IRISH WITCHCRAFT AND DEMONOLOGY

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ETC.

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IRISH WITCHCRAFT AND DEMONOLOGY

CHAPTER I

Some Remarks on Witchcraft in Ireland

It is said, though we cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement, that in a certain book on the natural history of Ireland there occurs a remarkable and oft-quoted chapter on Snakes—the said chapter consisting of the words, "There are no snakes in Ireland." In the opinion of most people at the present day a book on Witchcraft in Ireland would be of equal length and similarly worded, except for the inclusion of the Kyteler case in the town of Kilkenny in the first half of the fourteenth century. For, with the exception of that classic incident, modern writers seem to hold that the witch-cult

never found a home in Ireland as it did elsewhere. For example, the article on "Witchcraft" in the latest edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* mentions England and Scotland, then passes on to the Continent, and altogether ignores this country; and this is, in general, the attitude adopted by writers on the subject. In view of this it seems very strange that no one has attempted to show why the Green Isle was so especially favoured above the rest of the civilised world, or how it was that it alone escaped the contracting of a disease that not for years but for centuries had infected Europe to the core. As it happens they may spare themselves the labour of seeking for an explanation of Ireland's exemption, for we hope to show that the belief in witchcraft reached the country, and took a fairly firm hold there, though by no means to the extent that it did in Scotland and England. The subject has never been treated of fully before, though isolated notices may be found here and there; this book, however imperfect it may be, can fairly claim to be the first attempt to collect the scattered stories and records of witchcraft in Ireland

from many out-of-the-way sources, and to present them when collected in a concise and palatable form. Although the volume may furnish little or nothing new to the history or psychology of witchcraft in general, yet it may also claim to be an unwritten chapter in Irish history, and to show that in this respect a considerable portion of our country fell into line with the rest of Europe.

At the outset the plan and scope of this book must be made clear. It will be noticed that the belief in fairies and suchlike beings is hardly touched upon at all, except in those instances where fairy lore and witchcraft become inextricably blended.

The reason for this method of treatment is not hard to find. From the Anglo-Norman invasion down the country has been divided into two opposing elements, the Celtic and the English. It is true that on many occasions these coalesced in peace and war, in religion and politics, but as a rule they were distinct, and this became even more marked after the spread of the Reformation. It was therefore in the Anglo-Norman (and subsequently in the

Protestant) portion of the country that we find the development of witchcraft along similar lines to those in England or the Continent, and it is with this that we are dealing in this book; the Celtic element had its own superstitious beliefs, but these never developed in this direction. In England and Scotland during the mediæval and later periods of its existence witchcraft was an offence against the laws of God and man; in Celtic Ireland dealings with the unseen were not regarded with such abhorrence, and indeed had the sanction of custom and antiquity. In England after the Reformation we seldom find members of the Roman Catholic Church taking any prominent part in witch cases, and this is equally true of Ireland from the same date. Witchcraft seems to have been confined to the Protestant party, as far as we can judge from the material at our disposal, while it is probable that the existence of the penal laws (active or quiescent) would deter the Roman Catholics from coming into any prominence in a matter which would be likely to attract public attention to itself in such a marked degree. A certain

amount of capital has been made by some partisan writers out of this, but to imagine that the ordinary Roman Catholic of, let us say, the seventeenth century, was one whit less credulous or superstitious than Protestant peers, bishops, or judges, would indeed be to form a conception directly at variance with experience and common sense. Both parties had their beliefs, but they followed different channels, and affected public life in different ways.

Another point with reference to the plan of this work as indicated by the title needs a few words of explanation. It will be seen by the reader that the volume does not deal solely with the question of witchcraft, though that we have endeavoured to bring into prominence as much as possible, but that tales of the supernatural, of the appearance of ghosts, and of the Devil, are also included, especially in chapters IV and VI. If we have erred in inserting these, we have at least erred in the respectable company of Sir Walter Scott, C. K. Sharpe, and other writers of note. We have included them, partly because they afford interesting reading, and are culled from sources with which

the average reader is unacquainted, but principally because they reflect as in a mirror the temper of the age, and show the degree to which every class of Society was permeated with the belief in the grosser forms of the supernatural, and the blind readiness with which it accepted what would at the present day be tossed aside as unworthy of even a cursory examination. This is forcibly brought out in the instance of a lawsuit being undertaken at the instigation of a ghost—a quaint item of legal lore. The judge who adjudicated, or the jury and lawyers who took their respective parts in such a case, would with equal readiness have tried and found guilty a person on the charge of witchcraft ; and probably did so far oftener than we are aware of.

The question will naturally be asked by the reader—what reason can be offered for Ireland's comparative freedom from the scourge, when the whole of Europe was so sorely lashed for centuries ? It is difficult fully to account for it, but the consideration of the following points affords a partial explanation.

In the first place Ireland's aloofness may

be alleged as a reason. The "Emerald Gem of the Western World" lies far away on the verge of Ocean, remote from those influences which so profoundly affected popular thought in other countries. It is a truism to say that it has been separated from England and the Continent by more than geographical features, or that in many respects, in its ecclesiastical organisation, its literature, and so on, it has developed along semi-independent lines. And so, on account of this remoteness, it would seem to have been prevented from acquiring and assimilating the varying and complex features which went to make up the witchcraft conception. Or, to put it in other words, mediæval witchcraft was a by-product of the civilisation of the Roman Empire. Ireland's civilisation developed along other and more barbaric lines, and so had no opportunity of assimilating the particular phases of that belief which obtained elsewhere in Europe.

Consequently, when the Anglo-Normans came over, they found that the native Celts had no predisposition towards accepting the view of the witch as an emissary of Satan and

an enemy of the Church, though they fully believed in supernatural influences of both good and evil, and credited their Bards and Druids with the possession of powers beyond the ordinary. Had this country never suffered a cross-channel invasion, had she been left to work out her destiny unaided and uninfluenced by her neighbours, it is quite conceivable that at some period in her history she would have imbibed the witchcraft spirit, and, with the genius characteristic of her, would have blended it with her own older beliefs, and so would have ultimately evolved a form of that creed which would have differed in many points from what was held elsewhere. As it happens, the English and their successors had the monopoly, and retained it in their own hands; thus the Anglo-Norman invaders may be given the credit of having been the principal means of preventing the growth and spread of witchcraft in Celtic Ireland.

Another point arises in connection with the advance of the Reformation in Ireland. Unfortunately the persecution of witches did not cease in the countries where that movement made headway—far from it; on

the contrary it was kept up with unabated vigour. Infallibility was transferred from the Church to the Bible; the Roman Catholic persecuted the witch because Supreme Pontiffs had stigmatised her as a heretic and an associate of Satan, while the Protestant acted similarly because Holy Writ contained the grim command "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Thus persecution flourished equally in Protestant and Roman Catholic kingdoms. But in Ireland the conditions were different. We find there a Roman Catholic majority, not racially predisposed towards such a belief, debarred by their religious and political opinions from taking their full share in public affairs, and opposed in every way to the Protestant minority. The consequent turmoil and clash of war gave no opportunity for the witchcraft idea to come to maturity and cast its seeds broadcast; it was trampled into the earth by the feet of the combatants, and, though the minority believed firmly in witchcraft and kindred subjects, it had not sufficient strength to make the belief general throughout the country.

A third reason that may be brought forward to account for the comparative immunity of Ireland was the total absence of literature on the subject. The diffusion of books and pamphlets throughout a country or district is one of the recognised ways of propagating any particular creed; the friends and opponents of Christianity have equally recognised the truth of this, and have always utilised it to the fullest extent. Now in England from the sixteenth century we find an enormous literary output relative to witchcraft, the majority of the works being in support of that belief. Many of these were small pamphlets, which served as the "yellow press" of the day; they were well calculated to arouse the superstitious feelings of their readers, as they were written from a sensational standpoint —indeed it seems very probable that the compilers, in their desire to produce a startling catch-penny which would be sure to have a wide circulation, occasionally drew upon their imaginations for their facts. The evil that was wrought by such amongst an ignorant and superstitious people can well be imagined; unbelievers would be

converted, while the credulous would be rendered more secure in their credulity.

At a later date, when men had become practical enough to question the reality of such things, a literary war took place, and in this "battle of the books" we find such well-known names as Richard Baxter, John Locke, Meric Casaubon, Joseph Glanvil, and Francis Hutchinson, ranged on one side or the other. Thus the ordinary Englishman would have no reasonable grounds for being ignorant of the power of witches, or of the various opinions held relative to them. In Ireland, on the other hand (with the solitary exception of a pamphlet of 1699, which may or may not have been locally printed), there is not the slightest trace of any witchcraft literature being published in the country until we reach the opening years of the nineteenth century. All our information therefore with respect to Ireland comes from incidental notices in books and from sources across the water. We might with reason expect that the important trial of Florence Newton at Youghal in 1661, concerning the historical reality of which there can be no possible doubt, would be

immortalised by Irish writers and publishers, but as a matter of fact it is only preserved for us in two London printed books. There is no confusion between cause and effect; books on witchcraft would, naturally, be the result of witch-trials, but in their turn they would be the means of spreading the idea and of introducing it to the notice of people who otherwise might never have shown the least interest in the matter. Thus the absence of this form of literature in Ireland seriously hindered the advance of the belief in (and consequent practice of) witchcraft.

When did witchcraft make its appearance in Ireland, and what was its progress therein? It seems probable that this belief, together with certain aspects of fairy lore hitherto unknown to the Irish, and ideas relative to milk and butter magic, may in the main be counted as results of the Anglo-Norman invasion, though it is possible that an earlier instalment of these came in with the Scandinavians. With our present knowledge we cannot trace its active existence in Ireland further back than the Kyteler case of 1324; and this, though it was almost

certainly the first occasion on which the evil made itself apparent to the general public, yet seems to have been only the culmination of events that had been quietly and unobtrusively happening for some little time previously. The language used by the Parliament with reference to the case of 1447 would lead us to infer that nothing remarkable or worthy of note in the way of witchcraft or sorcery had occurred in the country during the intervening century and a quarter. For another hundred years nothing is recorded, while the second half of the sixteenth century furnishes us with two cases and a suggestion of several others.

It is stated by some writers (on the authority, we believe, of an early editor of *Hudibras*) that during the rule of the Commonwealth Parliament *thirty thousand* witches were put to death in England. Others, possessing a little common sense, place the number at three thousand, but even this is far too high. Yet it seems to be beyond all doubt that more witches were sent to the gallows at that particular period than at any other in English history. Ireland seems to have escaped scot-free—at

least we have not been able to find any instances recorded of witch trials at that time. Probably the terribly disturbed state of the country, the tremendous upheaval of the Cromwellian confiscations, and the various difficulties and dangers experienced by the new settlers would largely account for this immunity.

Dr. Notestein[1] shows that the tales of apparitions and devils, of knockings and strange noises, with which English popular literature of the period is filled, are indications of a very overwrought public mind; of similar stories in Ireland, also indicative of a similar state of tension, some examples are given in chapter IV. Though the first half of the seventeenth century is so barren with respect to *witchcraft*, yet it should be noticed that during that period we come across frequent notices of ghosts, apparitions, devils, &c., which forces us to the conclusion that the increase of the belief in such subjects at that time was almost entirely due to the advent of the Cromwellian settlers and the Scotch colonists in Ulster; indeed the beliefs of the latter

[1] In his *History of Witchcraft in England.*

made the Northern Province a miniature Scotland in this respect. We cannot blame them for this; could anything else be expected from men who, clergy and laity alike, were saturated with the superstitions that were then so prominent in the two countries from which their ranks had been recruited?

Thus the seventeenth century was the period *par excellence* of witchcraft, demonology, and the supernatural in Ireland. The most remarkable witch case of that time, the trial of Florence Newton in 1661, to which allusion has already been made, seems to have been largely influenced by what occurred in England, while the various methods suggested or employed as a test of that old woman's culpability are quite in accordance with the procedure adopted a few years previously by the English witch-finder general, the infamous Matthew Hopkins. After 1711 the period of decadence is reached, while between that date and 1808 nothing has been found, though it may be safely inferred that that blank was filled by incidents similar to the case of Mary Butters and others, as described in the final chapter; and possibly too, as in

England, by savage outbursts on the part of the ignorant and credulous multitude.

Witchcraft never flourished to any great extent in Ireland, nor did anything ever occur which was worthy of the name of persecution—except perhaps as a sequel to the Kyteler case, and the details of which we fear will never be recovered. The first part of this statement must be taken generally and not pressed too closely, as it is based almost entirely on negative evidence, *i.e.* the absence of information on the subject. England has a lengthy list of books and pamphlets, while Scotland's share in the business may be learnt from the fine series of criminal trials edited by Pitcairn in the Miscellanies of the Abbotsford Club, not to speak of other works; notwithstanding these, many cases in both England and Scotland must have been unrecorded. Ireland can produce nothing like this, for, as we have already shown, all *printed* notices of Irish witchcraft, with one possible exception, are recorded in books published outside the country. Nevertheless, if all likely sources, both in MS. and print, could be searched, it is highly probable that a

much fuller volume than the present one could be written on the subject. The Elizabethan Act was passed on account of cases (recorded and unrecorded) that had arisen in the country; while, human nature being what it is, it seems likely that the very passing of that Statute by the Irish Parliament was in itself a sufficient incentive to the witches to practise their art. No belief really gains ground until it is forbidden; then the martyrs play their part, and there is a consequent increase in the number of the followers.

The Act of 1634 shows the opinion that was entertained in the highest circles relative to the baneful influence of witches and the menace their presence was to the safety of the community at large; in this no doubt the effect of the "evil eye," or of the satirical verses of Bards, would be equally classed with witchcraft proper.

From various hints and incidental notices, such as in the account of the bewitching of Sir George Pollock, or in Law's statement relative to the case of Mr. Moor, as well as from a consideration of the prevalence of the belief amongst all classes of society, it may

be inferred that far more cases of witchcraft occurred in Ireland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than one imagines, though in comparison with other countries their numbers would be but small. Future students of old documents may be able to bear out this statement, and to supply information at present unavailable.

To deal with the subject of witchcraft in general, with its psychology or with the many strange items which it included, would be out of place in a work exclusively devoted to one particular country, nor indeed could it be adequately dealt with in the space at our disposal; it is necessary, however, to say a few words on the matter in order to show by comparison how much pain and unhappiness the people of Ireland escaped through the non-prevalence of this terrible cult amongst them.

In the first place, to judge from the few witch-trials recorded, it may be claimed that torture as a means of extracting evidence was never used upon witches in Ireland (excepting the treatment of Petronilla of Meath by Bishop de Ledrede, which seems to have been carried out

in what may be termed a purely unofficial manner). It would be interesting indeed to work through the extant Records for the purpose of seeing how often torture was judicially used on criminals in Ireland, and probably the student who undertakes the investigation will find that this terrible and illogical method of extracting the truth (!) was very seldom utilised. Nor is it at all clear that torture was employed in England in similar trials. Dr. Notestein[1] thinks that there are some traces of it, which cannot however be certainly proved, except in one particular instance towards the end of the reign of James I, though this was for the exceptional crime of practising sorcery (and therefore high treason) against that too credulous king. Was its use ever legalised by Act of Parliament in either country?

In Scotland, on the other hand, it was employed with terrible frequency; there was hardly a trial for witchcraft or sorcery but some of the unfortunates incriminated were subjected to this terrible ordeal. Even as late as 1690 torture was judicially applied to

[1] Notestein, *op. cit*

extract evidence, for in that year a Jacobite gentleman was questioned by the boots. But Scotland, even at its worst, fades into insignificance before certain parts of the Continent, where torture was used to an extent and degree that can only be termed hellish; the appalling ingenuity displayed in the various methods of applying the "question extraordinary" seems the work of demons rather than of Christians, and makes one blush for humanity. The *repetition* of torture was forbidden, indeed, but the infamous Inquisitor, James Sprenger, imagined a subtle distinction by which each fresh application was a *continuation* and not a repetition of the first; one sorceress in Germany suffered this continuation no less than *fifty-six* times.

Nor was the punishment of death by fire for witchcraft or sorcery employed to any extent in Ireland. We have one undoubted instance, and a general hint of some others as a sequel to this. How the two witches were put to death in 1578 we are not told, but probably it was by hanging. Subsequent to the passing of the Act of 1586 the method of execution would

have been that for felony. On the Continent the stake was in continual request. In 1514 three hundred persons were burnt alive for this crime at Como. Between 1615 and 1635 more than six thousand sorcerers were burnt in the diocese of Strasburg, while, if we can credit the figures of Bartholomew de Spina, in Lombardy a thousand sorcerers a year were put to death *for the space of twenty-five years.*[1] The total number of persons executed in various ways for this crime has, according to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, been variously estimated at from one hundred thousand to several millions; if the latter figure be too high undoubtedly the former is far too low.

In the persecution of those who practised magical arts no rank or class in society was spared; the noble equally with the peasant was liable to torture and death. This was especially true of the earlier stages of the movement when *sorcery* rather than *witchcraft* was the crime committed. For there is a general distinction between the two,

[1] Français, *L'église et la Sorcellerie.*