



## Name-Avoidance and Circumlocutory Terms in Modern Irish and Scottish Maritime Memorates

Fomin, M. (2020). Name-Avoidance and Circumlocutory Terms in Modern Irish and Scottish Maritime Memorates. *Studia Celto-Slavica*, 11, 51-67. <https://doi.org/10.54586/OHSH9643>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**  
Studia Celto-Slavica

**Publication Status:**  
Published (in print/issue): 17/12/2020

**DOI:**  
[10.54586/OHSH9643](https://doi.org/10.54586/OHSH9643)

**Document Version**  
Author Accepted version

**Document Licence:**  
Other

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# NAME-AVOIDANCE AND CIRCUMLOCUTORY TERMS IN MODERN IRISH AND SCOTTISH MARITIME MEMORATES

*Maxim Fomin*

## **0. Introduction**

In 1942, Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *Handbook of Irish Folklore* was produced for collectors of the Irish Folklore Commission. Among many things related to the Irish folklore tradition, the handbook included a section on 'Fishing Lore' (Ó Súilleabháin 1942: 27), asking the folklore collectors to record

large body of customs and superstition ... attached to the art of fishing... details of local beliefs and customs connected with luck in fishing. Acts performed and rites observed by fishermen before setting out to fish, on their way to the fishing place, during the time of fishing, and on returning home subsequently. Words, sayings or acts forbidden among fishermen by custom or superstition. Objects carried by fishermen on their person or in the boats for good luck... Examples of fishing customs and beliefs... causes to which ill-luck may be attributed: meeting a fox or a (red-haired) woman when going fishing; mentioning certain words, names, persons, or animals while fishing; whistling.

This initial inquiry was followed by a questionnaire of a fuller scale distributed among the fishermen and members of coastal communities on 'fishing beliefs' by the Department of Irish Folklore at UCD in 1979 (see Ní Fhloinn 2018: 352–4 for further detail). Questions relevant to this paper included the following:

Are certain kinds of people or certain animals thought to bring bad luck to the fishermen?

Are people with certain surnames regarded as unlucky?

How do fishermen react to all of these?

What attitude do fishermen have towards red-haired people and red things in general?

The answers have since been carefully documented by the Department of Irish Folklore. Most recently, results of research into a specific aspect of the occupational lore of Irish fishermen, "namely, the idea that it was unlucky to mention certain words and entities while at sea" (Ní Fhloinn 2018: 13) was published.

Drawing upon Ní Fhloinn's methodological framework, I would like to examine the corpus of maritime memorates collected by Ulster University's Stories of the Sea project since 2010 drawing particular attention to various circumlocutory fishing terms and the fishermen's sociocultural practice of name-avoidance.

Conceptualised by Ní Fhloinn (2018, back cover), with regard to the topic of name-avoidance she noted:

'Cold iron' is a phrase that may be used by fishermen as a euphemism to avoid misfortune at sea... The use of such euphemisms, which form a part of the work culture and occupational lore of Irish fishermen,... focuses on the belief that certain entities should not be mentioned while at sea, or while engaged in the business of fishing, for fear of attracting misfortune. Often, stock euphemisms or circumlocutions are used for the entities in question. Objects of ill omen typically involve animals, such as foxes, hares, pigs etc., and certain categories of people, such as red-haired women.

### **1. The meeting of red-haired woman as the omen of ill-luck**

It is true to say that one of the most widespread beliefs regarding the bad luck at fishing is the one following the meeting of red-haired woman while going out fishing. The example provided below is drawn from the memorate recorded by Michael Corduff in Co. Mayo, Portaclay, in 1955, where the informant witnessed the bad luck at fishing experienced by his father and the crew on his boat. In a nutshell, a member of the informant's father fishing crew meets a red-haired woman on his way to the harbour. The fisherman is late, so the rest of the crew have to wait until he arrives, and then they go out to sea. The next morning the boat comes empty, with no catch, and the informant confirms he was an eye-witness to the effect that meeting of the red woman had on his father's boat catch:

I was helping with others attending on my father's curragh. One of the senior partners in the curragh was rather late in arriving on the shore.

—You are somewhat late this evening, Frank, my father said.

—Yes, I know I am late, I forgot to bring my buoy, and I had to return home for it, and then as I came along, I unfortunately met with another mishap, which almost caused me to go back home again, and stay at home, was Frank Gannon's reply.

—What happened? further queried my father.

—I met a certain woman and I never yet had any luck whether fishing or otherwise on any occasion on which she crossed my path. A red-haired woman, of course! was Frank's rejoinder, rather chagrined by the inauspicious event.

—She might bring you luck this time, humorously commented another member of the crew.

—I hope she does, but I will be very much surprised if it should happen.

The curragh with crew and fishing nets and appurtenant accessories set out in the wake of the setting September sun for the herring fishing grounds of Broad Haven Bay, having first recited the traditional prayer and blessed themselves with sea-water, and we watched their departure until they pounded Cornboy Point, and went out of view... Next morning, I was up early, dressed hurriedly, and as was the custom of the boys of the neighbourhood, went to the shore to meet the fishermen returned from the deep... Soon my father's curragh which was the last to arrive hove in sight... It was empty save for a few dogfish and crabs...

My father and his crew were obviously discomfited at their failure, and had little to say. They went about their work of taking their nets and equipage out of the curragh and spreading them out to dry on the sandy greensward along the shore, devoid of their usual éclat and enthusiasm. Their manner was moody and subdued. When their work was done, and as they were walking along the path through the fields, Frank remarked to his comrades:

—Now, didn't I tell ye this last night before we left the shore, and some of ye were treating the matter as a joke.

—Well! I made no joke of it, said my father adding, it's not the first time it happened; neither is it the last.

(NFC 1395: 330–4)

The oral account just cited obtains a flavour of a piece of creative writing. The memorate is recorded in long sentences, with citations from contemporary fiction to give his speech some extra flavour, and is embellished with words more appropriate of a middle-class city dweller, probably also a University graduate (“chagrined”; “appurtenant accessories”; “discomfited”; “equipage”; “éclat and enthusiasm”) than those of a country fisherman.<sup>1</sup>

Suffice it to say, that the event just cited was described as vividly as it could have been, with examples of direct speech and dialogues reproduced happening between the fishing crew members, and descriptions of personal feelings experienced by the informant at the time of its happening. This plenty of detail in

1. For example, the informant describes his haste to run ashore in the morning to welcome the return of the curraghs in the following way: “In my hurry, I took a shortcut across the fields, brushing with hasty steps the dews away” and reached the beach just as the first curragh was hugging the shore” (NFC 1395: 331).

the retelling of the event is rarely observed in the stories our project has collected. More research is needed whether the person in question had any recourse to formal education and why he chose to retell the events using a high register of English—originally being reared up in the area of the Mayo Gaeltacht—but I cannot provide an answer to this now; it may have been that the whole incident was recorded at informant’s leisure and was sent to Michael Corduff by regular mail.

What we can do is to analyse the memorate in more detail. The informant relates the dialogue between his father and the member of the crew who came late twice: firstly, at the beginning of the story, and secondly, when the story is coming to its end:

—What happened?

—I met a certain woman and I never yet had any luck whether fishing or otherwise on any occasion on which she crossed my path. A red-haired woman, of course!

... as they were walking along the path through the fields, Frank remarked to his comrades:

—Now, didn’t I tell ye this last night before we left the shore, and some of ye were treating the matter as a joke.

—Well! I made no joke of it... it’s not the first time it happened; neither is it the last.

At the close of the memorate, the informant provides his own explanation—he tries to *rationalise* the belief, and share his own view on the veracity of the incident—pointing out at the constant luck at fishing that his father’s crew always had until this particular moment; unfortunately, he never mentioned whether the ill-luck on that particular occasion had further effect on their fishing in the future:

This little anecdote concerning the ill omen of the red-haired woman is no mere hearsay, but is derived from personal knowledge. I was on the scene when the fisherman before setting out to sea made his prediction that the night’s fishing would be a failure in consequence of the ill-omened meeting with the “*bean ruadh*” (red-haired woman) and I was there in the morning following to witness the fulfilment of the prediction of ill-luck. Of course, some will say it was all a matter of coincidence, that it was not the first time a boat came to land empty from fishing. Quite true, but on less favourable nights at least so far as sea, weather, and incidental conditions were concerned, my father’s curragh usually topped the list of the highest catch during the season. Certainly, it never drew blank as it had done on that particular night. However, the evidence suggests there is at least some doubt, and as people often say “there is something in it.”

(NFC 1395: 334)

In Scotland, a similar belief was registered by Donald Mac Donald from John Mac Millan, 1933, who resided on Eriskay near South Uist. He originally recorded his data in Scottish Gaelic, which is evidenced by the biggest part of his collection, but he chose to translate the piece under discussion (providing a summary of his observations in the area rather than any concrete examples): “Fishermen in Eriskay have still a definite dislike of meeting a red haired person when on their way to fish” (SSSA, *Donald Mac Donald Collection*, vol. 2, p. 247).

This recollection of a belief involving a red-haired woman has given the opportunity to the informant to mention another wide-spread belief connected with women and fishing. The collector recorded the description of the practice of the fishermen taking their nets home during the winter fishing season, but leaving them inside the boat during the summer:

When the summer season is over every year, the fishermen leave their nets aboard until the winter season begins, but when this season is over they take them home in order to get them mended for the next season.

(Ibid.)

However, he says, he was told that,

as late as ten years ago (*in the 1920s*—M.F.), the fishermen used to carry their nets to their boats for the re-start of the season during the night. The reason for this curious practice was this. The fishermen were afraid that if they carried their nets to their boats in daytime some “cailleach” with the power of the evil eye would see them, and if this lady happened to be unkindly disposed towards the particular persons seen, a bad season would be the result. In order to avoid this the fishermen took advantage of the cover of night to shield them from the eyes of all vindictive “cailleachan”.

(Ibid., 248)

It is clear that the fishermen’s dislike or even fear of women that had certain powers against them included both the old women (with the power of the evil eye) and the red-haired women whose presence or interference would have provided similar effect on their fishing.<sup>2</sup>

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2. On the power of evil eye and related phenomena in the Irish folklore tradition see examples collected by the National Folklore Collection under the topic of the evil eye (<https://www.duchas.ie/en/tpc/cbes/5283386>); and in medieval Ireland, see Borsje (2012).

## 2. The meeting of red-haired animal or red coloured flesh fish as omen of ill luck

Similarly to red-haired women, red-haired animals were particularly ill-omened, such as foxes, hares, rabbits. This belief echoed by a well-known curse collected in the west of Ireland,

*Sionnach ar do dhuan agus giorria ar do bhaoite  
Agus nár mharaigh tú aon bhreac ná go dtaga an Fhéile Bride*

A fox on your hook, and hare on your bait,  
And may you kill no fish until St Brigid's Day.

(Ní Fhloinn 2018: 57–8)

In some versions of the curse collected elsewhere *sionnach* ('fox') was replaced by *coinín* ('rabbit') *ar do dhuan* ('on your hook'). These were certain things unlucky to talk about while fishing, and the fabulate 'Fairy rabbit and blessed earth of Tory' serves as an example warning what could happen to the fishermen if they pronounce a certain word. Informant's grandfather goes fishing. While the sea is calm, he and his fellow fisherman see a rabbit sitting on a cliff. When they try to frighten it away, the three waves came upon them and the curragh capsized:

*Ba iascaire mór m'athair mór. Donnchadh Ó Duibhir ab ainm dó, agus le cois a bheith ina fhear mhaith farráige, bhí snámh iontach aige. Fear láidir i gceart a bhí ann fosta. Ba ghnách leis a ghabháil soir go ceann thoir an oileáin, agus fear ón bhaile sin a thabhairt leis amach a dhiascaireacht. I bPort an Dúin a bhí an curach aige, agus ba thart ar an taoibh ó thuaidh den oileán a níodh sé cuid mhór dá chuid iascaireachta.*

*D'imigh sé soir tráthmóna amháin deas samhraidh. Tharraing sé ar a chomrádaí, agus chuaigh an bheirt go Port an Dúin. Thug siad an acuinn agus an curach síos ó bharr an chladaigh, agus d'imigh siad thart ag tarraingt ar an aird a tuaidh.*

*Tá áit ar an taoibh thoir den oileán comhgarach don Dún, a dtugann siad Poll an Rutáin air. Tá uaimh ann, agus théid siad isteach ar thaoibh daoithi agus amach ar an taoibh eile, agus tá aichearra mhór ansin le taoibh a bheith ag gabháil thart le gaosán an Tóir Mhóir. Fríd Pholl an Rutáin a bhí siadsan ag gabháil an tráthmóna seo. Cha rabh smid ghaoithe ann, agus bhí an fharráige chomh ciúin le clár.*

*Chonaic siad coinín ina shuí in airde ins an bhinn os a gcionn, agus dar leofa go rabh sé dána i gceart. Tharraing m'athair mór isteach a chéaslaigh, agus thoisigh sé dá bhualadh ar bhéal an churaigh, ach dbeamhan ribe a bhog siad ann, agus char fhág sé áit a bhoinn. Bhí an curach caite ansin ar an uisce, agus thoisigh an bheirt a scairtí agus a' bhúirfí, ach is cosúil nach rabh tóir ar bith le cur air.*

*“A Dhonnchaidh,” arsa fear a bhí i ndeireadh an churaigh le m’athair mór, “chan coinín saolta é seo!” Leis sin féin tionsn siad an tonn mhór ag tarraingt orthu. “Coisreacan Dé orainn!” arsa siadsan.*

*Tháinig an tonn orthu, agus d’éirigh an curach ar an toinn thair a leath. Leis sin féin tionsn siad tonn eile ag tarraingt orthu a bhí i bhfad ní ba mheasa ná an chéad cheann. Bhuail an tonn seo an curach sa taoibh, agus chuir sí a tóin os a cionn, agus sula rabh faill acu a n-anam a thabhairt do Dhia is do Mhuire, tháinig tonn eile den chineál chéanna, agus thaosc sí anuas sa mhullach orthu féin agus ar an churach, ach mar sin féin char lig siad amach a ngreim. Scairt m’athair mór leis an fhear eile greim maith a choinneáil ar an churach. Chuaigh sé féin ar an tsnámh, agus é ag tarraingt an churaigh ina dhiaidh lena leathláimh. Cha rabh sé ábalta an curach a thabhairt chun talaime san áit a rabh siad, agus b’éigean dó an curach agus an fear a bhí crochta aisti a tharraingt ina dhiaidh píosa fada.*

*Bhí go maith. Streacháil sé leis go dtug sé an curach isteach ag taoibh leice, agus d’éirigh leis a chomrádaí a chur i dtír. Nuair a tháinig siad chucu féin beagán, thiompaigh siad an curach, ach bhí an dá chéaslaigh ar an tsnámh go fóill. Chuaigh Donnchadh ar an tsnámh arís, agus chuaigh sé amach, agus thug isteach na céaslaigh. Chuaigh an bheirt amach ansin gur thóg siad na crannógáí agus an treachlaisc eile a chaill siad. Phill siad isteach go Port an Dúin ansin fliuch báite, briste brúite.*

*Bhí barúil ag an bheirt fhear sin rith a saoil, agus chualat mé féin m’athair mór ag trácht air fiche uair, gur coinín sí a bhí sa cheann a bhí in airde sa bhinn os a gcionn, agus gur fhéach sé lena gcailleadh. Bhí gráinnín de úir Thoraigh leofa ins an churach, agus, ar ndóiche, char éirigh leis siocair go rabh.*

My grandfather, Donnchadh Ó Duibhir, was a great fisherman, and as well as being a good seaman he was a wonderful swimmer. He was a very strong man, too. He used to go over to the eastern point of the island, and take a man from that area out fishing with him. It was in Port an Dúin he kept his curragh and it was on the north side of the island he did most of his fishing.

One fine summer evening he went east to meet his comrade and the two of them went over to Port an Dúin. They took all the boat-gear and the curragh down to the edge of the strand and set out for the northern shore.

There is a place on the east of the island near the Dún called Poll an Rutáin.

There is a cave there, and one goes in one end and out the other and it is a shortcut compared with having to go round the nose of Tor Mór. It was through Poll an Rutáin they were going that evening. There was not a breath of wind and the sea was as flat as a board.

They saw a rabbit sitting up on the height overhead and it seemed to them it was very bold. My grandfather drew in his paddle and began to beat it against the edge of the curragh but not a hair did they move of the rabbit which did not stir from

where it sat. The curragh was bobbing about on the water by then and both men began to shout and roar but it seems there was no hunting it away. “Donnchadh, that is no earthly rabbit!” said the man in the stern of the curragh to my grandfather. With that they saw a great wave coming upon them.

“God save us!” they cried. The wave swept the curragh halfway over its crest. With that they saw another wave much worse than the first one. It struck the curragh amidship and capsized it, and before they had time to offer their souls to God and Mary another wave of the same kind broke over them, but they did not let go their hold of the curragh. My grandfather shouted to the other man to keep a good grip, and he himself began to swim and draw the curragh after him with one hand. He was not able to bring the curragh to land where he was, and he had to draw the curragh and the man hanging on it a long way.

Well and good. He struggled on until he got the curragh in beside a flat rock and succeeded in landing his comrade. When they had come to themselves a little they turned the curragh but the two paddles were still afloat. Donnchadh went out swimming again and brought in the paddles. They both went out then and rescued the line-frames and other gear they had lost. They returned to Port an Dúin sodden wet, bruised and exhausted.

As long as they lived both men held, and I heard my grandfather speak of it a score of times, that it was a fairy rabbit they had seen on the height above them and that it was trying to drown them. They had a small amount of the earth of Tory in the curragh, and that surely is why it did not succeed.

(Fomin and Mac Mathúna 2016: 5-6)

The informant believed it was the fairy rabbit his grandfather and his fellow fisherman had seen and because they had had an antidote against the fairies, which in this instance had been a morsel of the earth of Tory kept in the curragh, the fairy rabbit had not succeeded to drown them.

Things unlucky to talk about while fishing also included the mention of the red colour in general, and of red coloured flesh animals (such as pork) and fish (such as salmon). The fishermen used to employ a number of euphemisms for the word ‘salmon’, for instance ‘the silvery fellow’, *an buachaill*, ‘the boyo’, ‘the gentleman’, *an duine uasal*, ‘the beastie’ (Ní Fhloinn 2018: 105–7, 115).

Special type of herring with red fins was inauspicious as well:

*Bhíodh scadáin le feiceáil fadó ó shin a mbíodh a gcuid eiteóg dearg, agus ní tháinig beathach éisc isteach i mbád ariamh a bhí comh mí-shona le ceann acu sin. Bhíodh contúirt bháite ar an bhád ná ar an fhoirinn dá dtigeadh ceann acu sin chun an bháid.*

*Tá ball dubh ar chúl a chinn ar an scadán ar dhéanamh combartha [leg. cónrach], agus deirtear gur fágadh sin air mar chuimhneacháin do iascairi go bhfuil caill air!*

(Ó hEochaidh 1965: 47)

There was herring to be seen long ago, whose fins used to be red, and it was the most unfortunate creature of all to be taken into the boat ever. If any such creature would end up in the boat, the boat or the crew would be perceived to be in danger of drowning. There is a black spot at the back of its head on the herring to put a mark on it and it is said that it was left on it as a warning to the fishermen that it is harmful!

The example of breaking the taboo when certain words are mentioned while at sea is a fabulate ‘The devil against the prayers.’ It was collected by Seán Ó hEochaidh on 15 July 1937 from Conall Ó hEochaidh in Teelin, Co. Donegal. The story is about fishermen who had no luck fishing salmon on a Sunday. When they were at sea fishing, they tried to say the Rosary three times. Each time they were interrupted and when they pulled in the nets, there was no fish. On the third attempt, one of the fishermen said that were it not for “the devil”, they would have caught some fish. No sooner had he said this, when “a ball of fire” rose up in the nets.

*Nuair a fuair siad greim ar an eangach an tríú huair dúirt fear dá raibh sa bhád murab é an **diabhal** féin a bhí ann go maródh siad an iarraidh seo é agus ní raibh an focal amach as a bhéal gur éirigh **an cnap tine** amuigh san eangach agus siúd amach leis thar na hiompair.*

(NFC 390: 101)

When they had the net by the lugs the third time one of the crew said they would catch it this time unless it was the **devil** himself! The word was not out of his mouth before **a ball of fire** leaped out of the net and over the corks.

In the prelude to the story, the informant explains, the story was told to him by his father while they were sitting out at sea fishing. He says:

*Nuair a bhí mise i mo ghasúr bheag ag iascaireacht i gcuideachta m'athara, san oíche i gcónaí nuair a bhíodh na líonta curtha againn sin an rud a gcaitheadh na seandaoine an t-am ina chionn go mbeadh am tógála ann ag insint scéalta dá chéile, agus ar an dóigh sin ní mhothíodh sinn an t-am ag dul árd. Seo scéal beag iontach amháin a chuala mise m'athair a insint.*

(NFC 390: 101)

When I was a young boy fishing in the company of my father, always at night when we would have the nets put out, this is what the old men used to do, spending their time until the time was up to lift the nets was to tell stories to each other, and in that way we did not notice the time to pull the nets up. This is one excellent short story that I heard my father tell.

Because the father and his son (the informant) were in their boat in the middle of the sea fishing, the father had resorted to using euphemisms to describe various objects in his story, including red salmon they tried to catch. In so doing, he invoked circumlocutory terms to describe the salmon, which I have outlined in bold in the citation above, such as ‘the devil’ and ‘a ball of fire’ — suggesting the red aspect of the fish they were trying to catch. The informant, recalling the story told by his father at a later point in time, conveyed that story *verbatim* to the Irish Folklore Commission collector, so that he did not change a word of it, and in so doing, the euphemisms used by the informant’s father at the time of fishing — and during the telling of the story — were kept the way they had been pronounced during the first telling of the story at sea.

### 3. The inauspicious days for fishing and antidotes to bring luck at fishing

Sunday was one of the special days when one was not supposed to fish. Going fishing on the day of the Sabbath was considered particularly unlucky which can be linked to a wide-spread folklore motif ‘Breaking the Sabbath’ (ST C 631). The memorate ‘Two boats that sank at Concroome Harbour’ (*An Dá bhád a báthadh i gCuan Cromtha*) collected by Tadhg Ó Murchadha from Muiris Ó Ríoghghardán in Baslickane, Co. Kerry, on 13 October 1935 (NFC 146: 568–70) reported the sinking of two ships because, as the informant reported, the crew of the ships did not attend the Sunday Mass.

Another day of special significance for the fishermen was St. Martin’s Day (11 November). Local belief legend, collected by Tomás Ó Ciardha in 1935 in Duncormick, Co. Wexford (Fomin and Mac Mathúna 2016: 24–6), speaks about the boat crew drowning on the eve of St. Martin’s Day as they went into sea ignoring the warning of a horse rider who appeared to them prior to the journey.

The luck at fishing in fact was achieved through a number of means, and we have them registered in the NFC holdings as the answers to the following questions of the Fishing Lore Questionnaire mentioned in the introduction to the article, such as “Were there any objects carried on the boat for luck?” or “Do fishermen ever pray while fishing?”

The use of the sacred objects is given as an explanation by the informants as to why they did not drown on a particular occasion. In the fabulate ‘The devil against the prayers’ I have just cited, the fishermen were saying the Rosary during

the time of the Sunday Mass to avert bad luck from the boat. The fabulate ‘The fairy rabbit’ also cited earlier contained a reference to the blessed clay of Tory that was kept in the boat to protect the fishermen from mischief.

It was recorded that the skipper of the boat could also administer holy water on the fairy boats to avert dangers of drowning. This is illustrated by the local legend ‘Magic cloud and magic boat’ collected by Sean Stundún from Conchobhar Ó Riogáin, 1934, Clear Island, Co. Cork:

A boat was coming from the *leac* sometime after midnight, and about midway between the Fastnett, they saw what they thought a shower rising to the north west. It got up suddenly and approached them quick, and it was making a terrible noise—just the same as a gale of wind. They lowered all sails to be prepared for it when it would come. And when they looked again, it looked like a cloud of smoke with a fire underneath. The crew got frightened; they were right in its track; and it was very close to them. The skipper of the boat went down in the cabin and brought up a bottle of holy-water and have sprinkled it between them and the cloud; and making the sign of the cross with it, it turned right away from the boat and they didn’t see any more of it.

And the ski cleared and the stars came out and ’twas a fine night again after. They made all sail on the boat again for to come home and directly when they had got the boat under way, there was a full-rigged ship right ahead close to their steam, and they had to tack from her, and when they tacked she was ahead of them again. And they made three of forward tacks and she was ahead of them every time. So they had to use the holy water again—on her, the same as on the cloud and she suddenly disappeared and they saw no more of her.

(NFC 49: 247–9)

Other important objects included cinders or burning coal (*aibhleog bheo* ‘live coal’) kept onboard while fishing out at sea. The mention of cinders could have given rise to the wide-spread antidote against bad luck—fishermen were supposed to say ‘cold iron’<sup>3</sup> if any of the fishing prohibitions were accidentally broken.

There was a connection between the priest and the fishermen too, and the priest was an important agent against fairies and bad luck. Here I provide an example from the local legend ‘The child from the sea and Kilstiffin’, collected by Tadhg Ó Murchadha from Dómhnaill Bán Ó Loinsigh on 11 November 1942 in Kilcloher,

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3. It is mostly likely that ‘cold iron’ could have arisen through a phonetic near sameness of the way it was pronounced by the Irish fishermen (‘cowl iron’), which I think comes from ‘coal iron’ and, more so, from its Irish equivalent *gual iarainn*.

Co. Clare, where the priest helps the fishermen by admonishing to put the fairy baby girl back into the sea and as a result their luck in fishing increases:

*Ach ní fheadar-sa ann ag iascaireacht a bhíodar, ach gur tógadh thíos sa mbád é (e.g. an leanbh). Déarfadh duine eile leat gur currach a bhí acu. Ach do tugadh an leanbh aníos, pé ar domhain é, agus go dtí an sagart le haghaidh é a bhaistiú. Dúirt an sagart leo an leanbh a thabhairt amach agus do scaoileadh síos san áit chéanna, thar n-ais arís. Ach deirtí, ina dhiaidh sin, go raibh an-ádh éisc air, pé acu bád nó currach é. Ach ní fheadar mé féin ach mar a d'airíos. Ach níl aon bhaint le haon rud a gheobhaidh tú sa bhfarraige mar sin, ach fág mar a raibh sé é. Is dócha gurb é an ceart é.*

(NFC 861: 756)

All they were doing was fishing, but he (*the child*—*M.F.*) was taken up into the boat. Other people would say that they had a curragh. But the child was taken up, whatever on earth it was, and taken to the priest for her to be baptised. The priest said to them to take the child out and let it down in the same place, back again. But it used to be said, after that, that it had great luck for fish, it a boat or a curragh. I don't know but that is what was said. But this has no connection with anything you would find in the sea like that,—it seems like it was right.

Contrariwise, acting against witches (cf. section 1 above) was most definitely to bring drowning and bad luck on the fishermen; stories of this kind are connected with a wide-spread migratory legend (Almqvist's MLSIT 3036, 'A Ship-sinking Witch'), which in its turn is based upon a widespread folklore motif ST D2142.1.4. *Wind raised by troubling vessel of water* (see Mac Cárthaigh 1992–3). In the belief legend 'Prochlaisc fairy woman', collected by Seán Ó hEochaidh from Séamus Mac Amhlaoigh, Inver, Co. Donegal, on 27 November 1957, an old woman has a heated argument with the hostess, causing her anger and further action: the witch performs a magic practice drowning the husband and the son of the hostess (see further Fomin 2011):

*Thosaigh an gearradh cainte mar seo eadar an bheirt agus diabhal i bhfad gur ghlac an tseanbhean mothú feirge, agus d'éirigh sí ina seasamb agus bhí mias adhmaid thíos i gcionn an tí. Bhí cupán beag léi ina póca agus chuir sí an cupán isteach sa mhias. Chuaigh sí ar a leath-ghlúin ansin agus thosaigh sí ar a cuid rannta. San am seo bhí bean an tí ag nigh cúpla práta taobh amuigh den doras, a bheadh bruite aici nuair a thioctadh a cuid fear abhaile in am luí. Mhothaigh sí an tormán agus an támhach táisc ag tarraingt uirthi agus nuair a d'amharc sí síos uaithi bhí tonnta mar bheadh farraige mhór ag teacht aníos an cabhsa. Rith sí isteach chun tí, agus ní raibh an tseanbhean bhocht le fáil thíos ná thuas aici agus ní thioctadh léi a ghabháil amach i ngan fhios di. Bean sí a bhí inti i rith an ama agus ní raibh*

*sí ach ag fanacht le seans go ndéanadh sí an dochar. Thóg sí an fharraige san am ar chuir sí an cupán isteach sa mbias, agus báthadh, féadaim a rá, iomlán a raibh amuigh ag iascaireacht an oíche sin. Tá sé ainmniste ariamh ó shin—Oíche Báthadh Phrochlaisc.*

(NFC 1204: 468–9)

This sharp talk started between the two and it wasn't long before the old woman was overcome with anger, and she rose and stood up and there was a basin of water in front of the house. She had a small cup in her pocket and she put the cup into the basin. She went down on one knee then and started with her spells. In those days the woman of the house washed a couple of potatoes outside the door, which would she would have boiled by the time her man would come home at bed time. She heard the noise and the commotion coming towards here and when she looked down there were waves as if from a large sea coming up in her direction. She ran into the house and the old woman was nowhere to be found and she could not have gotten out without her knowing. She was a fairy woman the whole time and she was just waiting on a chance for her to do damage. She raised the sea when she put the cup into the basin, and if I can say so, all who were fishing that night were drowned. It has since been named—The Drowning Night of Prochlaisc.

#### 4. Conclusion

Some of the stories cited above were collected from the fishermen and coastal dwellers by Seán Ó hEochaidh, probably, the longest serving collector of the Irish Folklore Commission. He reported that his informants were not always eager to share their experiences with the collector. It was by sheer accident and chance, that he really (like other collectors) succeeded in collecting these personal accounts as these had sometimes been too personal to be told to an outsider. An account of a characteristic encounter of that sort was reported by Seán Ó hEochaidh in the Thomas Davies Memorial Lecture he presented in 1954 (1966: 11):

*Tá cuimhne mhaith agam a bheith ar oileán ar chósta thiar Thír Chonaill, ocht mbliana déag ó shin. Tugadh tuairisc dom fá iascaire a bhí ina chónaí ar an oileán, a raibh clú air a bheith ina an-seanchaí... Tharraing mé ar an fhear seo. Bhí sé fá theach ag gabháil 'un boinn dom agus ba é a bhí fearadh-fháilteach. Dar liom go ndéanfáinn iarracht cuid den seanchas a raibh mé a lorg a bhaint as. Ach is é sin a raibh ar a shon agam! Chuireann ceist air agus ghéibhinn freagra mar a gheobhadh oifigeach fiosrúcháin pensiuín seanaois: "Tá" agus "Níl", "Sea" agus "Chan ea".*

*Shíl mé go raibh mo chluiche tugtha agus go gcaithfinn imeacht le mo dhá láimh comb fada le chéile. I gcionn tamaill d'éirigh mo dhuine den chathaoir agus bhuaíl sé air ag líonadh a phiopa. Nuair a d'éirigh seisean shuigh mise ar an chathaoir ar éirigh sé di, agus tharraing mé aníos fúscadh den eangaigh ar mo ghlúine. Rug mé ar an snáthadán agus lean mé de léasadh an phoill a raibh seasean ag gabháil de. Tá sé i mo shúile ó shin an stán a tháinig ann, agus an aibhleog leagtha ar bhéal an phiopa aige, agus an aoibh a tháinig ar a aghaidh nuair a chonaic sé go raibh rud ínteacht i gcoitinn eadrainn.*

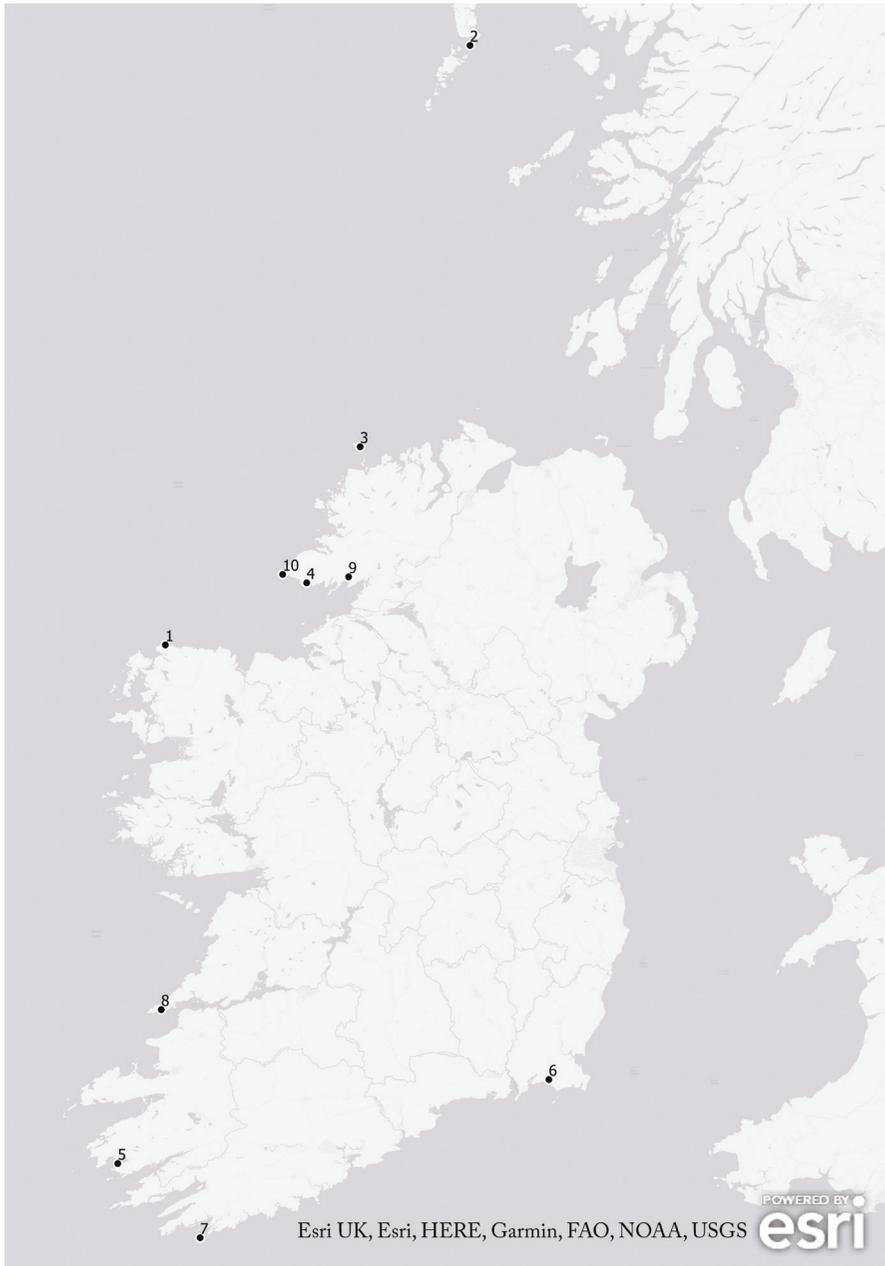
I remember well being on an island on the western coast of Donegal, 18 years ago (i.e. 1936). They told me about a fisherman who lived on the island, who was well known as a good storyteller... I went to see the man. He was in the house, coming towards me and so he was most welcoming. So I thought I would try to get him to tell me some of the types of stories that I was looking for. But nothing was forthcoming from him other than: “Yes” and “No”, “Aye” and “Nope”.

I thought the game was up and I would have to leave empty-handed. In a little while, he rose from his chair and lit his pipe. When he stood up, I sat down on his chair, and began mending the net that he had been working on. I can still see the stare that came upon him, and a pleasant expression coming on his face when he saw that there was something in common between us.

In this vivid recollection of his personal experience, the collector was able to recognise that the unease that kept the informant from sharing his stories was due to the fact that “he was a fisherman from birth and like all fishermen he kept his mind to himself and a bridle on his tongue *until he got to know me*”.<sup>4</sup> One can surmise from this observation that it was only when the fisherman realised that the collector was of the same flesh and blood as he was, coming from the stock of the Irish fishermen, he was able to open up to him, to tell his stories; had the collector intuitively, and almost subconsciously not demonstrated that he also belonged to the fishermen’s professional community, such stories — full of personal encounters with the supernatural, sometimes obtaining good luck and sometimes suffering from ill fate — would not have been told and would have never been subsequently recorded.

*Ulster University*

4. “Bhí sé ó dhúchas ins an iascaire seo, ár ndalta uilig, a intinn a choinneáil aige féin agus srian a choinneáil ar a theanga *gur chuir sé aithne orm*” (Ó hEochaidh 1966 [1954]: 11). Further on Ó hEochaidh and on various incidents he recorded while he was working as the Irish Folklore Commission collector see Ó Tiarnaigh 2015 and 2018.



**Map 1.** Localisation of the stories cited (in their order of appearance).

### Appendix 1. List of locations mentioned (see Map 1)

1. Portacloy, Co. Mayo (Ireland)
2. Eriskay island, South Uist, Outer Hebrides (Scotland)
3. Tory island, Co. Donegal (Ireland)
4. Teelin, Co. Donegal (Ireland)
5. Baslickane, Co. Kerry (Ireland)
6. Duncormick, Co. Wexford (Ireland)
7. Clear Island, Co. Cork (Ireland)
8. Kilcloher, Co. Clare (Ireland)
9. Inver, Co. Donegal (Ireland)
10. Rathlin O’Birne island, Co. Donegal (Ireland)

### Abbreviations

**NFC**—National Folklore Collection, Main Manuscripts Collection, University College Dublin (UCD), Ireland.

**SSSA**—School of Scottish Studies Archive, University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

**ST**—**Thompson, S.**, 1955–8, *Motif-index of Folk-literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

**MLSIT**—*Migratory Legend Suggested Irish Type* (Almqvist 1991).

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