

“There must have been something in it ...”

By Frank Watters

I suppose the Irish would have a reputation of being a superstitious people but they are certainly not exclusively so. There are many groups of people who are well known for their superstitions - sailors, actors, miners - and folk lore and fairy lore occur all over the world.

To begin with, here is a sample of unlucky things mentioned to me in the course of my research for this article. You'll appreciate that this is by no means complete. It is regarded by some as unlucky to :-

- meet a red headed woman on New Year's morning
- burn human hair
- put up an umbrella indoors
- put new boots/shoes on the table
- spill salt
- rock an empty cradle
- kill a robin, swallow or cuckoo or a spider
- bring hawthorn blossom or lilac bloom into the house
- bring a spade into the kitchen
- lift a pin or needle by the point or give it to another person point first
- cut a fairy thorn
- see one magpie
- go near water on Whit Sunday
- see the new moon through glass
- walk under a ladder
- break a mirror
- take down Christmas decorations before January 6th
- put up a calendar for the new year before 1st January
- turn a garment if put on back to front
- whistle on a boat or for a woman to whistle or a hen to crow
- put red and white flowers together in a vase
- close or fill in a spring well
- pare/cut your nails on Sunday

- put on a sock and shoe on one foot before putting the sock on the other
- strike a child or a cow with an elder stick
- strike another person with a ragweed
- turn back having started out on a journey
- sit or meet in a group of 13
- share washing water
- set an even number of eggs under a clocking hen

13 is an unlucky number
“ Saturday flit's a short sit “
Green is an unlucky colour

There are some happenings which are considered bad signs or omens :

- For the fire to burn on one side only
- For a picture to fall off the wall
- For your right hand to itch
- For a break to come in a funeral cortege
- For a child not to cry at a christening etc. etc etc

Now while some of these superstitions might be regarded as being totally ridiculous some could be considered to have some sense in them - walking under a ladder could, in some circumstances, be dangerous, - and there may have been a reason for some of them originally but that reason is usually not clear to us. Some times I was given an explanation - “ There were thirteen at the last Supper.” - “Thorns for the Crown came from the hawthorn.” Sometimes there is an antidote which will ward off evil if any of these unlucky things should happen to you. “If you see the new moon through glass you should turn the money in your pocket.” If two are sharing washing water the first must spit in the water before the second washes.

Nowadays many people would think of these old superstitions as generally silly but there is a residue of belief in us all. We are often a bit uneasy when

confronted with some such situation and many sophisticated people seem to set great store by what their 'stars' say.

My father, Paddy Watters, used to tell us a story about Pat Brannon's Ghost. Now Pat Brannon was an old bachelor who lived a simple life in a little two- roomed cottage on the old lane in the townland of Federnagh. It is now partly in ruins and partly used as a shed for cattle.

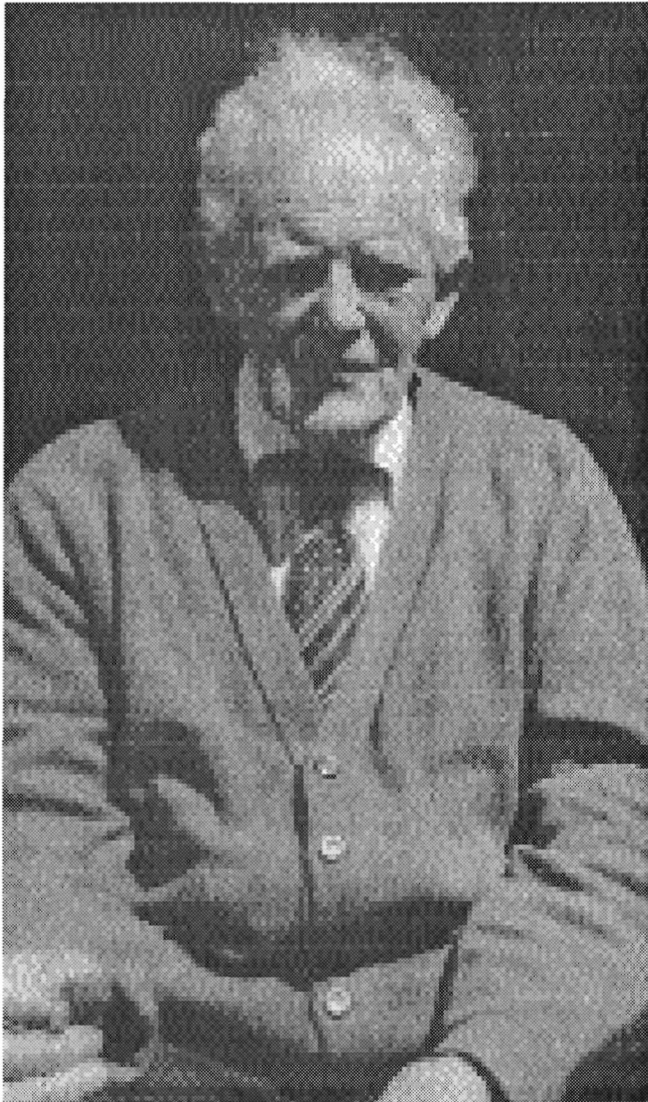
Now the house consisted of the kitchen and a room. Pat lived in the kitchen and he never used the room. However on one occasion he decided that it was a pity to let the room go to waste so he 'flitted'

his bed down to the room and slept there that night. As my father always said :

"Anyway in the middle of the night the ghost got into bed with him. He said he wouldn't have minded the ghost in the bed with him only, 'It munched biscakes and broke wine in my face.' Pat got up and took a blackthorn stick and he bate the bed up and he bate the bed down. He said to the ghost "Who are you and what do you want?" The ghost replied, "I was here before you, Brannon, and I'll be here after you." Pat said, "If you give me till the mornin you'll be here by yourself" So he flitted back to the kitchen and had no further trouble."



Pat Brannon's House.



Paddy Watters.

Now there are 3 other stories about ghosts which are well known around Poyntzpass - or were often repeated to me at any rate. They are 'The red hand on the wall', the Dromantine ghost and the Ghost of Fivey's horse.

According to the 'legend' in days long ago - end of the 18th or early 19th century - when the Back Lane was the main Coach road to from Newry to Tandragee, there stood on the site of Pat Loughlin's house in Meeting Street an Inn which offered travellers food and drink and accommodation. Now on one occasion there arrived at the inn a man on horseback. He was called "McGerry or McGeary" and was the tithe collector - tithes being a payment of a church tax. Anyway he was thought to have a goodly sum of money on his person. He put up at the inn over night and was never seen again. Next day his horse was found wandering between Poyntzpass and Scarva. Of him there was never a

trace. However, according to the story, he had been murdered and robbed during the night and his body disposed off. He is supposed to have put his blood-covered hand on the wall of the room in which he slept and no amount of washing could remove the stain. No matter how often this was painted over or plastered the red hand was said to reappear. (I have heard of similar stories from other locations)

The site of the Inn at Poyntzpass.

The Dromantine Ghost is a bit more vacuous - it's hard to get any facts or story. It is said that at some stage a ghost was exorcised in Dromantine House and in some mysterious way coaxed into a bottle which was sealed and thrown into the lake.

I have been told of other hauntings of Dromantine House, but whether they are connected with the ghost in the bottle I cannot say.

Another local tale is that of Fivey's horse. William Fivey's family owned Union Lodge or Lisnabrague Lodge in the first half of the 19th century. He owned among other things a very large estate, several mills and a lime kiln and was a very wealthy man. He was, however, a gambler much addicted to the race track and owned and trained many horses. According to the story he gambled away most of his money on horses and was in a desperate state.

He decided to risk all on one final fling. He carefully prepared one of his horses for a big race and wagered all on it. The horse was beaten and Fivey lost everything. It is said he took the horse home and put it in a stable. He had the stable door bricked up and the horse starved to death. A ghostly horse is said to gallop up the avenue on nights and was reportedly seen by several people who worked there and by soldiers stationed there during World War 2.



Dromantine House with lake in foreground.



The entrance to Fivey's Avenue.

It is interesting that there may be a basis in fact - at least for Fivey's gambling, - because in 1850 he was forced to sell all his horses and his furniture to meet debts and to let Union Lodge to a Doctor Saunderson.

I am grateful to Mrs Mary McVeigh for the following account :

"In 1925, when I was a young girl, I was sitting up with an old woman called Bridget Carty in Leish Loanin, in Lissummon, along with my father James Sands and a man who was working with my father at the time. He was Neilly McDonald and he was from up above Newry. Now Bridget Carty was on her death bed although she didn't die immediately. She recovered briefly. Now her house consisted of three rooms - the kitchen with a bedroom on either side of it. The sick woman was in one room and we were, all 3, around her bed. The door into the other bedroom was locked. There was only one lamp - an oil lamp - in the house and we had it in the bedroom. The kitchen was partly lit by the light of the fire.



Bridget Carty's House.

'We were all sitting in silence around the sick woman's bed when we, all three of us, heard the latch on the door lift, the door open and close, footsteps going into the kitchen and the sound of a stool being drawn up to the fire. My father went to the kitchen to see who had come in, but there was nobody there.

He called to Neilly who took the lamp to the kitchen but there was no one. They were very concerned, much more than I was. The door into the other bedroom was still locked. Above the kitchen was a "half loft," with a ladder leading to it. They took the lamp and went up to the loft but there was no one. Anyway, as I have said, Bridget recovered briefly before she died, and when she was reasonably well my father told her about the incident. She said 'You needn't have worried. Johnny Boyle said before he died, that he would do his penance at my fireside and I leave the stool out for him every night.'



Mary McVeigh.

Miss Minnie Savage told me the following story of a "wraith," that is, the spirit of someone which appears in one place at the instant that person dies elsewhere.

"At one time there was a shop where Sean Murtagh's bungalow is today. The shop was owned by Peter Meehan and his wife and it sold odds and ends like meal and tobacco. Opposite the shop was a gate into a field and from that gate a cart pad led along the side of the field and carried on to Bob Ferguson's and on over the hill next Jim Finch's and when you landed on that hill you were looking down on Finch's bog.



Minnie Savage.

Now there was a stile on the top of that hill and manys a one came that road to the shop, particularly a few old men going for tobacco. Now one evening a man was coming over the hill and at the stile he met a neighbour man called Barney. They were good friends. He said 'Good evening Barney', but Barney never spoke but crossed the stile and went on. Now the man was very surprised and he wondered what he had done on Barney, but he continued on down the pad to the shop. Mrs Meehan was in the shop. The man asked if Barney had been in. She said 'No' so he told her of what had happened at the stile. She couldn't understand it for Barney was a good-humoured man who loved a bit of chat.

Just at that moment a lad ran into the shop to say that Barney had fallen out of a horse's cart and been killed. The accident happened opposite George Patterson's, near Searce Lane, and it happened at the exact time Barney had met, or appeared to meet the man, at the stile."

Now I might say at this point that all the stories I was told were told to me very sincerely and by people whose word would be taken in a Court of law.

I was told the following by Terry and Annie Murray :

At one time in the early years of this century a young fellow from Poyntzpass was "doing a line" with a girl who was working in Acton House, then owned by the Alexanders. One night this fellow was leaving his girl friend home and they invited Frank Cross to accompany them for the walk. It was in October or November time and although dark it was a pleasant night.



Frank Cross.

When they reached Dolly's Bridge on the avenue, Frank sat down on the wall while the couple went on up to the house a short distance away. Frank smoked the pipe, as some of you may recall, and as he sat on the wall he took out his pipe and prepared for a smoke. As he struck a match to light his pipe, he was suddenly aware of the figure of a man sitting on the wall beside him. He had neither seen nor heard

him coming. The man was dressed in evening wear - bow tie, top hat. So transfixed was Frank that he more or less froze. The match burned down and eventually the pain of the burn made him momentarily look away from the man. When he looked back there was no one there, but Frank had the mark of the burn on his thumb till his dying day!

It was widely believed, maybe still is, that animals, particularly horses, could see things which are not visible to the human eye. One person told me that a horse's eye magnifies everything four fold. - I don't know if this is true or not. Anyway there are many tales of horses refusing to pass a particular spot on the road or alternatively bolting in a mad panic. It was said that if you looked between a horses' ears you could see what it saw!

Several of the stories I have been told relate to the area of road around Union Lodge gates. I was told that on one occasion a horse belonging to Mr. Savage of Laurelhill bolted at that point coming from Loughbrickland and galloped at break neck pace from there, through Poyntzpass the four miles to its stable in Lissummon arriving there very distraught and in a lather of sweat.

More often it was a case of the horse stopping and refusing to budge - again shivering and covered with sweat. This happened several times at funerals which was no doubt very traumatic for all concerned.

Dogs were also credited with peculiar powers. Miss Minnie Savage told me the following :

"Mrs Willie Stewart of Ballylane told me this. Her husband Willie had a brother called Alan. Now an uncle of theirs who had a business in Liverpool sent word that there was an opportunity in the business for a young fellow and so Alan, who was 18, was sent off to Liverpool to his uncle's business.

Now Alan had a beloved sheep dog and the day before he was due to set off for Liverpool he took his dog with him to the top of the hill at the back of their house and he and the dog sat there and he was so vexed at leaving his old dog that he shed tears.

A year or so later the old dog went one day to the top of the same hill and cried and howled. They wondered what was wrong with it. By and by there

arrived a telegram from Liverpool "Alan seriously ill. Come at once" So his father and Willie got ready at once and got a neighbour to take them in a trap to Loughgilly station. On the way they were stopped by the postman with a second telegram which said that Alan had passed away.

The people concluded that the dog had seen a wraith of Alan as its howling had been at the time he died. They were sensible people and not at all superstitious."

While on the subject of dogs, I might say that there were certain roads in this area where a black dog was seen to walk at night. This dog is sometimes called 'Trudge' and an old man, Joe McGrath of Keadymore, who met 'Trudge' twice described it as "the devil incarnate"

The Banshee is of course well known. Several people I talked to believe that they, or their father or mother, had heard the banshee.

Mrs Kathleen McVeigh told me that her father, James Sands, went on one occasion to visit his father who was very ill. The banshee followed him all the way to his father's house in Barr. When he got there his father was dead.



Kathleen McVeigh.

Miss Savage told me the following which was told to her by Irvine McGowan of Mountnorris. His father was bad with heart trouble and on his death bed for some time .

“One morning in June, he died about 4 or 5 in the morning. Irvine, who had been sitting up with his father, went out to the door for a breath of air. A neighbour, called Frank Feenan, came up the road. He extended his hand and commiserated with Irvine saying “I’m sorry about your father.” Irvine was puzzled “How did you know he was dead?” Frank Feenan said, “ I couldn’t get a wink of sleep - did you not hear the banshee crying all night?”

Hugh Meehan told me the following :

“I heard the banshee on two occasions. The first time a chap Seamus Lavery and I went to visit this family that had one of the daughters very ill. While I was in the house I could hear this noise. You would have heard it close up to the window and next second it was away in the distance, then really close again. I was the only one could hear it although there was several others there. The girl died the next day.

The second time I was coming home from Bessbrook from visiting a friend of mine. In the hollow of the road, after you pass Taylor’s I heard the Banshee. One time it would be crying close round me and then it was away far in the distance. I listened it for 10 minutes and I said a prayer for whoever it might be. The next day Patricia McCourt, the school teacher in Lissummon died suddenly. She was my God mother.”

The Banshee was of course a “fairy woman” and was supposed to follow certain families often said to be the Mc’s and the O’s but apparently not exclusively so.

Belief in the fairies appears to be largely gone nowadays but a generation or two ago it was quite widespread. There were several explanations as to the origins of the fairies the most common one being that they were a race of small people who inhabited Ireland before more powerful people invaded the country and drove them underground or into lonely places. Another theory is that they are the followers of Lucifer who were expelled from Heaven. Sighting

of fairies appear to be even rarer than ghosts and particularly so after the ‘Night of the Big Wind’ (1839) for it was believed that that was some sort of magical storm which was conjured up in order to carry the fairies away from Ireland.



Hugh Meehan.



Mrs Kathleen McVeigh told me that before the Big Wind the fairies were often heard singing in the fields around the townland of Dinnahorra Markethill where her mother’s people lived.

One particular time a man by the name of Whiteside, who lived at the Eleven Lane Ends, heard the most beautiful music he had ever heard coming from a corn field. He could see nothing. Next morning the corn was all tramped down. (Reminiscent of the corn rings!)

A great aunt of Kathleen and Mary McVeigh’s who lived at Dromintee was on an occasion sent to the well for water. When going down the path she saw a little man mending shoes. He had a little hammer and a “percy” in his hand -(a percy was an awl for

punching holes in leather). She put down her buckets and stopped to look at him. He was dressed in red and green. He said to her *"If you don't go on I'll stick that (the Percy) in your eye."*

An old woman called Anne McCourt lived on the Old Road in the townland of Aughtantaraghan seventy years ago. Once when she came in from gathering sticks in the month of November there was a tiny, wee woman standing at the fire warming herself.

Another similar story was told to me by Sally Downey about an experience her mother Rose had long before she was married - Rose Downey lived to be almost 100 years old.

"In 1905, when she was 26, Rose Anne Turley, as she then was, was working for a man and wife named Cowan who lived between Laurencetown and Banbridge. This couple often went out in the evenings and left her to complete her work. When she had finished her chores she went down the lane to talk to some pals of hers. She always locked the house as she had a key.

One evening, it was still bright, she returned to the house earlier than usual and was amazed to find a very small, very tiny woman sitting at the fire. She described her as having a grey appearance. She was very alarmed. She asked the little woman 'Who are you? How did you get in? What do you want?' but got no answer. She was so confused and frightened she didn't know how the woman left - by door, window, stairs, or even up the chimney! She was so upset that she quit her job in Cowan's almost immediately and very shortly after Cowans sold the house and left."

A well known feature of the countryside - even today - is the fairy thorn.

Many people believed that some great disaster or misfortune was sure to follow if you interfered with a fairy thorn - usually a lone hawthorn growing by itself and not in a hedge. I have been told about people who lost eyes or arms or who were killed in accidents soon after interfering with a 'fairy thorn'. In the same category can be included fairy forts and raths - It was regarded as extremely dangerous to touch them.

I was told by the late Andy Liggett how his father Martin Liggett decided to remove some thorns growing around a fort on his land at Knockanarney. That very day an 18 month old colt dropped dead in the field and that night a sow gave birth to a litter of piglets - all of them dead and the sow herself bled to death. Needless to say the work ceased and was never completed. Nothing would induce Andy Liggett to touch a thorn such as that on his land.



Andy Liggett.

Peter Murtagh (101) told me the following :

"Kevin Reavey cut a bush one day in a fort on his land. There was a gate between the field and the fort. The next morning the horse was hanging on a spike on the gate. The spike was up through his neck - he bled to death."

People would not even use a branch of a fairy thorn blown down, as firewood. It was said that it would cause your fire to smoke. T.G.F. Patterson recorded the following in 1929 about Rathconvil fort: He was told that ...

"An earlier owner had tampered with the enclosure and forfeited his life and another man had sawn off a branch of a fairy thorn therein and had lost an arm by septic poisoning" also that the Finch family interfered with a fort in Lissummon and "had wretched luck afterwards."



"A Fairy Thorn".

People went to considerable lengths to placate or keep friendly with the fairies. When a heifer calved her first calf, Arthur Carty of Leish would take the first milking, "*the beestings*" and empty it at the root of the fairy thorn for luck. And in times gone past it was customary to leave out plates of champ for them at Hallowe'en. It was regarded as dangerous to refuse any fairy token of friendship or thanks.

My father told a story he had heard when he was a boy. One cold spring day two men were ploughing a field in the townland of Tullynacross near the old windmill stump.

Each had a horse and a 'singletree' plough. Now in some way, I can't recall how, they had earned the fairy's gratitude - probably by not disturbing a 'fairy - thorn' in the field - for when they arrived at the top of the field, there, on the headrig sat two steaming bowls of broth. A discussion took place as to whether they should, or should not, take the broth. It

was a cold day and the hot broth was attractive. Eventually one decided not to. So while his colleague sat down on the bank to eat the broth he continued with his ploughing. However, before he had reached the end of the furrow, his horse fell and broke its leg.

The practice of placing May flowers around the doors on May Eve still continues today but in only isolated cases whereas 50 years ago the custom was still widespread. This was done to keep off evil spirits or fairies. Nowadays it is usually simply done to preserve an old custom. Authorities believe that this custom dates back to pre-Christian times and is associated with the start of Summer.

The Fairies would of course occasionally steal a child and put one of their own in its place. If a child who had been very quiet and easy to rear became cross and hard to put up with, it could be a sign that the child was a "*changeling*." Boys were particularly at risk when they were very young and it was customary to let their hair grow long and dress them in petticoats in order to confuse the fairies. My own father told me that until he was 6 or 7 his hair was in ringlets and that all the young boys went to school in petticoats. Old school photographs verify this. I don't think he associated this with the fairies and certainly I didn't until recently.

Miss Savage told me of a changeling in the Lissummon area. Apparently a formerly quiet baby became cross and hard to manage. No explanation was to be had until by chance it was discovered to be a changeling. One evening the child's grandmother was darning a sock while rocking the cradle in an attempt to get the child to sleep. By chance, as she went to thread her needle, she saw the child through the eye of the needle and saw it for what it really was - an ugly misshapen fairy child. What happened then is not recorded.

Annie Mary Mackle of Acton, however, told a story of a changeling in Acton. When the parents discovered that their child had been swapped, they took the fairy child to Lisraw fort on a moonlit night. There they saw the fairies going round and round with their child in the middle of them. The mother, who must have been a resourceful person, managed to grab her own child and substitute the fairy child and return happily to Acton!



Anna Mary Mackle.

That some people took these seriously was vividly illustrated by a tragic case which happened in Co. Tipperary in 1895. A young couple, Michael and Bridget Cleary, had been married for some years when Bridget became ill. The nature of her illness is unclear - perhaps she was a bit depressed. However her husband and some of her relations came to the conclusion that she was a 'changeling' and not the real Bridget Cleary. They subjected the poor woman to a series of 'tests' which culminated in holding her over a fire and setting her alight. She died of extensive burns. Her husband was found guilty of manslaughter and several of her relatives and neighbours were also imprisoned.

People in days gone by spent a lot more time in the fields working or taking short cuts, as they went everywhere on foot. There were more opportunities of seeing the fairies. Nowadays farmers drive around the fields, plough them in an hour or two, and are gone. Perhaps the fairies are gone too - perhaps not.

One of the most important events in the farmer's wife's routine was the churning, and there were many superstitions surrounding it. If you went into a house where churning was taking place you should say, "God bless the work!" and you most certainly had to take a "brash" at the churn. If you failed to do the latter it was thought that you did not wish the process to be successful.

Sometimes, for one reason or another, butter failed to form on the milk and sometimes a cow or cows would have no milk when brought in from the fields. It was then that people became suspicious of their neighbours and very often it was narrowed down to one neighbour, usually an old woman, who was suspected of being a witch. If a hare was seen in the field with the affected cows then that was seen as confirmation that the cows had been 'blinked'.

Stories about hares which could not be caught by any greyhound or shot by any normal gun occur everywhere in Ireland. Locally in the townland of Aughtantaraghan there was such a hare and it was given the name "Dudley" - why I cannot say. It defeated the efforts of the best hounds and huntsmen in the land.

Artie O'Hare told me the following:

"In the townland of Knockanarney there was a hare that couldn't be caught or shot. A man with two greyhounds often hunted this hare without success. Now nearby was a wee cottage that an old woman, her daughter and her grandchildren lived in. One day the hounds chased the hare right past the cottage door and were very close behind it. A wee grandchild standing in the doorway was heard to shout, 'Run Granny! Run!' -"



Artie O'Hare.

Miss Savage told me the following :

“At one time in the townland of Carrickbrack there lived two old brothers called Parsons. Now they had four fields and had two or three cows. It happened that they were unable to get the butter to form on the milk and suspected an old neighbour woman had blinkt their cows. They got a man with a gun, it was the blunderbuss type. He loaded it with powder and put a silver sixpence in it for ordinary lead was no use. He hid in the field with the cows and sure enough after a while into the field came a hare. He fired at it and hit it in the leg but it got away. The following day, the old woman neighbour was seen to be lame and going on a stick.”

When walking in the fields there were many perils - you could find yourself on a “fairy pad” off which you couldn’t get. There was said to be such a pad in Hudson’s land at Monclone. Or you could walk on “hungry grass” and be taken by a great weakness which could only be overcome if you ate something. The “hungry grass” was said to be a spot where someone had died of starvation at some time of famine. There were some who always carried a piece of bread in their pocket for such an emergency. I was told of some who still do. Or you could step on a “rambling sod” and lose your bearings completely. I have been told many examples of the latter. At night a person would go into a field - a short cut - but could not find his way out of it. It was not

unusual for a person to spend two or three hours in a field they knew - like the back of their hand - and be unable to find the gate.

The cure for this problem was to turn your coat inside out and then you would find your bearings!

It was often said to me “*It’s a great pity you weren’t talking to my grandfather/father/mother they knew far more.*” This feeling of having ‘missed the boat,’ so to speak, is not new. The late T.G.F. Patterson, founder and first curator of Armagh County Museum, was talking to a 90 year-old man from Terryhoogan in 1929. The old man said :

“ It is a pity to God you weren’t here in my grandfather’s time. He knowed all. He cud have toul you about putting out the champ on Hallow Eve and manys an other crack as well.”

So no matter when you start collecting you have missed a lot. But it’s making a start that’s important for there are still remnants of old beliefs to be found and while many will deny any faith in these old ways they will often add but “*There must have been something in it.*”

I’ll end by reassuring you that I’ve never seen anything worse looking than myself and to quote one of my informants - “*and what I’ve told you is the God’s honest truth.*”