

Edward Burne-Jones,  
'Sleeping Beauty'.



# ‘The Well of D'yerree-in-Dowan’: Manifestations of Grimm’s 'The Water of Life' in Irish Folklore and Literature

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**I**rish folklore studies established from early on the links between the Grimms' collection and oral and literary tales gathered in different regions of Ireland. The Grimms translated the first issue of T. Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (1825) within a year of its publication. Over the last two centuries many folktales collected in Ireland, some of which influenced Irish literature, showed a connection to or have been compared with the Grimms' oeuvre. This paper will look at one particular Grimm tale, 'The Water of Life', and its most well-known Irish variants: that collected in Irish and English by Douglas Hyde, the adapted children's version by Seamus MacManus, and the modern literary short story by Benedict Kiely, 'The Heroes of the Dark House'. While all these stories share the same motifs and tropes, the Grimm version focuses more on power and filial loyalty in the relationships of the king's sons and their father, and on the three kings of foreign countries whom the youngest helps; the Irish folktales place greater emphasis on the power of the princess, and the relationship between her and the youngest son and his responsibilities to her. Kiely's literary tale, by placing the story in the context of collector, teller, and audience while at the same time relating it to other Irish wonder tales and legends, provides a contemporary interpretation of the story as a metaphor of cyclical challenges and responsibilities held by different generations.

## **The Grimms' 'Water of Life'**

'The Water of Life' ('Das Wasser des Lebens'), number 97 in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Aarne-Thompson Tale Type 551, tells of an ailing king sending his three sons on a quest for magic

water to cure him. The elder brothers fail, due to moral inadequacies, while the youngest succeeds after completing difficult tasks demonstrating kindness and bravery, and in doing so of course marries a princess.

Here I wish to compare the Grimms' story with the Irish versions. Known usually as 'The Well o' the World's End' in Ireland, I've taken for my title one of the earliest and best known versions in English, published in Douglas Hyde's *Beside the Fire* (1890), a collection of folktales in Irish and English, with key Irish words spelled phonetically in the English translations.<sup>1</sup> 'Well o' the World's End' is commonly found, with at least 267 oral versions collected, more than half in Irish (Gaelic). About thirty were published, many in *Béalóideas* (the *Journal of the Irish Folklore Commission*, 1929; 1942). Those best known to English readers are by Douglas Hyde, Seumas MacManus, Jeremiah Curtin, and Patrick Kennedy. Prevalence of this tale in oral tradition and its prominence among works by writers of the Irish literary renaissance known as the Celtic Twilight led to its incorporation in later modern Irish literature.

These are the Irish tales looked at:

- 'The Greek Princess and the Young Gardener', collected and published by Patrick Kennedy in *Fireside Stories of Ireland* in 1870;
- 'The Well of D'yerree-in-Dowan', collected, translated and edited by Douglas Hyde in *Beside the Fire: A collection of Irish Gaelic folk stories* published in 1890;
- 'The King of Erin and the Queen of the Lonesome Island', collected and published by Jeremiah Curtin in *Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland* in 1890 (also found in *Celtic Fairy Tales* by Joseph Jacobs);
- 'The Son of the King of Erin and the Queen of the Moving Wheel', also collected by Curtin and originally published in the *New York Sun* in 1892. (Stories in the *Sun* were gathered and republished by the Irish Folklore Commission through *Béalóideas* in 1941-2 as *Irish Folk-Tales collected by Jeremiah Curtin*, edited and with introduction and notes by Séamus Ó Duilearga, and republished by Talbot Press Ltd in 1964);
- 'The Well o' the World's End', collected and published at various times in several different volumes, most recently *Hibernian Nights* by Seumas MacManus, who also had published a very similar tale he entitled 'Hookedy-Crookedy', in his *Donegal Fairy Stories* and in Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora Archibald Smith's fairy tale collections.

## Irish Versions

The Irish tales are more complex and detailed compared with the Grimms' simple compact version, as Irish tellers merge Tale Types, or add a 'back story' and extra tasks for the hero to complete. For example, Kennedy's 'The Greek Princess and the Young Gardener' conflates 551 with AT550, the story of the search for the golden-bird or firebird, with the quest for the magic water cure as a sub-plot. Hyde's version begins with an ill king like the Grimms', but he orders

all three sons to fetch the water together, whereby the elder two in most Irish versions end up drinking in a pub while the youngest completes the quest.

Curtin's two versions provide elaborate family histories. Both start with the King of Erin led astray, to live for a year with the Queen of the Lonesome Isle, thereby producing a son who becomes the story's hero. The Irish King already has two feckless sons with his wife, the Queen of Erin. Whenever this King or Ireland is endangered, the bastard son, sent by his mother, saves the day. MacManus's adaptation sees the hero as the son hated by his stepmother. Whether as jilted wife or stepmother, this Queen fears and despises the hero and fakes an illness forcing him to fetch the water.

The Irish tellers examined here also give the hero far more magic helpers than the one dwarf in Grimm. Most usually these are his aunts or uncles; often there are giants to be challenged, threatened, and/or tricked, and magic animals, fairy women, and/or other foreign kings whom the hero helps or who help him. But the greatest difference is in the treatment and actions of the woman dwelling where the water of life is found. In Grimm she is a wide-awake princess, greeting the hero with a chaste kiss and telling him to return in a year to marry her. She has a golden road built to greet him, and instructs her servants on how to recognise the true hero. She is passive and stationary, an object to be fetched like the water.

In contrast the Irish tales make her a fierce, warlike queen ruling the land and its magic well. When the hero arrives this queen and her people are in a magic sleep, its length varying in each version. The King's son, instructed by magic helpers not to be distracted and to fetch the water immediately, always ignores their order and explores the castle, taking other magic treasures in addition to the water of life. When he finds the sleeping Queen he 'kisses' her.

This is a euphemism in printed English versions (oral Irish versions are slightly more explicit). As a result, the princess wakes to find next to her a baby boy or a two- or six-year-old son, depending on the length of her sleep. In Hyde's tale, the prince also kisses each of the Queen's eleven waiting maids and all twelve have baby sons when waking after a year. Here Tale Type 410, 'Sleeping Beauty' (particularly Basile's variant, 'Sun, Moon and Talia'), merges with 'Well o' the World's End'. The Queen swears she will never stop until she finds the father of her child and the one who stole her treasures.

The injured Queen and her army of monsters find on her quest the stolen magic treasures left with the hero's magic helpers or kings he helped. Such discoveries provide the hero's name and origins, keeping her on the right path. Her quest reverses that of the hero's. Whereas the prince was helpful and kind to all he encountered on his journey to her, wherever the Queen encounters anyone she threatens to throw houses upside down or upon people's heads. Arriving at the King of Ireland's castle she challenges him and his sons to combat, shouting for whoever stole her magic water to come to her or 'I'll kill ye all'.

The other sons have tricked the hero and the King of Erin so the King thinks they completed the quest, and the true hero has either been banished, sometimes supposedly executed, or, like Cinderella, set to the most menial work. Needless to say, the king quickly sends out the other sons. The avenging queen sets impossible physical tasks at which they fail, at best humiliated but usually crippled or killed.

At last the youngest son is found, proving he is the hero and the child's father by accomplishing the challenges or producing a broken love token. MacManus's version has no kiss or baby; rather, while the Queen sleeps, the hero takes her ring, breaks it, keeping half as a love token and leaving the other half with her so she may find and know him. In 'extended family' versions the avenging queen reveals the Queen of Erin is an adulterer and so she is executed. Yet the hero's father, the King of Erin, equally unfaithful, goes free and marries the Queen of the Lonesome Isle. Satisfied, the avenging queen marries the hero, her objective to establish legitimacy of her husband and son on her terms. In Hyde's version, the hero marries all twelve women, lives with them all at the World's End, and when his queen dies, returns to Ireland with his sons. They marry local women, thus creating the twelve tribes of Galway.

## Analysis of Sources

The Irish versions, clearly representations of an international tale, cannot have Grimm as their source. The majority were collected in Irish from poverty-stricken rural peasants living in the congested districts<sup>2</sup> without English or formal education. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* was not translated into Irish until 1923, after the foundation of the Free State. For the same reason Basile's 17th-century tales, 'Ancilotto, King of Provino', and 'Sun, Moon and Talia', cannot be accepted as sources for the oral tales.

Dáithí Ó hOgáin (1990, 374) reported that there are over 150 international tales found in Ireland, the majority with a European provenance. Their entrance into Irish literature and oral traditions happened during the early medieval period.<sup>3</sup> Georges Denis Zimmerman states that the 'earliest known version of what would later be classified as AT550 and 551 ... is in *Scela Coeli* (c.1300), a compilation of *exempla* by the Provençal Dominican Jean Gobi' (2001, 475).

Circulation of printed books in Ireland before the 18th century was limited and the wide circulation of printed items such as ballad sheets and pamphlets was mostly inside the English 'Pale'. Materials were not printed in Irish until the late 16th century, and these and the majority of 17th-century print materials were religious tracts ordered by the British crown to convert the Irish to Protestantism, or by Irish Catholic clergy on the continent fighting the counter-reformation. Due to Ireland's violent political history in the 17th century, very little remains of any early printed material before 1700 (Gillespie, *The Oxford History of the Irish Book*, 2005). Medieval and early modern Irish manuscripts, consisting of legends and



wonder tales, according to many accounts survived and were kept and read aloud by certain families until the early 19th century (Zimmerman 2001, 65, 100, 131-2).

The number and distribution of Irish oral versions suggest sources for oral versions of 'Well o' the World's End' were medieval manuscripts. The four collectors discussed here certainly collected the stories orally, and it is possible an oral version of the story preceded the medieval source Zimmerman identifies, though this is impossible to ascertain.

Although Curtin, Hyde, MacManus and the rest were aware of the Grimms, Basile and other fairy tale authors they did not 'Hibernicise' continental tales. Their notes clearly identify oral sources. Divergent motives naturally affected their choices and interpretations. Patrick Kennedy held a genuine love of stories heard in childhood. As a bookseller, the Grimms' and other collections provided him with models, and it is likely he produced collections for commercial reasons too. Douglas Hyde and William Butler Yeats recognised Kennedy as the father of Irish folklore (Yeats 1888). They, and other folklorists, linguists and writers, were disparaging of Thomas Crofton Croker, the Irish writer corresponding with the Grimms, who translated his Irish stories (Zimmerman 2001). Croker's writing, at the time of these later collectors, was viewed by Hyde, Yeats and their generation as 'stage Irish', propagating belittling stereotypes to amuse English readers (Yeats 1888; Bourke 2007).

Jeremiah Curtin produced collections for financial gain. Angela Bourke demonstrated that Curtin's 'whole enterprise is an early example of what has come to be called the commodification of vernacular culture' (2007, 1-2). With his wife Curtin developed an assembly-line methodology, successfully exploiting many cultures' folklores. Charles Dana, of the *New York Sun*, commissioned Curtin to provide stories for his paper, paying \$500 for every ten 'myths', a considerable sum equivalent to \$10,000 today. Curtin had no Irish, employing local translators and relying on his wife to do the work. Scholars at the time, such as Hyde, and later folklorists with the Irish Folklore Commission (*Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann*) were puzzled by Curtin's lack of common basic Gaelic but acknowledged that in plot and motif he was close to the original Irish. Curtin held that period's common beliefs regarding folklore, as a kind of colonial pedagogy looking down on 'the other' and viewing white Protestant European culture as the pinnacle of evolution. Although Curtin's collections were respected by Hyde and others, his worldview on folklore was different to theirs. Curtin viewed 'the collection of the ideas of primitive people as indispensable to the study of the development of the human mind' (1940, 84). He was not criticised for this, as his English contemporaries were later. Irish scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries accused these English writers of the 'feminizing and infantilizing of indigenous traditions' (Bourke 2007, 6) to make folktales for adults into popular, commercially successful reading material for children.

For Irish collectors the folklore project was one of decolonisation (Bourke 2007, 6). Douglas Hyde, who founded the Gaelic League to revive Irish language and later became the first president of Ireland, published folktales to assert the richness of Irish culture and its ancient history as arguments to promote Irish uniqueness and its right to national self-determination and

independence from British Imperial hegemony. His motivation first and foremost was promotion of the Irish language and respect for its ancient literature and contemporary oral expressions.

Seumas MacManus, one of many minor poets associated with the Celtic Twilight, shared such motives, but made his career in the United States. His arrival coincided with a storytelling revival led by children's librarians and progressive educators. Storytelling practices in public libraries and parks, schools and settlement houses produced great demand for folktale anthologies and books on storytelling between 1890 and 1920. MacManus, and his peer Padraic Colum (another Irish writer of similar background, experience and talent making a career in America), cashed in on this, becoming highly successful in children's publishing. MacManus eliminated allusions to sex and illegitimate birth. Within a generation, these Irish writers were making folktales palatable for publishers, teachers and librarians promoting juvenile fiction.

### **Interpretation of Texts** (with regards to performances and modern literature)

In modern storytelling performances of 'The Well o' the World's End', the initial meeting and subsequent marriage of the hero and the sleeping queen cause discomfort by challenging modern sexual norms. It is wrong to have sex with a sleeping partner without consent, and one doesn't marry one's rapist. The sensitive topics of adultery and illegitimate birth also feature prominently in this story. Yet initial English publications had no difficulty including these passages and the original versions are still published in children's books.

In Irish, narration of the hero's encounter with the sleeping Queen will often use a traditional run, common phrases such as 'He made a woman of her,' or 'She made a man of him', or 'He thought he'd like to kiss her, and he did. And he thought he'd like to lay by her side, and he did. And he thought he'd like them to be as one, and so they were and their limbs entwined as do limbs of trees of the wood and they knew the great joy of joys! Sometimes in performance the teller glosses over or euphemises the sexual content, as did Hyde and Curtin in their English versions by just narrating 'a kiss'; other tellers will use English translations or adaptations of the Irish runs. Oral tone or tempo, gestures, physical stance, eye expression and gaze behaviour, depending on the audience and the teller's relationship with it or individual members of it, can negotiate communication of sensitive subjects.

However, there is little critical analysis of these elements, in this or other Irish tales, in literary criticism or gender or cultural studies of Irish folklore. In this specific example could the 'reverse quest' by a fierce, threatening, warlike queen balance the hero's actions, making the rape and illegitimate birth acceptable, and so raise no concern or comment? Or is it because Irish versions are so little known that critics see no need to examine or challenge such passages?

When interpreting Irish tales it helps to consider Miceal Ross's study of the 'The Knife Against the Wave'. A fairy woman of the sea (not a mermaid, but similar) desires a handsome fisherman and raises a wave to drown him so that she might have him forever. Instinctively he throws his knife against the wave which then disappears, and he is safe. That evening, fairy men come and insist he return to the sea, promising him safety. He goes, and finds the knife stuck in the arm of the fairy woman who desires him. The knife is iron, which they cannot touch; only he, a human, may. The fisherman removes it and returns safely to his world. Ross analysed multiple versions of this Irish story, discovering each had a markedly different slant or tone. One teller told the tale as a horror story, another as a bawdy romp, another as a tragedy, others as a romance, mystery or marvel, yet another as a comedy on the female sex drive, and another as a withering satire on men's stupidity when it came to romance, sex, and/or women.

Most likely 'Well o' the World's End' was similarly performed, with infinite variety in tone and interpretation available depending on teller and context. We must remember that traditionally adults were the audiences for these tales when they were collected, and the published, translated English versions targeted different readers. Hyde's, and possibly Kennedy's and Curtin's, were meant for adult readers; MacManus's was definitely for children. But Kennedy's and certainly Curtin's works quickly 'crossed over' to juvenile fiction, and Curtin may have intended this due to potential financial gain. We, as modern adult readers and monitors of children's literature, may read of, or as adult audiences of storytelling performance listen to, and dislike the ravished sleeping woman marrying her ravisher. For those adults in a rural *ceili* house the tale originally could have been recounted with severe moral criticism, gleeful eroticism, or as scandal, tragedy or horror. The insistence on legitimacy and marriage could express concern over the purity and continuity of bloodlines, a matter of great importance in the small closed communities where these stories were told.

The difference between the German and Irish titles invites speculation on the part of a modern performer, along with other elements in the tale. These hint at opportunities regarding different interpretations in performance. The Irish for 'water of life' is *uisce beatha* ('*uisce*' = water, '*beatha*' = life). But in Irish, *uisce beatha* also means 'whiskey'. Irish tellers didn't know the German version, and collectors perhaps naturally wanted clarity and avoided the German title, particularly as they wished to present tales asserting an Irish provenance and long cultural tradition. Informants rarely refer to a story or song's title, usually describing tales as 'that one about Jack' or 'the one about the magic well'; it is collectors or editors who give titles to traditional material. Even so, the structure of 'Well o' the World's End' provides hints to why this was chosen as a title by collectors, or used as a descriptor by tellers (and a 'jumping off' point to use euphemism and punning within and across languages humorously in performance).



This story follows Propp's demonstration of the morphology of the folktale, containing many examples of his functions: absention, interdiction, violation of the interdiction, departure, receipt of a magical agent and so on. There is the matrix of polar opposites, male and female, courage and cowardice, honesty and deceit, life and death. What I find appealing is the mirroring in the story's structure – the hero's quest in the first half and dormancy (banishment or servitude) in the second, balanced by the Queen's initial dormancy and subsequent search. Perhaps informants and collectors (and modern tellers) emphasised the magic well as it is the pivot for the two quests – one to the well, the other away from it. The juxtapositions, and the potential punning of 'water of life' and 'whiskey' when playing between Irish and English meanings, along with the drunken feckless brothers and the hospitality of the magic helpers the prince and Queen meet, all present elements for a playful performance of the tale.

### **Conclusions regarding 'Water o' Life' and later Irish literature**

One last viewpoint for analysis should be mentioned, as it provides an explanation for the tale's popularity in Irish literature. Ireland's history resulted in persistent attitudes that appear as tribal mentalities concerning who is an 'insider' and who is an 'outsider'. Zimmerman stresses distinctions must be made among viewpoints of insiders 'because there was more than one way of being in Ireland'. Storytelling, particularly as it has been observed integrated in rural Irish social life by Cashman, Glassie and others, allows individuals and groups to explore ways of being Irish, to discuss who is 'in' and 'out'. Mass-produced English publications in the 1890s and early 1900s of stories discussed here were made for middle-class readers in Ireland (and America and Britain). According to Zimmerman (2001, 592) these publications:

could be directly or indirectly influenced by nationalism, which had spurred folklore collections and studies in continental Europe and later did the same in Ireland; reciprocally, the revelation ... of folklore strengthened the idea that some unique cultural heritage defined the national singularity and justified political claims. By the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, when the idea was in the air that one should remain or once more become Irish, going back (selectively) to cultural roots meant, for some, favouring distant 'Celtic' sources and perhaps entering an Otherworld and approaching a sacred well from which they might drink the Water of Life ...

Irish folk-tale collections asserted models of the idealised Irish stories, Irish tellers and Irish individuals, feeding the Irish literary renaissance. James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, James Stephens and other writers referenced folktales and the movement spawning them: they imitated, mocked and satirised both, playing with language and creating new works.

Recent writers continued to do the same. Benedict Kiely's short story 'The Heroes of the Dark House' referenced two folk collectors, and several storytellers and folktales, including 'The Well o' the World's End'. Kiely delineates beautifully the rivalry and jealousy, as well as the common causes, between collectors, along with everyday struggles arising from common annoyances by fellow locals and disruptions imposed from outsiders in a rural Irish community. The characters of his short story – folklorists and oral tellers – are based on people Kiely knew. Kiely's narration delicately explores the tensions in a rural Northern Ireland village during a time of crisis, World War II, when American military were based there prior to the invasion of Europe. The referenced folktales act as metaphors, describing a conservative community radicalised by friendly though still foreign military occupation. Like the Irish hero, these warriors from abroad risk life going to distant overseas lands at the world's end to fight monsters and bring home magic to heal the world.

Within the constraints of this paper, one cannot make a definitive interpretation of this complex and widespread story. In too short a space, perhaps, I've tried to describe Irish versions of a world tale that the Grimms also interpreted, and also to provide explanations for how the Irish versions were developed, found, interpreted and in turn had an impact on Irish literature. Given the vast number of Irish versions of stories, rather than giving a definitive and in-depth analysis of this story, my primary purpose has been to alert fairy-tale scholars and storytellers to a wealth of material remaining for study and experimentation.

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## Patrick Ryan

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1. 'The Well of D'Yerree-in-Dowan' in modern Irish is 'An Tobar ar Deireadh an Domhain'.
2. 'Congested areas' in the west and the west coast were districts of extreme poverty, where the homeless or the unemployed were out of no alternative pushed into inadequate housing. It was a major socio-political issue in Ireland from the time of the Famine but particularly in the late 19th century at the time these stories were collected (Bourke).
3. See also Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Folklore of Ireland Society, 1942); and Seán Ó Súilleabháin and Reidar Thorlaf Christiansen, *Types of Irish Folktale* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1963).

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