms.

While tourism is often identified as a threat to heritage and tradition, I wish in this paper to explore one way in which tourism gives a 'second life' to traditional forms. In Stuart Hall's formation, it is an example of the 'new articulation between 'global' and 'local'[1].

First, the word

There are many words in Irish for the fairy folk, and many translate quite well into English. They are called, for instance, the *daoine maith* (good people), *daoine*

uaisle (noble or sacred people), *daoine beaga* (little or wee people), *bunadh na gnoic* (hill-folk) and a host of other 'alternative names' since there was a taboo against naming them directly. The common name 'leprechaun' is derived from the Old Irish *lucharpan*, or 'small-bodied'[2]. Their 'direct' name, if I may be so bold, is *sí* ('shee'). The word *sí* has two separate, yet overlapping, meanings in Irish[3]. These are:

1. The mounds and megalithic monuments which are well-represented in Ireland, dating from the Neolithic times and long the center of much tradition (Tara, Newgrange, and a multitude of lesser sites), and
2. The spirits of these mounds. Hence we have the well-known 'banshee' (*bean sí*) which means 'woman of the mounds' or 'fairy woman'.

According to the ancient St. Fiacc's hymn, upon his arrival in Ireland, St. Patrick found the people of Ireland worshiping the *sí*. 'On Ireland's folk lay darkness: the tribes worshiped the *sí*'[4]. In an even earlier text, *Tírechán's Account of St. Patrick's Churches* (in the *Patrician Texts from the Book of Armagh*, c. 670), two young noblewomen at first mistake St. Patrick and his men as 'men of the *síd* or gods of the earth or a phantasm'[5].

Christianity, it seems, was never able to truly get rid of the little people: the most common story of Christian re-interpretation is that they were a sort of fallen angel, and, while not condemned to hell, were not to be allowed into heaven either. They seemed to be fairly ineradicable, and outside the usual Christian categories of demons and devils[6].

The 'fairy faith' as it is often dubbed, was at times subsumed within the parameters of Christianity, and at other times continuing to operate outside of it. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin has stated that the fairy faith can be seen as a native religious resistance to the hegemonic processes of Christianity – itself allied with 'civilization', towns, and the European world. This popular religion, which included elements of Christianity as well, lasted in strong form up until the 20th century[7]. I myself have witnessed what would at least be a reluctance to deny the existence of the 'good people', and there are many active stories and traditions still current – for instance, a road was recently re-routed so as not to disturb a fairy site.

It is perhaps easy to underestimate the value and importance that the fairy faith had in Irish life – the word 'fairy' is an English word, not an Irish one, and the progressive belittlement of the tradition is an old English custom, corresponding in a large amount with the increase in England's colonial domination of Ireland, and the denigration of Ireland's culture and peoples. The fairy folk appear in many Irish accounts as impressive supernatural others of the same or only slightly smaller stature than mere mortals. They frequently had dealings with mortals, including marrying them, fighting with them, having children, etc. But by the time of Shakespeare, there had already begun an English process of cultural and literal bellittlement – the fairies were shrinking. By the time of the sensational Cottingley fairies (supposedly photographed in Victorian England) the fairies' shrinking had drastically increased – it would no longer be capable of seeing them in their former awesome sense. Now they were trifles, elements which helped justify English colonial rule of the 'silly, superstitious Irish' among whom the fairy faith was not yet extinct[8].

The Historical Background: Ireland as the *Insula Sacra*

It is therefore best to put the 'fairy faith' process in its long historical perspective. Ireland was known to the ancient Greeks and Roman writers as the *insula sacra*, the sacred isle[9]. It was not unknown to the ancient Mediterranean world – on the contrary, it formed a part of the known world for Classical and pre-Classical peoples[10]. The tin trade from the British Isles was the backbone behind the European Bronze age. Carthaginians traded tin from the British Isles for over 1,500 years, before Carthage was finally defeated by Rome in what must have been a tremendous blow to the Atlantic trading system[11].

The great centers of Ireland were, from the Neolithic onwards, the megalithic sites, the *sí*. These still excite the imagination and awe of the viewer, and have been the topic of countless queries and speculations. There is little doubt that these were the cultural, religious, social, and legal centers of the society, sharing many features with the wider Atlantic Europe.

With all this in mind, it is perhaps a bit easier to understand how and why the 'fairy faith' was such a large part of the Irish mindset and culture, inscribed in the very landscape, and why it had such lasting power against all the other influences mitigating against it. The *sí* were the 'omnipresent ancestors', as well as the sites of the ancestor's spirits and the cultural centers of Ireland for thousands of years. These sites often remained sacred throughout the later culture: the hill of Tara, for example, witnessed monument building from the Neolithic through to the early Christian period. Megalithic temples in Ireland predate the pyramids of Egypt by a wide margin and the island's temples and associated religious elements would have seemed impressive and ancient even to visiting Phoenicians, Etruscans, Egyptians or ancient Greeks.

When the English invaded Ireland with the Papal blessing under Henry II in 1170, they initiated what was to become a common theme in later colonial activities as well – transforming the native culture towards that of the invading one. In Ireland, the process of 'Anglicization' was a long and fairly thorough project. From the beginning of legal enforcement as to how one could legally wear one's hair, to what kind of clothes one could wear, to less obvious but perhaps more insidious means as to providing economic benefits and social distinctions towards those Irish who appeared most English. Ireland, which had long been the pinnacle of learning in Western Europe, was now derided as savage, barbarous, and ignorant. Native schools of learning were increasingly discredited – those who wished to teach in the so-called 'hedge schools' did so outside the law. Alongside this was the denigration of the belief in the *daoine beaga uaisle*.

Colonialism, tourism

With the belittlement of traditions, there is often an ambivalence towards them from the natives – this is one of the hallmarks of colonialism. Stereotypes may be seized upon, inverted into self-affirmations, which may also be used as conscious projections to the 'touristic image'. This is often because it is easier to 'reclaim'

identity through stereotypes rather than disputing the stereotypes themselves. For example, there is a very popular tour company in Ireland called 'paddywagon tours' – the term paddywagon being originally a term referring to the police wagons that would pick up 'paddies', a derogatory term for the Irish.

Colonialism often goes hand in hand with other forms of hegemony – journalistic, academic, monetary, etc. Colonial stereotypes are therefore difficult to counter, as they often have so much 'weight' behind them. Far easier to seize upon the stereotypes, and accept them, while trying to use them to foster a positive self-image. This may account somewhat for the most seemingly trivial aspects of the *sí* to be seized on so strongly.

When I talk about my research in Dublin, I'm often told 'Well, that's only for tourists'. And certainly, tourism has a particularly interesting role in Irish culture. One of the mainstays of the economy, tourism often fosters a projected image geared towards market concerns, which can easily be at odds with one's self-image, for one's own cultural rationale. The representations of the 'little people' for international tourists have been filtered through Disney or other such pop-culture representations which owe much more to English representations of the 'fairies' than they do the underlying Irish ideas of the *sí*. The idea of such trivialized figures being integral parts of Irish traditional cosmology and religious beliefs is to invite mass confusion.

But, by the same token, I found that these images were *not* 'just for tourists' and indeed that these representations were very popular among a wide swath of Irish citizens, with many little leprechauns in various office cubicles, as salt-and-pepper shakers in homes, and even a leprechaun doll that a man brought with him on a game show for 'good luck'. Irish citizens often dress up in leprechaun hats or costumes for a night out on the town. This is one of the most interesting aspects for me, how the locals can engage ironically, and playfully, with the touristic forms, while still using them as self-expressive devices, celebrating their collective identity.

The New Omnipresence of the Good People

Just when they were supposed to be forever vanquished, this time by modernity, electricity, and the motor-car, they have popped up again with a vengeance. I am not talking about in religion or belief, here, necessarily. But if it is neither belief nor religion, it is at the same time an *awareness*. It is next to impossible at the turn of the millenium to travel to Ireland without seeing the little people – or rather, their numerous representations. A few years ago, one old fellow was interviewed by a folklore collector, who asked if he believed in the fairies. 'No sir', he replied, 'but they're there all the same'[12]. The statement seems very appropriate today as well – they are an inescapable presence in modern Ireland.

There was a moment when this paper occurred to me – a few years previous, visited the village of Knock. It is a small village that largely runs on an economy of ecclesiastical tourism, stemming from a supposed miracle over 100 years ago. The town square is little more than the shrines, hotels, and a series of souvenir shops. Not

surprisingly, in this village the tourist shops were largely oriented towards Christian themes – plastic saints, hologram bookmarks of the Virgin Mary, and so on. But what caught my eye, though was that on several of the shelves, mixed in with the plastic and brass statues of famous saints, were several unmistakable leprechauns.

They were clearly mixed together, seemingly grouped according to make but not, it would seem, as to *genre*. There seemed on the part of the shop owners no cognitive dissonance involved with putting St. Joseph next to an obviously inebriated leprechaun.

Although resulted in no outcry, or even mention, among either the shopkeepers or tourists, it was to my mind discongruous. Why was this so? Probably because I had read so much of the history of the 'little people', the *daoine sí*, and knew a fair amount about the old antagonistic relationship between them and the Christian church. In previous times, it must have been much easier to witness this tension. The *sí* belief used to be much stronger in Ireland.

But for that matter, so was the Catholic Church. Indeed, at times the Republic seemed almost a theocracy: there was the famous breaking point on Saturday Night Live, when Sinéad Ó Connor held up a picture of the Pope, and said 'This is the enemy' while ripping his picture in half. The world was stunned. But for a young headstrong woman in Ireland at the time, the paternalistic and patriarchal Church was an obvious dominating presence, controlling much of their lives without allowing them representation in the hierarchy. It was the beginning of a long, quick slide for the Catholic church in Ireland.

This is not to say that the church is not still powerful. It is. But its hegemony has been seriously compromised, in part no doubt due to the demographics of a young, and increasingly globally-aware nation. It has become, in the last few years, increasingly unfashionable to use the Catholic Church as a symbol of the Republic. The Republic now seems more interested in promoting secularism, diversity and cultural pluralism, moving further and further away form the insular Irish world of yesteryear.

Signs and Symbols

While there has been a noticeable decline in using symbols of the Catholic church to portray and project Ireland, the same can not be said for the little people. Indeed, the little people are popping up everywhere, from the sides of busses to Bord Fáilte (Tourist Bord) handouts. They are on telephone booths, bumper stickers, candy wrappers, and, most of all, in the tourist shops.

It would seem that they are no longer seen as a 'threat' to Christianity; that their presence has been so trivialized that they

Photo 2

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are now 'safe'. This may well be the case, but whatever the reason, the sheer numbers of them are staggering: great walls in tourist shops are filled with tiny men, dolls of every size, plastic mugs, slippers, whole adult-sized costumes, whole walls of leprechauns.

The 'wee folk' now seems to have coalesced along a certain representational style. This can be viewed as representing in large part idealized images of the past, to the point that it is often difficult to discern in the representations what is supposed to be a 'fairy folk' and what is a representation of traditional Irish peasant. The clothes, for example, are based on an older style of clothing. There are

Photo 3

other common attributes: one is that they are mostly men (although the banshees remain female), and they are commonly associated with drinking, if not in fact inebriated. This seems to have much to do with the earlier-mentioned phenomenon of adopting colonial stereotypes as affirmative, nationalist representations. The leprechauns are usually bearded, pointy-eared, and often have a bit of a beer belly. They are uniformly happy, often musical, and at times a bit lewd.

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, seems to be the number one Christian contender in the tourist industry, and he is depicted variously – at times seriously, in bronze or other images, usually with his fabled crook. At other times, however, he is represented in a light-hearted manner, and indeed this seems to be on the rise.

Photo 4

As we can see in photo 4, St. Patrick has increasingly come to resemble the leprechauns himself. While still dressed in ecclesiastical robes, these robes are now often green, the color of the leprechaun's clothes. He is frequently depicted with a bushy beard, as are the leprechauns, and he has the figure of one as well, with the slight pot belly. He has, in many of these representations, the same rosy cheeks and incorrigible grin that countenances his fairy counterparts. In short, the two strands are growing together.

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St. Patrick's Day

All of the photographs in this article were taken in Dublin on St. Patrick's day 2004. As one can see, St. Patrick's day is replete with various symbols regarding 'traditional' Ireland.

In this photo 5 we see the crock of gold – not a part of any St. Patrick legend, but surely connected with the leprechaun. It is often said that these items are for tourist, such as the 'Irish Leprechaun Costume' (photo 6), but this is clearly worn by the Irish themselves, especially on St. Patrick's day, which has been transformed from a religious day into a festival celebrating national identity. *Celebrating national identity* has increasingly included leprechauns.

Photo 5

In photo 7 the hat and beard can be seen on a young Irish man. And photo 8 displays a whole group of Irish adults with the complete outfits, again on St. Patrick's day in Dublin.

Meanings

What to make of all this? Perhaps nothing: 'It is just tourist junk', one might say. But 'tourist junk' comes from somewhere, and is a response to demand. These representations are not *ex nihilo*. They arise and succeed in a certain cultural matrix. They are largely produced by the Irish themselves, and indeed one of the shameful little secrets of tourism is that frequently the natives are also the consumers. There is a recursive functioning to tourismus

Photo 6

(if I can coin a less value-laden laden term than 'tourist junk'), where the items are constantly perceived as representing identity outwards, for others, come to represent identity inwards as well.

I saw a tough-looking youth one day who had a megalithic symbol tattooed on his left shoulder, and directly beneath it was an even tougher-looking leprechaun, fists clenched as if ready for a fight. The symbols of self-identification, and perhaps
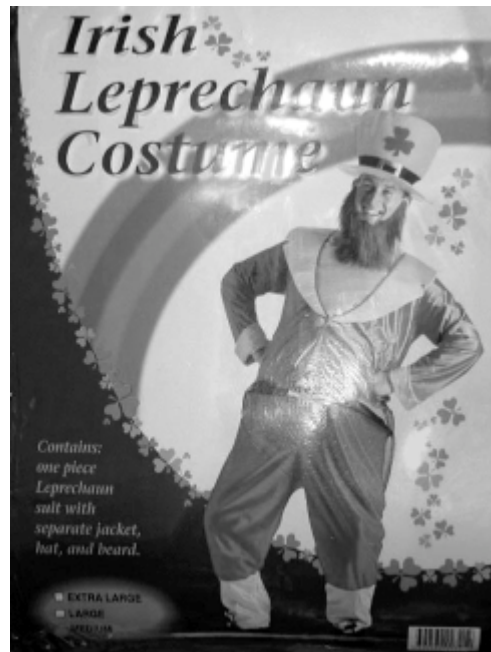
Photo 7   Photo 8

even more interestingly the *daoine sí* with artistic motifs from the Megalithic *sí* sites, were clear, and clearly displayed for all to see.

All in all, I believe it is a strangely telling barometer of cultural choices at play where the overwhelmingly chosen image to represent Ireland and Irishness is some form of *daoine sí*, while the previously common ecclesiastical images are seen in definite retreat, and at times even merging with the 'wee people'. Both have long pedigrees in Ireland, and remain embedded in the culture; both were at times dominant cosmological and religious foci, and both have left their respective temples as the most notable structures in the island.

It is unclear where religious and spiritual beliefs are headed in Ireland. The Catholic Church has lost an astonishing amount of good faith through its past actions, and while it remains a part of many people's lives, its hegemony has been strongly challenged.

The 'fairy faith' has been so discredited (with a great deal of help from the colonial interpretations thereof) as to have also 'fallen from grace' in terms of cosmological or religious beliefs. Many of their former cultural and linguistic associations and references have been lost in translation, as the use of Irish as an everyday language in Ireland continues to decline. This 'mundanization' of the fairy folk has certainly shaped their current forms, and it may have even helped them attain their current level of popularity. Now they are not so much feared as appreciated, not so much awesome as charming, not so much the spirits of the ancestors as the representatives of the 'good old days'.

The idea of supernatural others as representing an idealized past, has been investigated elsewhere as well, for example in Barbara Rietie's (1990) work in Newfoundland, or Valdimar Hafstein's (2000: 96) work on Icelandic elves, where he states that 'the contemporary tradition as a whole may be read as an extended

metaphor for social changes. It provides a narrative framework for negotiaitng their significance, validity, and their import for the cultural system of values and identity'. As in Iceland, the Irish rural farmer is often held up as an idealized image of traditional 'Irishness' while at the same time there is a diminishment of the small farms as a viable way of life. Hafstein reads contemporary elf belief in Iceland as providing a 'clear-cut direction for dealing with these concerns through ritual avoidance, and it affords a narrative code, through which to discuss and negotiate them' (100).

This may well be the case in Ireland as well – after all, how does one know one is Irish (which is almost always posed in opposition to being 'British' or 'English')? The English language is spoken throughout the island, and England has been a decidedly hegemonic presence for hundreds of years. The 'good people' provide something that the English, by and large, do not (or at least do not profess to) have. It is, as Hafstein intimates, a discourse full of taboo nuance, a code by which highly sensitive notions of nationalism, traditions, and the loss thereof, can be played out.

But this is not to assert that these representations are entirely bereft of traditional meaning. Indeed, in many traditional areas there is still, if not a belief in the fairy tradition, a great respect for the tradition. The *sí* remain embedded throughout the Irish language, landscape, and linguascape, and are an indelible part of the island's customs, place names, personal names, and other parts of the culture. Some Irish may wince at the trivial, jovial leprechauns sold in stores as denigrating the once-great tradition, while at the same time others may see this sort of representation as a harmless, playful reference to the fairy faith, something that once defined Ireland more than perhaps any other aspect, and is now doing so again.

Both of these aspects – Christian and *sí*, are often conjured up in images of Ireland – I have demonstrated how they often overlap with little apparent incongruity. All in all, the little people currently seem to be on the ascendancy in representations – not particularly in their earlier, religious role as feared spirits of the ancestors and the timeless Otherworld, but still with ties to the past, even the ancestral past. No longer responsible for the growth of crops and the health of cows, and no longer locked in a fierce struggle with the Catholic church over the souls of the Irish, the fairy folk in Ireland today are generally a happy lot, content, perhaps, with their beer, shamrocks, and pots of gold, as they prance and dance in thick crowds along the walls of tourist shops – and elsewhere – in modern Ireland. Where and what they will be in the future is hard to predict. But, judging from their longlife span and frequent reincarnations, I believe that in all probability they will still be around, and will still be elements representing Ireland and Irish culture, for many long years to come.

[1] Hall 1996.
[2] Ó Giolláin 1984.
[3] Ó Dónaill 1992, p. 1089.
[4] *For tuaith hÉrend bai temel, tuatha adortais síde* (Stokes 1887, p. 409).

[5] Koch and Carey 1995, p. 198.
[6] See Carey 1999.
[7] See Ó Giolláin 1991.
[8] Carol Silver's book, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (1999), provides an excellent account of this process.
[9] Freeman 2001, pp. 28–29.
[10] See, e.g., Freeman 2001.
[11] See Cunliffe 2001.
[12] Munnelly 1992–1993.

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