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The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger

Patricia LYSAGHT

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Patricia's Lysaght's rewritten doctoral thesis, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger*, is a thoughtfully constructed and copiously documented ethnographic work. It represents the high standard of scholarship that we expect from the Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, the successor to the Irish Folklore Commission (1935-1971). Primary sources for the study derive largely from the Main Manuscripts and Schools' Manuscripts of the UCD Folklore Archives, all citations appearing in lengthy appendices. Intriguing quotations from this data bank liberally interlard the text along with full English translations of statements in Irish. Additional sources include responses to a questionnaire prepared in 1976, references from the archives of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and most importantly, fieldwork carried out by the author in County Kildare and in Dublin. The fieldwork component allowed her to observe the supernatural death-messenger tradition "in its overall context" which provided a nonverbal basis (i.e. "attitudes," paralinguistic communications) for judging levels of belief. Nineteenth and twentieth century printed accounts have also been considered; Lysaght stresses, however, that these secondary sources have exerted "negligible" influence on banshee oral traditions. Twenty-five ethnographic maps of Ireland illustrate the geographic distributions of major findings, a most impressive feature which visually demonstrates how "Irish" the banshee really is.

Some of Lysaght's conclusions are: beliefs concerning the supernatural death-messenger "were fully developed in Gaelic Ireland"; the creature is a solitary female of the Otherworld, usually known as *bean si*; she is attached to families and positively affects their status in rural community contexts; depending on geographic location, the

banshee's cry of death may be a mournful keening or a frightening animal sound; if she is seen, her appearance is often that of an "old and small" woman with long white hair and white clothing; she manifests herself aurally and/or visually "before a death takes place," from a "high and prominent" place, the interval between the manifestation and death being "between a few minutes . . . and two or three days"; relations and neighbours of dying persons experience the banshee rather than the moribund individuals themselves; a number of "interference legends" ("The Comb Legend," "The Imprint of the Banshee's Five Fingers," "The Shirt Legend") function to support the widespread taboo against interrupting or meddling with a banshee. The last chapter, "Continuity and Change in the Death-Messenger Tradition," maintains that the banshee belief complex has been rapidly disappearing in this century because of mass literacy, newspapers, radio, television, electrification, new roads, changes in rural landscapes wrought by new agricultural technologies, and most significantly, because of the privatization of death and its new "invisibility," a development which removes death from realms of family and community that the banshee served.

In concentrating on a traditional Irish supernatural creature, Lysaght's study is the first of its kind and one can only hope that it will serve as a model for future monographs. At the same time, it is important to note the limitations of the phenomenologically specific, quantitative approach of this work. In concentrating on an aspect of survival "lore," the societies that breathed life into these systems of behaviour and belief, the "folk," are easily obscured, as are other integral sectors of their lore. This study does provide some degree of performance context as well as detailed historical references to verbal usage. Except for brief statements in the last two chapters, however, the wider context of Irish social and cultural history is largely ignored. Thus, other supernatural creatures such as fairies and the *leipreachan* are distinguished from the banshee and the author remarks that "the inventiveness of our imagination seems to be without boundary as far as supernatural beings are concerned" (87). But what are the broader outlines of how this pantheon of supernatural creatures integrated into the unique worldviews of Irish folk religion? Banshees have been attached to families, but *in general* what have Irish supernatural beings had to do with socioeconomic status and class? Lysaght finds it "remarkable" that "none of the records suggest priests or clergymen condemned the death-messenger beliefs," (234) but she does not provide suggestions for how such beliefs have

coexisted for so long within the hegemonic framework of religious orthodoxy.

“Sins of omission,” however, should not detract from Lysaght’s worthy accomplishment. Having impeccably provided the descriptive facts, her valuable study awaits the interpretation of future scholars who will integrate her findings into a larger, holistic picture. Moreover, for Canadian folklorists she has provided a groundwork for the comparative analysis of similar epiphenomena.

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