



The Féar Gortach: Memorialization of the Great Hunger in Irish Folklore

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Abstract

Folklore, as an ever-changing set of stories and traditions, provides valuable insight into the emotional and cultural impact of historical events. In Ireland, one can find an excellent case study in the evolving stories of the *Féar Gortach*. Also known as Hungry Grass, this particular Irish legend centers around patches of earth that instill intense feelings of hunger in those who cross it. Traditionally characterized as the doing of fairies, the legend began to see a cultural shift in the latter half of the nineteenth century following the tragedy of the Great Hunger, a period of mass starvation and emigration brought about by the repeated failure of the potato crop. In the wake of this national tragedy, the legend of the *Féar Gortach* changed to reflect Ireland's cultural landscape, centering the historical events of the Great Hunger and directly attributing the legend to its effects. This paper examines how stories of the *Féar Gortach* were used to memorialize and process the Great Hunger through a nationalistic lens, drawing upon the imagery of Irish funerary rites and nineteenth-century famine walls in order to produce a uniquely Irish means of grappling with the tragedy.

Keywords: Folklore, Irish Potato Famine, Irish Nationalism, Irish Folklore Commission

Folklore plays a unique role within cultural histories. As an ever-changing network of stories that often hinges upon oral traditions, it provides indispensable insight into the concerns and values of a culture at a given moment in time. One of the darker circumstances in which this effect appears is in the memorialization of collective tragedies. In instances such as these, folklore may be reshaped as a means of processing grief, encouraging the remembrance of the dead while providing some form of catharsis. In Ireland, where folklore has long been recorded and disseminated as an act of cultural preservation and political dissidence, these stories hold a particular cultural weight. This research examines one such instance of this process within Irish

folklore: the recontextualization of the *Féar Gortach* as a folkloric memorialization of mass starvation during the Great Hunger. To fully examine this legend and its cultural context, it would be best to begin with a story.

It was a cold evening in the village of Killadiskert in County Leitrim when Patrick McKenna vanished on Gabhlán Mountain. McKenna, as it were, had foregone the traditional precautions that one was expected to take when going on a journey through the Irish countryside. He had ventured onto the mountain alone. He had neglected to bring the customary bit of oat bread with him. And so, when he came upon the fairy path that ran across the mountain, he was unprepared for the sudden onset of a supernatural hunger and fatigue. With no one to help him and no scrap of food to ward off the effects, McKenna soon succumbed to this terrible hunger, perishing on the mountainside. As the people of the town understood it, he had fallen victim to the *Féar Gortach*. This is the account given by a Mrs. McLoughlon in the late 1930s, recalling a story from her hometown of Killadiskert, Co. Leitrim (“Fear Gorta,” *The Schools’ Collection*, vol. 0204, pp. 381-382). Recorded in the *Schools’ Collection* of the Irish National Folklore Collection in Dublin, the account serves as a prime example of one of the more standard variations of the *Féar Gortach* legend.

Féar Gortach, in the simplest of terms, is a patch of land that inflicts feelings of hunger and fatigue on those who walk across it. The term translates literally to “hungry grass,” though one can find numerous instances of the term also being used to describe the supernaturally inflicted sense of hunger itself, often referred to as “taking the *Féar Gortach*.” Traditionally, *Féar Gortach* has two folkloric origins: a spot where a person has broken bread and failed to leave behind crumbs for the Good Folk, or a spot where a coffin had been set down on the way to a burial site (“*Féar Gortach*,” *The Schools’ Collection*, vol. 1096, p. 394; “*Wakes and Funerals*,”

The Schools' Collection, vol. 0139, p. 426). Between these two, the former is the more frequently found and longer established variant, being recorded as early as 1834 in William Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, in which it is remarked that the Féar Gortach "is the spot the fairies planted their hungry grass" (Carleton, 1834, p. 227). There is, however, a third reported cause of Féar Gortach that, by its very nature, would likely not have entered into circulation until the latter half of the nineteenth century. This is the Féar Gortach as the site of death via starvation.

Collective memories of starvation in Ireland are strong, and the topic typically conjures up a period in the mid-nineteenth century known as the Irish Potato Famine, or Great Hunger. At the center of this tragedy was an agricultural disease known as "late blight," though it is more frequently and colloquially known simply as "blight," a testament to its capacity for devastation (Kinealy, 2012). Blight is a disease that favors cool, damp climates, and it poses a particular threat to potatoes. Its impact was felt across Europe, but nowhere was quite as primed for devastation as damp, rainy Ireland, where the survival of the working class often hinged upon the yearly yield of potatoes. The blight arrived in September of 1845, mere weeks before the mid-October harvest. Within two months, it had infected a third of the year's crop, and the downward spiral of the Great Hunger began (Coohill, 2014).

To truly understand the impact of the blight upon Ireland, one must first understand the importance of the potato to the mid-nineteenth-century Irish peasantry. Potatoes were a near-universal staple of the Irish diet largely through necessity, and though they were consumed by nearly every social class, it was the poor who truly depended upon them for survival. By the beginning of the 1840s, approximately three million people, a staggering two-fifths of the Irish population, relied on potatoes as their main dietary staple (Kinealy, 2012). Potatoes functioned

largely as a subsistence crop, and if a year's harvest failed, many would not have the reserves to weather the period until the next one, making them vulnerable to the threat of starvation. The families that relied on potatoes as their main food source rather than as a supplement were typically the poorest of the Irish population, and when the threat of food shortage loomed, it was these families who bore the worst of it. The first crop failure in 1845 was no exception.

It is estimated that between the years of 1845 and 1851, a million Irishmen succumbed to the effects of the Great Hunger (Gray, 2018). In 1847, at the famine's height, malnutrition accounted for 18.5%, nearly a fifth, of all deaths in Ireland (Kinealy, 2012). When the addition of those who migrated in search of better circumstances is taken into account, the ten-year period between 1841 and 1851 saw Ireland's population shrink from 8.2 million, the highest it would ever be, to 6.5 million. The number continued to fall throughout the nineteenth century, reaching 5.4 million by 1871 (Coohill, 2014). Within a span of just thirty years, Ireland's population would be nearly halved. In the wake of this devastation, the Féar Gortach, a folkloric fixture that already dealt with hunger and starvation, would be reinterpreted to reflect on the then-fresh wounds of the Great Hunger.

As described above, one of the more prominent explanations for the Féar Gortach is that it grows in places where a coffin or corpse has been allowed to make contact with the earth. This element of the legend provides an early connection between death and the causes of Féar Gortach, but it was not until the twentieth century that this correlation would be expanded upon and solidified into its own tenet of folklore. Instead of a connection to death as a generic and indirect concept, the Féar Gortach was reframed as a direct consequence of a death by starvation. One manuscript from Co. Sligo within the Schools' Collection notes a local spot in town marked by a "hungry rock" where the Féar Gortach grew after a priest died of starvation there during the

penal era in the eighteenth century (“In the Penal Times,” The Schools’ Collection, vol. 0171, p. 432). Another manuscript from Co. Cavan links this trend directly to the Great Famine itself, stating that a “traveler is supposed to take the ‘Fear Gorta’ at the spot where a person or persons died from the famine, ” while an interview carried out by historian Deborah R. Davis in Co. Mayo attributes the onset of Féar Gortach to having “hit up against the Famine Ghost” (“The Fear Gorta,” The Schools’ Collection, vol. 0978, p. 283; Davis, 1996, p. 49).

The Féar Gortach did not begin as a reflection of famine within Ireland, but in the decades following the Great Hunger, the stories of the “hungry grass” shifted in accordance with the concerns, memories, and priorities of the people telling them. By attributing the Féar Gortach to sites of starvation, these stories ascribed physical form to the famine’s impact on Ireland. In this way, the Féar Gortach become symbolic of the lingering influences of the Great Hunger, a way to process collective tragedy through ritual and shared narrative. However, if one considers the Féar Gortach within the context of two other traditions in Ireland, *cairns* and *leachts*, one is able to see how it serves not just as a means of processing that grief, but memorializing it, as well.

Many cultures around the world have traditions associated with the physical commemoration of death, but the Irish cairn is unique in its versatility. Cairns, sometimes referred to as *múcháns*, are piles of rocks used to mark a location associated with death, a definition that covers no less than three different interpretations: places of burial, places of death, and places where a corpse has come into contact with the earth. Cairns placed at sites of burial are the least commonly recorded and are typically associated with instances when a body, for various reasons, would not be buried in a traditional graveyard. Cairns associated with places of death appear far more frequently, the assumption being that the physical bodies would be moved

and laid to rest in a local churchyard after the fact (Nic Néill, 1946). Cairns may also be erected on spots where a corpse had been allowed to touch the earth, whether this be in a funeral procession or under more tragic circumstances, such as the spot in which a drowned body is laid after retrieval from the water (Nic Néill, 1946). In this way, cairns fulfill a similar purpose to early iterations of the Féar Gortach, providing a cultural symbol of where death has marked the land. In the transfer of dead bodies, great care would often be taken to avoid contact between the deceased and the earth. One manuscript account from Co. Mayo has a man remarking that he has “seen a coffin resting on men’s shoulders for almost an hour while waiting for a *currach* to carry it across the bay to the burial-ground” in order to avoid resting it on the soil (The Main Manuscript Collection, vol. 653, p. 275).

Yet despite this seeming cultural taboo of allowing a corpse to make contact with the earth, there is evidence that such “halts,” as Máire Nic Néill calls them in her article, “Wayside Death Cairns in Ireland,” were once an important part of Irish funerary rituals (Nic Néill, 1946). Halts often occurred at places of particular import and were often associated with leachts, another Irish practice involving the piling of stone. Leachts as a practice date back to early Christian worship in Ireland, and debate over what purpose they served continues to this day, with explanations ranging from places of prayer to burial mounds, much like the *cairn* (O’Dowd, 1998). In more recent years, however, scholars have associated leachts with these “halts” in funeral processions. In his 1998 article “Leacht Cuimhne or Funerary Cairns of Wormhole, Moycullen, Co. Galway,” Peader O’Dowd further details this funerary practice, citing a 1996 exchange with fellow historian William Henry, who writes:

The custom in this area [Wormhole] was that when the funeral procession reached the crest of the hill, the coffin was removed from the cart and placed on a large flat stone in front of the monuments. The people then knelt in prayer, while some

of the men of the deceased family raised a few stones on the *leacht* (O'Dowd, 1998).

In contrast to the taboo of allowing the body to touch the earth, these *leachts* incorporate it as a standard practice of funerary procession. There is speculation within the manuscripts of the National Folklore Collection itself that such structures may have been established as a means of bypassing this taboo by creating “acceptable” places for the coffins to be set down so that carriers may rest (“Wakes and Funerals,” The Schools’ Collection, vol. 0139, p. 426). Ultimately, though, these *leachts*, like the cairns, suggest a tradition of reverence for the dead and apprehension for the taboo of death as a concept, encouraging continued observation through the addition of new rocks every time a coffin is set down. In both of these cases, these structures act as memorials, physical markers of the effects of death upon both the landscape and the community that occupies it. Nic Néill summarizes this with the argument that, despite the vast variety of reasons that a cairn may be erected, the core intent of them is “to remind people to pray for the dead” (Nic Néill, 1946, p. 53).

Sites associated with the Féar Gortach, in a tradition closely related to that of the cairns, are sometimes marked by either a singular rock or a pile of them, often referred to as “hunger stones” or “Féar Gortach stones.” Accounts describing these miniature monuments are particularly prominent in the Schools’ Collection of the Irish Folklore Collection, which includes instances of traditional cairns being used to mark the death-locations of those killed by the Féar Gortach as well as instances of cairns being used as warnings to mark areas that may *inflict* the Féar Gortach upon travelers.

One manuscript from Co. Mayo describes as many as four *múcháns* within one area, all of them marking locations where a person had fatally succumbed to the Féar Gortach (“Féar

Gortach,” *The Schools’ Collection*, vol. 0139, pp. 428-429). Another account, also from Co. Mayo, describes a village’s “fear gortach stone,” which according to the older generations of the area, would inflict the “fean gontach” on any person who sat on it (“(no title),” *The Schools’ Collection*, vol. 0138, pp. 230-231). These stones, visually reminiscent of both cairns and leachts, may be understood to have two purposes: to warn passerby of the presence of Féar Gortach and to memorialize places where its victims’ corpses have come into contact with the earth, much like the traditional cairn.

Both the cairns and the leachts draw upon uniquely Irish rituals, rituals that potentially predate the Norman invasion of Ireland, and thus would have appealed to the resurgence of interest in pre-Christian Irish culture associated with the nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century. During a period known as the Gaelic Revival, folklorists placed a high premium on the historical preservation of Irish language and folklore as a means of establishing a sense of Irish national identity separate from that of Great Britain. In this context, one can understand why a ritual like the hunger stones that mirrored such distinctly Gaelic practices as the cairn would have retained popularity well into the twentieth century. However, while the cairns and the leachts may play an influential role in the history of the Féar Gortach’s stone markers, this paper suggests that there is another, more modern element of Irish history that these stone piles invoke, especially when one considers the later associations between the Féar Gortach and death by starvation. Hunger stones, as it were, are not the only stone structures that mark the impact of hunger upon the physical landscape of Ireland.

If one visits the rural regions of Ireland, they will find a peculiar network of low stone walls speckled across the countryside. They wind about without reason. They stop abruptly. They keep nothing out and nothing in and can often be found in areas where there would be no

reason to do either. They do not make for very good walls. Yet the walls remain standing to this day, protected as historical landmarks and frequently incorporated into local oral traditions (Kinealy, 2012). These are famine walls, and they are one of the most prominent visual scars left by the Great Hunger on Ireland, the story behind them serving as a symbol of British misrule in Irish culture.

The famine walls were a project first implemented by British Prime Minister John Russell following his instatement to the position in 1846. Russell's ministry was directly proceeded by that of Sir Robert Peel, who had served as Prime Minister for the first year of the famine. Peel's initial responses to the famine, which included the establishment of relief depots and public works, were generally well-received, but despite a timely and, in Irish eyes, surprisingly earnest attempt to combat the threat of starvation, they had never been intended as long-term solutions (Coohill, 2014). Mid-nineteenth-century Great Britain, in the midst of the industrial revolution, held tight to notions of the free market, which left little room for the "charity work" that Ireland needed so desperately (Gray, 2018). Thus, when Peel stepped down and Lord John Russell was appointed in his place, the momentum of the previous ministry's relief efforts slowed to a halt. This was in part due to England's own tightened food supply and the fear of establishing an unsustainable precedent, but more than that, it was a doubling down on the laissez-faire attitudes of the previous ministry. This response was not helped by popular English perception of the Irish as an inherently indolent, backwards people, to the point that the potato itself was framed as "a lazy root, grown in lazy beds, by an incorrigibly lazy people" (O'Cathaoir, 1846, p. 66, as cited in Derby, 2000, p. 172). Thus, efforts were shifted towards reforming the Irish economy and industry, long-stunted by its colonial connections to industrial Great Britain. The issue with this approach, however, was that it was implemented on the

precipice of the very worst of the famine. The early summer hopes for the 1846 crop proved to be short-lived. Come autumn, the crop failed, worse than the 1845 crop before it, and in the second year of food shortage with no direct relief, starvation began to grip the nation in earnest (Kinealy, 2012).

Despite the slashing of relief depots and food supplies, the one holdover from Peel's response that remained was the public works. In September of 1846, the public works of Ireland employed 30,000 men, but by December of the same year, that number had grown sixteen times over to a staggering 500,000 men (Coohill, 2014). The public works were meant as a way to provide Irishmen with the opportunity to work for their metaphorical bread, and they appealed to industrial England's ideals and values. The problem was that there were more men being put to work than there was work to be done.

The solution to this surplus of workers was the construction of famine walls and famine roads, structures that served little infrastructural purpose, but provided a task that men could be set to work on in order to earn their relief. Due to their often impractical placement and a lack of necessity, the walls were largely intended as "a test of destitution" under John Russell's relief program rather than as a practical endeavor in infrastructure (Kinealy, 2012, p. 513). The work proved to be grueling, especially for those already struggling with malnourishment. By the end of 1846, reports had begun to roll in of men "falling over from hunger and dying next to their work," a bitter reality to face when the pointlessness of many of these efforts was taken into account (Coohill, 2014, p. 90).

The history of the Irish famine walls is a fraught one, wrapped up in the imagery of a nation that had been failed and worked to the point of death by an apathetic crown. Nationalist interpretations of the famine were abundant, with men such as Charles Gavan Duffy, a member

of the nationalist Young Ireland movement, arguing that the famine was “a fearful murder committed on the mass of the people” (Coohill, 2014, p. 101). It is easy to see why the famine walls became such a poignant symbol of Britain’s misrule to nationalists. Though it is generally recognized that the tradition of hunger stones predates the famine walls, it is worth considering why these piles of stone continued to be revered well into the mid-twentieth century. The persistence of the hunger stones is especially interesting given the fact that, by this time, many considered the Féar Gortach a “disease” of the past, a relic of outgrown superstition (“Folklore – Local Cures,” *The Schools’ Collection*, vol. 0199, p. 57). Yet the rocks remained, and the stories around them continued to be circulated, perhaps fueled by the same cultural memory and reverence that keeps the famine walls protected and standing to this day. Considered within the context of the famine walls and the tradition of cairns and leachts, one can see how the hunger stones fit into the tradition of physical memorialization, serving to mark locations of folkloric importance while also commemorating the tragedy of the Great Hunger.

The Irish legend of the Féar Gortach taps into two of the few truly universal human experiences: death and hunger. Hunger is a quintessential part of many different folklores, but its manifestation in the form of the Féar Gortach held a specific role in the folklore of late nineteenth-century Ireland. It represented the grief of a nation still in mourning and the failure of the Union to act on Ireland’s behalf, addressing both of these grievances through the lens of traditional Irish folklore and funerary practices dating as far back as the fifth century to pre-Christian Ireland. The reframing of the Féar Gortach legend is a testament to the enduring yet fluid nature of the folkloric tradition in Ireland and its ability to help a mourning populace grapple with real-world tragedy through memorialization and remembrance.

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