

William Carleton, Folklore, the Famine and the Irish Supernatural

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Mystic forces were to the fore in the life of the Irish writer William Carleton (1794–1869) from the beginning. He was a seventh son, and the five years between the birth of his brother John and his own arrival gave rise to speculation in the parish: some predicted he would achieve something extraordinary – others, with sinister shakings of the head, warned ‘it might be the other way’. He was born on Shrove Tuesday, which again divided the neighbors: perhaps his whole life would be shadowed by the privation and suffering of Lent, or maybe he would be a saint, and teach them to mortify the flesh. Either way, he says, ‘superstition was at work, and in the spirit of prophecy shadowed forth my future fate’ – Carleton was inclined to think it a ‘peculiarly calamitous’ one (*Autobiography* 15–17). Superstition kept him in the Clogher valley until young manhood; his journey to Munster as a poor scholar was aborted after the first night, when his dream of being pursued by a mad bull persuaded him to return home. But superstition also had a hand in his decision to leave Co. Tyrone and head for Dublin. Young William had been intended for the priesthood, but when his sister Mary paid a gipsy to tell his fortune, fate intervened:

‘He will never be a priest,’ said she, ‘he will love the girls too well; but when he grows up, he will go to Dublin, and become a great man.’

This prediction I never forgot, nor was it without influence in urging me into the city (*Autobiography* 179).

The gipsy fortune-teller does not get all the blame (or credit) for rescuing Carleton from the priesthood; the other factor in his decision to leave for Dublin was his voracious appetite for literature. ‘During my whole life, I had been an insatiable reader of such sixpenny romances and history-books as the hedge-schools afforded’, he says in his General Introduction to *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* (1843–4) (1:xvi); his tale ‘The Hedge-School’ lists an eclectic collection of books he devoured with delight and credulity, and whose influence emerges in his stories and novels: the histories of Freney the Robber, the Irish Rogues and Rapparees, the prophecies of Columkill and Pastorini, political and religious ballads, miraculous legends of holy friars persecuted by Protestants, the Royal Fairy Tales, the Arabian Nights Entertainments (*Traits and Stories* 1:313). When these were exhausted, he ransacked the parish for anything in the shape of a book. Even illiterate neighbors could be counted on to have kept an odd volume or two in the hope that a young relative might read them, and in this way Carleton encountered among other books Defoe’s *History of the Devil* (*Autobiography* 73). The first novel he unearthed was *Amoranda, or the Reformed Coquette* – the long plot synopsis of this ridiculous romance in Carleton’s autobiography testifies to its hold on his memory even fifty years later, and his indiscriminate pleasure in any fiction: ‘Such was the delight with which I read, and such my disappointment that there was no more of it, that I actually shed tears’ (*Autobiography* 73). At his friend William Short’s house, he discovered the second volume of Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, feeling ‘something amounting to agony at the disappointment [of] not knowing what the *dénouement* was’ (*Autobiography* 71). Much later, while staying with another family in Meath, he found Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (*Autobiography* 148). But by far the most influential of the novels he read

before he left the Clogher Valley (though he claims to have thought it was fact) was Le Sage's *Gil Blas*, which inspired him to leave home, 'friendless, moneyless and alone – but not without hope, for I had read *Gil Blas*', and even in his darkest days in Dublin he comforted himself that 'I might yet become the Gil Blas of Ireland' (*Autobiography* 110–2, 193). One of his favorite lodgings in Dublin was in a circulating library in Francis Street, where he frequently spent more than twelve hours a day engrossed in books such as the *History of Mrs Leeson* or the *Irish Female Jockey Club*, mostly obscene: 'The curiosity of a young man, added to the fact that they came in my way by accident, must plead my excuse for reading them', he says ruefully, adding more candidly: 'the very best of us have a taste for scandal'. He also read there several of Charles Maturin's novels and his tragedy *Bertram* (*Autobiography* 177, 190). The oral legends, superstitions and ballads of the Co. Tyrone peasantry and the written jumble of pamphlets, chapbooks, histories, and English, Irish and European novels – satires, romances, national tales, Gothic novels and picaresque adventures – he stumbled across at home and on his travels, generated the mysterious alchemy that made Carleton one of the most significant Irish novelists and short-story writers of the nineteenth century.

Carleton had already begun to develop his skills as a storyteller before his arrival in Dublin. Unable to find a post as a schoolmaster in Dundalk, he was reliant on the kindness of acquaintances, whose hospitality he repaid with legends. According to Carleton, no-one was better furnished than himself with Irish legends: 'My native place is a spot rife with old legends, tales, traditions, customs, and superstitions; so that in my early youth, even beyond the walls of my own humble roof, they met me in every direction. It was at home, however, and from my father's lips in particular, that they were perpetually sounding in my ears' (*Traits and Stories* 1:viii). His father's storehouse of charms, prophecies, tales of pilgrims and revelations from ghosts and fairies had been a source of wonder for young William, yet he felt somehow that they were unfit for his new-found audience, or his sense of his own importance: 'I would have given them Irish legends, and sometimes did, but then the Irish legends did not show the "larnin"'. He was intended for the priesthood, and fond of demonstrating his education in 'proper' subjects such as Latin and the classics, with a youthful self-regard he was later to satirize in his story 'Going to Maynooth'. Irish legends were common currency, so to display his 'larnin' to his neighbors, he gave them instead versions of classical legends, 'transmogrified and changed into an incredible variety of shapes', and when he ran out of those, began to invent his own, which he recited at their firesides; to his great satisfaction, the neighbors began to compete for his company (*Autobiography* 146–7). Ironically, he was later to realize that the way to show his 'larnin' in Dublin would be to fall back on his Irish legends, which were now highly fashionable, and as unfamiliar to his new metropolitan audience as the classical legends had been to his previous peasant one. A review of Samuel Lover's *Legends and Stories of Ireland* in the *London Literary Gazette* in 1832 stated that: 'Irish tales and legends have been both so very good and so very plentiful that, to use a Dublin bay simile, "there's a glut of herrings in the market"' (Loeber and Loeber xcvi). Carleton was able to claim unrivalled access to these fishing grounds; unlike other Irish writers who were introducing Irish legends to Dublin and London audiences, such as Lover, John and Michael Banim, Gerald Griffin, or Anna Maria Hall, he had been himself a peasant. Of Hall he is said to have asked (rather unchivalrously): 'Did she

ever live with the people as I did? Did she ever dance and fight with them as I did? Did she ever get drunk with them as I did?’ (Loeber and Loeber lxiv). So thorough was his informal training in Irish stories, legends and ballads that he claimed never to have heard, either from storytellers or scholars or antiquarians, ‘any single tradition, usage, or legend, that [...] was perfectly new to me or unheard before, in some similar or cognate dress’. In addition, he stressed his advantage in having heard them in Irish as often as English, if not more so. As a result, he said, ‘my exhibitions of Irish peasant life [...] may be relied on as truthful and authentic’ (*Traits and Stories* 1:ix, viii); clearly those of others were to be thought more dubious.

The issue of Carleton’s authenticity is complex. Not only had he left the Clogher valley behind for the life of a literary man in Dublin, but he had converted to Protestantism, and some of his ‘exhibitions of Irish peasant life’ were heavily skewed by their overt didactic purpose. Helen O’Connell has pointed out that far from being ‘faithful accounts of pre-Famine peasant life’, as they are often perceived and as Carleton would have us believe, his tales were in fact carefully modelled on the conventions of the nineteenth-century improvement tract (16). His ‘exhibitions’ were also packaged in the inherently inauthentic form of legends and tales. Carleton, a self-confessed improviser of legends before launching his literary career, dismisses the very notion of an ‘authentic’ Irish legend in his story ‘The Castle of Aughtentain; or a Legend of the Brown Goat’; the narrator claims the story’s language is truthful as he has ‘related [it] as nearly as we can remember’ in the very words of the story-teller Tom Grassiey, but adds: ‘We may as well, however, state at once that many of his legends were woefully deficient in authenticity, as indeed those of most countries are. Nearly half the Irish legends are *ex post facto* or *postliminous*’ (389). Their postliminality would, of course, only be enhanced in their retelling by Carleton in the periodical press. As Propp notes, circulation and changeability are defining features of folklore: ‘anyone listening to folklore is a potential future performer, who, in turn, consciously or unconsciously, will introduce changes into the work’ (8). Brian Earls argues that Carleton, as ‘a tradition bearer’, would have been well aware not only of the extent to which he was changing the tales he had heard, but of the inevitable future absorption of his own tales and novels into folklore to be told at the firesides of Monaghan, Tyrone and Fermanagh (129).

Carleton’s stated intention was ‘to give a panorama of Irish life among the people’ (*Traits and Stories* 1:xxiv), but he was aware that it would soon be outdated. Ireland was in a state of transition, and in his introduction to *Tales and Sketches Illustrating the Character, Usages, Traditions, Sports and Pastimes of the Irish Peasantry* in 1845, Carleton notes:

Many of the characters contained in the following volume have already ceased to exist, and are, consequently, the property of history. Others are still in being; but ere long they, too, will have disappeared, and may probably be sought for in vain, save in the unassuming pages of the following volume (viii).

Some of these archetypes – ‘the last of their class which the country will ever again produce’ – are much to be mourned: the dying out of the Irish Harper and Senachie (the traditional story-teller) means a massive cultural loss. The narrator of ‘Tom Gressiey, the Irish Senachie’ says: ‘The old armorial bearings of society [...] now hang like tattered scutcheons over the tombs of customs and usages which sleep beneath them; and, unless rescued from the obliterating hand of time, scarcely a vestige of them will be left even to tradition itself’ (*Tales*

and Sketches 177). In his stories and novels, Carleton seeks to recover, or at least record, some aspects of past cultural glories, preserving the customs, shreds of the language, and ancient beliefs of the people. Three of his novels – *Willy Reilly and his Dear Colleen Bawn* (1855), *Redmond, Count O’Hanlon* (1862) and *The Red-Haired Man’s Wife* (1889) – were inspired by ballads, and the narrator of the latter stresses the ‘inestimable value’ of ballads, their ability to ‘perpetuate the memory of National events, [...] and very often describe, by a single epithet, some well-known character peculiar to the Country in times long gone by, when Irish was the language of the people’ (1). The ballad ‘The Red-Haired Man’s Wife’ was of personal significance to Carleton, as he remembered his mother singing it, but he also remembered her refusal to sing it in English, because ‘the English words and the air are like a quarrelling man and wife; *the Irish melts into the tune, but the English doesn’t*’ (*Traits and Stories* 1:x). The translation of the ballad by her son not only into prose, but also into English, and the absence of the plot of the ballad in the novel bearing its name, is perhaps an acknowledgment on Carleton’s part at the end of his life that cultural recuperation was now impossible, in an Ireland where the vernacular was increasingly becoming English.

Some of the characters in his panorama were all too present in contemporary Ireland, and unlikely to be ousted any time soon – the miser, the agent, the religious hypocrite, the Ribbonman and Orangeman are all anatomized in the novels. Others he is glad to consign to history, such as the Irish match-maker, who promoted improvident marriages, and most notably the prophecy-man, retailer of the millenarian predictions of Columbkil and Pastorini about the downfall of Protestantism, who ‘unfortunately has survived the failure of his best and most cherished predictions’ (*Traits and Stories* 1:xxiii). Some of Carleton’s prophets are harmless enough; Barney M’Haigney is a rather touching figure, mortified by the failure of his favorite prophecies (*Tales and Sketches* 210, 220). In ‘The Poor Scholar’ Jemmy Donnelly uses the prophecies to assuage his father’s bitterness at the contrast between their own stony soil and the sheltered rich farms of their Protestant and Presbyterian neighbors: ‘An’ doesn’t Pashthorini say it? Sure whin Twenty-five comes, *we’ll* have our own agin’ (*Traits and Stories* 2:258). Here the Prophecies seem to function as a substitute for action; there was no need to seek retribution in violence when the Prophecy would shortly solve the problem. Other prophecy-men are an encouragement to vice, if not villains themselves. The Red Rapparee in *Willy Reilly* goes to the gallows cursing the prophecy man who assured him he would never be hung; the eponymous protagonist of *The Black Prophet* is a murderer and panderer. These men are confidence tricksters, telling people what they want to hear or shrouding the obvious in the veil of the supernatural. The conjuror of *The Evil Eye; or, The Black Spectre* (1860), a more sophisticated prophecy-man, flaunts his fakery, advertising himself as ‘Her Zander Vanderpluckem’, seventh son of ‘Her Zander Vanderhoaxem’, but the people still flock to him to be told what they should already know: ‘I make them state the facts, and I draw the inferences; nothing is easier; it is a trick that every imposter is master of’ (257). The conjuror’s chief boast, ‘He can also foretell backwards, and disclose to the individual anything that shall happen to him or her for the last seven years’ (*Evil Eye* 233), is a skill shared with Carleton’s prophecy men. Barney M’Haigney says ‘The prophet of the Black Stone is to come, who always prophesies backwards, and foretells what has happened’ (*Tales and Sketches* 214). The Black Prophet’s exclamation ‘Look about you, and say what is it you see that doesn’t foretell famine – famine – famine!’ follows close on the author’s

statement in his preface that famine was almost annual in Ireland: to look anywhere in the country at any time was to foretell famine (*Black Prophet* 15). In this novel, first published in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1846, Carleton himself becomes a prophecy-man, prophesying backwards in setting the novel during the famine of 1822, foretelling what has happened in order to explain what is happening now, the Great Famine of 1845–52.

Carleton's proximity to peasant culture was a guarantee of understanding and knowledge, and Carleton described it as '*the only merit which I claim*' (*Traits and Stories* 1:xvii). However, it could also be a disadvantage. Harris suggests that writers who use folklore in the nineteenth century needed to be careful to distance themselves, especially from the supernatural aspects of their tales, in order to meet 'the demands of rational respectability exigent on an author who pretends to high literary culture' (171). Fairies, ghosts and banshees were quaint, and clearly marketable commodities, but an author needed to make a clear distinction between the ignorant peasantry who believed in them and the educated author and his sophisticated readership. Thomas Crofton Croker prefaces his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825–8):

The following Tales are written in the style in which they are generally related by those who believe in them; and it is the object of the Compiler to illustrate, by their means, the Superstitions of the Irish Peasantry – Superstitions which the most casual observer cannot fail to remark powerfully influence their conduct and manner of thinking (7).

Crofton strictly separates his own beliefs and behavior, and by extension those of his readers, from a peasantry clearly steeped in and heavily swayed by superstition; by writing in their style he is impersonating – and later commentators, such as W. B. Yeats, suggested not accurately: 'Nor could he quite desist from dressing his personages in the dirty rags of the stage Irishman (1:187). This line of separation was perhaps not so distinct in Carleton's case; some of his tales were first published in the penny journals, with a relatively unsophisticated audience in mind. In stories such as 'Wildgoose Lodge', Carleton uses the contrast between the cultivated literary language the homodiegetic narrator (a reformed Ribbonman, educated since the events he relates) uses for the reader, and his Hiberno-English dialogue with other characters, to distinguish him not only from Paddy Devaun and his murderous crew but also from his former self, who would have shared their politics and idiom. Similarly Carleton makes it clear that while he in his youth, and everyone else in his parish, believed in ghosts, fairies and banshees, his entry into educated metropolitan society, and to some extent his country's progress in recent years, has laid such superstitions to rest: 'the belief in ghosts is fast disappearing, and that of fairies is already almost gone', says the narrator of 'Irish Superstitions – Ghosts and Fairies', their place in the imagination usurped by the wonders of steam and gas (164, 166).

However, Carleton refuses to identify a belief in the supernatural solely with the peasantry, and stresses that superstitions are a widely-shared fascination:

We have met and conversed with every possible representative of the various classes that compose general society, from the sweep to the peer, and we feel ourselves bound to say that in no instance have we ever met any individual, no matter what his class or rank in life, who was really indifferent to the subject of dreams, fairies, and apparitions. They are topics that interest the imagination in

all; and the hoary head of age is inclined with as much interest to a ghost-story, as the young and eager ear of youth, wrought up by all the nimble and apprehensive powers of early fancy ('Irish Superstitions' 164).

Helen O'Connell suggests that the pro-improvement Carleton identifies superstition with the backward and 'barbaric orality' of peasant culture that he is attempting to replace with reason, order and writing, giving as an example the story 'Larry M'Farland's Wake', where the feckless Larry and his wife Sally are a stark contrast to his improving brother Tom and his wife Biddy. O'Connell argues that: 'Improvement fiction insists that the irrationality of the supernatural can be kept at bay through strict domestic and commercial organization. It is fitting that Sally should hear the banshee the night that Larry dies – her lack of domestic orderliness delivering her directly to the forces of the supernatural' (41–2). However, the sensible, rational Tom and Biddy also hear the banshee; Tom even sees Larry's fetch, and accepts at once that his brother must be dead (*Traits and Stories* 1:100). The educated Protestant Toby Darcy, narrator of 'The Party Fight and Funeral', finds himself overcome by 'the superstitious terrors of my boyhood' on his return to his townland after fifteen years' absence:

It was in vain that I exerted myself to expel them, by throwing the barrier of philosophic reasoning in their way; they still clung to me, in spite of every effort to the contrary. [...] I felt an indefinite sensation of fear, because at that moment I recollected that it had been, in my younger days, notorious as the scene of an apparition, where the spirit of a murdered pedlar had never been known to permit a solitary traveller to pass without appearing to him, and walking cheek-by-jowl along with him to the next house on the way, at which spot he usually vanished (*Traits and Stories* 1:186–7).

Belief in the supernatural is not necessarily damaging to the community in Carleton's stories: in 'The Midnight Mass' and 'The Donagh', it is deliberately used to force confessions from suspects who are brazen in the face of the state or the church. In 'Frank Martin and the Fairies', while the narrator relates a belief in the supernatural to lunacy and fever-hallucinations, Frank's imaginary fairy friends are productive of much pleasure for him and his neighbors, and the narrator concludes his belief is essentially harmless: 'who can tell whether that which we look upon as a privation may not after all be a fountain of increased happiness, greater perhaps than any which we ourselves enjoy?' (*Tales and Sketches* 94). There is a note not just of nostalgia for, but also anxiety about the eradication of a faith in the supernatural in the preface to *Tales and Sketches*, where Carleton offers 'occasional glimpses of that fire-side enjoyment and simplicity of country life, which, perhaps, after all, ampler knowledge may remove without putting any thing so well calculated to charm the untutored heart in their stead' (ix). 'Alas! alas!' cries the narrator of 'Tom Gressiey the Irish Senachie', 'knowledge may be power, but it is *not* happiness' (*Tales and Sketches* 183). In 'Fair Gurtha; or, The Hungry Grass', published in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1856, Carleton notes that even now, in remote places, Ireland is 'literally studded with superstitions', some of which are 'vague, wild and nonsensical', while others are 'very beautiful emanations from the human heart' (414). The superstition he describes, he says, is wholly indigenous to Ireland, and influential until recently: the fairies, outraged by parsimoniousness and the neglect of laws of hospitality, make hungry grass grow in the spot where generosity has failed to be shown, and anyone walking on this grass grows weak and will die unless given food, while those who relieve them will have good luck. While Carleton acknowledges that 'this

view of benevolence degrades and narrows the more exalted motives from which it ought to originate', he adds 'it is better to see the charities of life performed even from such motives, than not performed at all' (414). But this unique system of popular belief is now on the point of extinction: 'The banshee, the lianhanshee, the leprechaun, the fetch, the phoocha, together with almost all the other individual myths of this wild, but imaginative creed, have all but vanished, and little now remains but the dim and distant memory of what they once have been' (415). Given this story was published only a few years after the Great Famine of 1845–52, it has a visceral contemporary resonance, invoking the failure of generosity not only on a local level but a state one too. The vanishing of the banshee and phoocha are conterminous with the disappearance of the peasantry who believed in them, in a Famine so overwhelming as to seem supernatural.

In his novels set before the nineteenth century, such as *Willy Reilly* and *The Evil Eye*, even the most rational and well-educated characters are superstitious. But Carleton's tendency in his early novels with contemporary settings – such as *Fardorougha the Miser* (1839), *Valentine M'Clutchy* (1845), and *The Emigrants of Ahadarra* (1848) – was to concentrate on the social realities and customs, with very little reference to ghosts, fairies, or the supernatural. This may be to do with the political or didactic intention of the texts, or Carleton's awareness that his novels would reach a London audience, and his disinclination to present an image of the Irish peasant as still hopelessly immersed in superstition. Or perhaps the Great Famine exposed the fallacy of civilization and progress in Ireland, unleashing the tide of the supernatural in his later novels; in *The Squanders of Castle Squander* (1852) he rages: 'We Celts were never civilised, and are not civilised, nor will be properly so for at least another half century, if even at that period' (2:237). The supernatural emerges forcefully in Carleton's Famine and post-Famine novels, in the awe-stricken sense of a providential curse upon the land and the way in which it transforms people physically and emotionally: 'Their cadaverous and emaciated aspects had something in them so wild and wolfish, and the fire of famine blazed so savagely in their hollow eyes, that many of them looked like creatures changed from their very humanity by some judicial plague, that had been sent down from heaven to punish and desolate the land' (*Black Prophet* 176–7). In the haunted glen of *The Black Prophet*, a man believed to be dead is resurrected, and the grisly remains of another are found; the false prophet dreams of his own death and the predictions he invents to lure a young girl to her ruin come true to destroy him instead. Those who persecute the poor are invested with supernatural malignity: Darby Skinadre in *The Black Prophet* is the 'Genius of Famine' (50), while the agent Greasy Pockets in *Castle Squander* is 'an ogre in disguise' who will eat the tenants in a year of famine, and whose monstrous stomach will eventually be 'the sepulchre of landlords' (1:264–5). The pre-Famine lavishness of landlords such as the Squanders is compared to 'the false splendour and magnificence [of] fairy revels', whose glamour is too late revealed to be 'the darkness, damp, slime, and hideous aspect of some repulsive cavern' (1:134). In some respects, the best way to depict and understand the enormity and horror of the Great Famine is to invoke the supernatural.

Novels like *Willy Reilly* and *The Evil Eye* have rightly been criticized for their sentiment, melodrama and poor writing. After the Famine, Carleton entered what Yeats called 'his twenty years' decadence: a time mainly of bad historical novels' (1:143). Yeats was horrified that excellent novels like *Fardorougha the Miser* and *The Black Prophet* were

only available from second-hand book-stalls, while ‘absolute rubbish like “The Evil Eye” and readable but empty melodrama like “Willy Reilly”’ were still in print (1:397). But the fact they were still in print says something for Carleton’s understanding of his audience and their appetite for melodrama and the supernatural. The Famine imposed practical publishing constraints for the Irish novelist; seventy-three Irish publishers were declared bankrupt between 1844 and 1848 (Benson 57), and as Anthony Trollope found when trying to publish his Famine novel *Castle Richmond* (1860), ‘Irish stories are not popular with the booksellers’ (Trollope 1). In this context, writing *Willy Reilly* was an extremely sensible decision; Carleton’s biographer, D. J. O’Donoghue, suggests ‘[t]o write a novel on this theme was to command success, for no Irish reader could repress a thrill of interest at the sight of the book’ (1:201).

James Cahalan sees the retreat to the past in Carleton’s late novels as a refusal to confront the aftermath of the Famine: ‘Carleton remained frozen in pre-Famine Ireland and romanticized a mythical past in his later, forgettable books’ (66). However, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland Carleton represents in novels like *The Evil Eye* and *Willy Reilly* is not the romantic, chivalric and safe fantasy Cahalan suggests. *Willy Reilly*, published in 1855, and set in 1745, opens with an immediate and very bitter contemporary reference to the public works scheme during the Great Famine that forced the destitute into hard labor on the roads in return for food, and to Skull and Skibbereen in Co. Cork, two of the most notorious areas for Famine deaths; Carleton the prophecy man prophecies backwards, seeing even in the roads of Ireland under the Penal Laws the future Famine. *The Evil Eye; or, The Black Spectre*, published in 1860 and set during the reign of Charles II, is perhaps Carleton’s most thorough catalogue of the supernatural: the villain has inherited from his mother not only the evil eye, but the curse of being haunted by the black spectre of a parson killed by his ancestor, who came over with Essex. The hero is a faith healer; there is also an unlucky red-haired woman, fortune tellers, and a witch who can transform herself into a white hare. At a bonfire held in the villain’s honor, the sky rains blood. Some of the supernatural events are explained: the haunted house is a den of forgers, the white woman is a peasant girl debauched by the villain, and the heroine’s terror of the evil eye is dismissed as superstition (though how the horse that dies of the evil eye learned the superstition is not revealed). The narrator frequently reiterates that this was particularly an age of superstitions ‘of which we who live in the present day can form but a faint conception’, but again the links with the near present are reinforced:

we ourselves have, about forty years ago, witnessed in remote glens and mountain fastnesses little clumps of cabins, whose inhabitants stood still in the midst even of the snail’s progress which civilization had made in the rustic parts of Ireland; and who, upon examination, presented almost the same rude personal habits, antiquated social usages, agricultural ignorance, and ineradicable superstition as their ancestors did in the reign of Queen Elizabeth (94–5).

The fact he witnessed such scenes forty years ago does not mean they no longer exist in Ireland; it was forty years since Carleton left Tyrone. Indeed, the story was suggested by a much more recent incident, the conviction of a dairy farmer, a neighbor of Carleton’s, that his cows had been afflicted by the evil eye.

It is also significant that this novel of Carleton's 'decadence' was already in contemplation when he was at the height of his powers in the 1840s. Carleton published the first sections of a novel called *The Evil Eye; a Tale of Mystery* in the nationalist newspaper the *Irish Tribune*, successor to John Mitchel's *United Irishman*, in June 1848; Mitchel had been convicted of treason-felony and transported the previous month, so it was a bold move for Carleton to associate himself with the Young Irelanders. Carleton terminated his links with the paper after three issues, probably due to suggestions in the *Packet* and *Evening Mail* that he was one of the newspaper's proprietors; the paper printed a denial of the rumor in the final edition before its suppression and the arrest of its editors and proprietors on charges of treason felony (*Irish Tribune* 72). The unfinished novel in the *Irish Tribune* does not resemble the 1860 publication, but still contains references to folklore and the supernatural – it is All Hallows Eve, and a woman with a changeling child and a man afflicted by the evil eye are travelling to a haunted house, in the hope of being aided by the wizard Wild Willy. It is impossible, without knowing how the story might have proceeded, to tell if there would have been any direct links with the Famine in this novel, as one might expect in a publication as polemical as the *Irish Tribune*. But what is clear is that the genesis of *The Evil Eye* is rooted in the context of the Famine and Young Ireland as much as in the folk superstitions Carleton had grown up with.

In his discursive introduction to *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852), written in 1849, towards the end of the Famine, and subtitled, with chagrined awareness of the extent to which the public were fatigued with the sorrows of Ireland, 'to be skipped by those who feel no present interest in Ireland', William Wilde (father of Oscar) surveys the state of superstitious belief in Ireland: on the one hand, huge advances have been made in education and technology; on the other, the Famine has decimated the country, deaths through starvation and disease, and emigration together causing 'depopulation the most terrific which any country ever experienced', and given those who died or emigrated were also more likely to be Irish-speaking, destroying the vernacular in which legends, ballads, rites and 'the relics of fairy charms' had been preserved (10–11). For Wilde, these superstitions had been '*the poetry of the people*', not the opposite of rationality and logic, but its necessary complement:

Without [popular belief and folklore], on the one side, and without proper education and well-directed means of partaking of and enjoying its blessings, on the other, and without rational amusement besides, [the Irish peasant] will, and must, and has in many instances, already become a perfect brute. The rath which he revered has been, to our knowledge, ploughed up, the ancient thorn which he revered has been cut down, and the sacred well polluted, merely in order to uproot his prejudices, and efface his superstition. Has he been improved by such desecration of the landmarks of the past, objects which, independent of their natural beauty, are often the surest footprints of history? We fear not (11).

As medical census commissioner, Wilde was simultaneously collecting information on mortality during the Famine for the Tables of Death in the 1851 census, and while the tables were flawed by gross underestimation (Ó Gráda 87), they were nevertheless shocking; Wilde's future wife, the nationalist poet Jane Francesca Elgee, wrote 'The Exodus' in response:

'A million a decade!' Count ten by ten,

Column and line of the record fair;
 Each unit stands for ten thousand men,
 Staring with blank, dead eyeballs there;
 Strewn like blasted trees on the sod,
 Men that were made in the image of God (ll. 13–18).

Ireland has been left bereft of fairy lore, Wilde argues; its heartland destroyed, its remnants had been carried with its peasant inheritors to ‘the broad waters of the Ohio or the Mississippi [sic], to the wild monotonous Australian prairie, or even to the golden soil of California’ (17). Those left behind in the mother country must look back to the writings of those like William Carleton, whose depiction of the supernatural, while retouched for ideological and aesthetic effect, still reflects the fundamental power and fascination they held for those who, like him, grew up immersed in them. ‘[N]one other ever touched Irish folk-lore with like genius’ said W. B. Yeats (1:138); it is particularly fitting that one of Carleton’s returns in Irish literature is as an angry ghost in Seamus Heaney’s ‘Station Island’.

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