



2000

## Celtic Traditions

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### Recommended Citation

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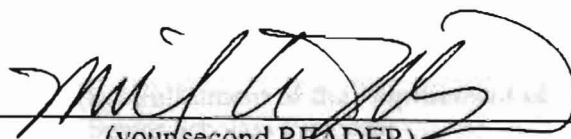
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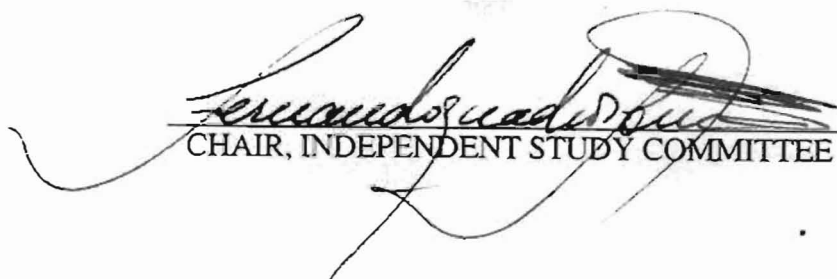


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COLBY COLLEGE



CHAIR, INDEPENDENT STUDY COMMITTEE

## CELTIC TRADITIONS

by

Lindsay L Stewart

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement of the  
Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE  
2000

## Abstract

My interest in the Celtic tradition starts in the oral, story telling custom that was common to the Celts. It was a poetic and skillful tradition passed down by storytellers from one generation to the next. The stories came from the memory and a sense of spirituality was essential in the telling of tales. Their belief in the other world, the fourth dimension, was a common part of their lives. They recognized their ancestors and the power of forces greater than themselves; in animals, in gods, in fairies. They believed in instincts and senses; the power of sight, the beauty of sound, the need to touch. Most fervently they believed in the things that went beyond those senses; in the otherworld. In order to believe in such a dimension one had to be strongly aware of one's own senses and instincts. The tradition is one that breaks formulated rules, as it comes from the recognition of self-belief. Their beliefs came from an inner spirit and guide that was fueled by a connection with the landscape, the power of beasts and the continual presence of one's ancestors.

My attraction to their set of beliefs comes from a need to tell stories. The narrative tradition helped me to access my own senses and beliefs, respecting the landscape, and the power of creatures and spirits. I traveled to the places where the myths and beliefs of the Celts formulated and I found fairies, animals and people that believed in the powers of story telling. In these places I told the stories again through photography and I listened to the music of the fairies.

I tell my tales through photography and music. By combining these two means I aim to attune the senses. I mix ideas of reality and those of the dream world by combining both color and black and white images in order to show that the two are inseparable. The visible and the invisible worlds are intimate, there is no distinction between the two. So too in my musical compositions I incorporate these worlds combining recognizable rhythms and sounds with more fantastical sounds, and unusual voices.

I have been exploring the beliefs of the Celts through many sources; reading the ancient tales, The Tain, the Mythological cycle, the Ulster cycle, and the Fenian cycle. I have endeavored to understand the relationship between saint and druid and to learn of the local beliefs in the fairies and the common tales passed down from generation to generation. The writings of ; W.B.Yeats, Jeremiah



Curtin and Lady Gregory were important also in my research as I found my interest peaked in the Irish tales. I do not consider myself to be an authority on the legends and traditions common to the Celts. I therefore relinquish responsibility of telling the tales as I use the words of those that tell the stories better than I. The quotes and stories included in this paper infused my images and the sounds of my musical compositions, they are therefore essential to my understandings of the Celtic tradition. The beliefs and stories were already in place it was simply a matter of interpreting them myself.

When I talk of the Celts I am referring to the inhabitants of Northern West Scotland and its Isles and those in Ireland, unfortunately I did not have the time to include the Welsh culture. I therefore focused on the stories of the Irish and the Scots and refer to their culture as Celtic throughout the project.

The essence of the project is to approach the legends and myths through the senses, placing them in the memory and into the viewers imagination by means of narrative imagery and fantastical sounds. Despite growing up on the west coast of Scotland I never knew the stories of the Celts, they have only recently become a part of my imagination. They are fresh to my mind, full of life, color and mystery. The world of the Celts is a wonderful place to play in.

I do not propose to pass on a dictatorial view of the stories I have found. I want my viewers to make their own fairy tales, create their own heroes. I want them to wake up and remember that they have an imagination and a belief system of their own. It does not matter where their beliefs come from, my mind is intrigued by the Celts, but every person has their own guide. There are lessons to be learned from every story and we are all free to tell whatever story we desire.

As Yeats says;

*"Are there not moods which need heaven, hell, purgatory and faeryland for their expression, no less than this dilapidated earth? Nay are there not moods which shall find no expression unless there be men who dare to mix heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland together, or even to set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men, or thrust the souls of men into the heart of rocks? Let us go forth, the teller of tales and seize whatever prey the heart long for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet" <sup>1</sup>*

## Research

I began my research by reading many of the common tales of Ireland and Scotland. As I was not in the land of the Celts I told my stories in settings that had no specific place, working in a world of fantasy, where the details of that fantasy world were left to my own imagination.

During January I traveled in Ireland and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in search of the remaining beliefs and opinions. It was here that the place became important in my tales as I returned to the original sites and recreated the stories in their original place. Speaking to the locals taught me about the contemporary beliefs and interest in the tales. I found the stories to be strongest where the accents are thickest and the Gaelic language prevails. *"One of the factors that makes spoken English in Ireland so interesting is the colorful ghost of the Gaelic language behind it. This imbues the use of English with great colour, nuance and power. Gaelic is such a powerful language it carries the Irish memory."*<sup>2</sup>

I am fascinated by mythology and the art of story telling. Where do myths come from? Who passes them on? How does a story differ every time it is told? The legends are bountiful in the Celtic tradition;

*"Cuchulain fighting the sea for two days until the waves pass over him and he dies, Caolte storming the pass of the gods, Oisín seeking in vain for three hundred years to appease his insatiable heart with all the pleasures of fairyland, these two mystics walking up and down upon the mountains uttering the central dreams of their souls in no less dream-laden sentences, and this mind that finds them so interesting - all are a portion of that great Celtic phantasmagoria whose meaning no man has discovered, nor any angel revealed."*<sup>3</sup>

All our beliefs come from somewhere, your imagination, your soul, your heart. Whether you believe in one God or many, the fairies, or nothing at all, something is pushing you to believe these things. Our imagination is essential to all those thoughts. Religion and superstition remain abstract. No scientific evidence has provided us with facts of our beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Yeats "A Teller of Tales" Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth. 112

<sup>2</sup> O'Donohue Anam Cara 95

<sup>3</sup> Yeats "An Irish Visionary" Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth. 76

*"Even in a technological age such as ours much survives of belief in a different way of looking at life. It is a view that sees events as having a logic that is not scientific or mathematical, that sees a world undetected by the strongest microscope; a world in short that is parallel to ours, but no whit less real for being invisible to us, a world that crosses ours only in certain times and places and through the intermediacy of certain people."*<sup>4</sup>

We think we are taught religion but in fact it has been a part of us, inside of us throughout. We come to learn and understand our beliefs over time. Our ideologies are guided by traditions, most commonly family traditions which in turn are led by societal trends. In our over materializing world our religious doctrines have been subdued as we find a lack of necessity in the basic senses, to see, touch, and hear. Religion and our sense of spirituality, even the mere idea of belief has been muted, we have been distracted. A great part of our beliefs and customs lie in the power of poetry and stories. It is through the strength of these stories that we are reminded of the power of the divine and we remember to address the often under - utilized senses. Poetry and stories are now forsaken as we televise our morals and beliefs in soap operas and talk shows. Yeats says: "*We have betaken ourselves in a hurry to the poetry of cigarettes and black coffee, of absinthe, and the skirt dance, or are trying to persuade the lecture and the scientific book to look, at least to the eye, like the old poems and dramas and stories that were in the ages of faith long ago.*"<sup>5</sup>

I have been using the tales of the Celts as a catalyst to return to a time when I was a child and did not have the beliefs and influences that I have today. I wanted to escape what I was being told to believe, the forced truths. I wanted to remember what it was like to react to the senses formulating my opinions afresh. I tried to remember how it was to interpret knowledge through senses, most notably through sight and sound.

*"I come from a narrative culture - a storytelling culture.  
I believe in the power of narrative.  
I believe in the power of memory.  
I believe in a certain connection between people and the land.  
I believe in the consciousness and the emotional lives of animals."*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lenihan In Search of Biddy Early

<sup>5</sup> Yeats "A Literary Causerie" Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Carter Twenty five years Photographs Fragments

Photographs are by their very nature seen as pieces of our memories, snap shots capture faces and moments that we wish to hold onto. Music also takes us back to a moment in time as patterns and lyrics carry associations. I use both means to create images and music that lead one into one's imagination and into one's memory. I believe we are always searching for a link to our memories and to our childhood thoughts and comforts. The power of imagination helps our memories and colors the details of our memories.

*" The original sense of the word "imagination" has become warped into meaning 'a faculty to dream up illusory things'. But the imagination is nothing less than our door - way to the other-world, it is the prime faculty of shamanic consciousness through which come the dreams, visions and ideas which we in turn implement in ordinary reality. We have to learn to trust the information of our imagination and our dreams. "*<sup>7</sup>

It has been common practice for centuries to use visual images and rhythmic music to tell stories that are to remain in one's memory. The same approach was used to invoke and reinforce religious dogma, and to tell stories that were to remain in and shape one's memory. The Celtic faith flourished on a personal level, as they found their religion in the world around them and within them. By using the beliefs and myths of the Celts I am trying to escape the imposed belief systems and power structures that make religion an imposition and a forced opinion.

Questions of power and religion still plague Ireland just as they did in the first century when Queen Medb lived and the Cattle Raid of Cuailgne occurred. Enforced ideas and structures have caused many problems throughout the centuries. Indoctrinating belief systems has been the cause of many battles and many lives lost. I am not suggesting that power and authorities did not create relevant belief systems but we have to think beyond the power structures into our own personal beliefs, by realizing where common beliefs fit into a personal divinity. Similarly I hope to give my audience a frame - work, by which they may interpret and build personal myths.

Joseph Campbell concentrates on the universality of cultural beliefs found in myths throughout the world. Campbell says;

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<sup>7</sup> Matthews The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom 221



Myths and dreams " come from the imagination, don't they? The imagination is the same in all human beings. Since imagination comes out of one biological ground, it is bound to produce certain themes."

He continues; *Myths inspire the realization of the possibility of your perfection. ... We learn them as a child on one level, but then different levels are revealed. Myths are infinite in their revelation.*<sup>8</sup>

Campbell continues on themes of the imagination and dreams. When asked the difference between myths and dreams he said;

*"A dream is a personal experience... and a myth is the society's dream. The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth. If your private myth, your dream happens to coincide with that of the society, you are in good accord with your group. If it isn't you've got an adventure in the dark forest ahead of you."*<sup>9</sup>

There is a common biological link between all humans that allows for similar thought patterns and images to occur. All humans have the capability to dream, to imagine and to interpret the world about themselves. You can learn lessons from myths if you can find an aspect of the myth that relates to your own life. Myth can serve as a pedagogical function teaching you how to live in many circumstances, if you can understand the intangible world then you are more capable of accepting the physical world around you.

The loss of myth in our society means a loss in the ability to tell a story. The beauty of storytelling is that no story is ever told in the same manner, none without elaboration or fabrication, the limit is your own imagination. Myths can provide you with a guide to your own personal divinity. The story telling tradition provides us with a model to base the way we live our lives as every day is seen as a fresh start. Similar themes arise, but the details and new experiences that are boldly told by the storyteller are positive examples of the way we should confidently take each day.

*"Next to desire, which every artist feels, to create for himself a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this marred and clumsy universe, I have desired to show in a vision something of the face of Ireland (and Scotland) for any of my own people who care for things of this kind.... I have however been at no pains to separate my own beliefs from those of the peasantry, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and faeries, go their way unoffended or defended by any argument of mine. The things a man has heard and seen are threads of life and if he pull them carefully from the confused distaff of memory, any who will can weave them into whatever garments of belief please them best. I too have woven my*

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<sup>8</sup> Campbell The Power of Myth 183

<sup>9</sup> ibid 48

*garment like another, but I shall try to keep warm in it, and shall be well content if it do not unbecome me."*<sup>10</sup>

I believe in the power of stories, which can lead to a deep level of truth and understanding. I have a fear that the oral tradition is being lost. The legends of the Celts are dying out and there is no need for the oral art of story telling any longer. I hope to continue the narrative tradition in my own story telling fashion. So often we see the value in customs and traditions only after they are lost, we look back and complain about the way things used to be.

*"Complacency is the enemy of oracy: the day when a tradition becomes so obvious that everyone knows it and no one cares to take special trouble to remember it and why, when or how it is done is often the day when that tradition flounders. There are frequently stories of how knowledge is lost, shipwrecked on the shores of wayward time, only to be resuscitated just before it is too late."*<sup>11</sup>

### **Brief History of the Celts**

The Celts arrived in Ireland from Spain, they were known as the Milesians, who took over the Tuatha de Danaan and banished them to the underworld, to live forever in the fairy forts and lakes that have become their homes. Hero tales and poetry began with the coming of the Milesians on Ireland's soil:

*"I am the wind on the sea,  
I am a wave of the ocean,  
I am the roar of the sea,  
I am an ox of seven exiles,  
I am a hawk of a cliff,  
I am a tear of the sun,  
I am a turning, I am maize,*

*I am a boar in valor,  
I am a salmon in a pool,  
I am a lake on a plain,  
I am a dispensing power,  
I am a spirit of skilful gift,  
I am grass- blade giving decay to the earth,  
I am a creative god giving inspiration."*<sup>12</sup>

This is said to be the first poem of the Celts, said by Amairigin, son of Mil as he set foot on Ireland. It shows clearly the beliefs the Celts held for the bond between nature and man and for the reality that we cannot feel, touch, hear, or smell. The tradition of shapeshifting, changing one's physical form, seen here as Amairigin changes from the sun, to maize, to a salmon, is first seen here.

The Tuatha de Danaan were the race that inhabited Ireland before the Milesians arrived. They (The Tuatha de Danaan) became the fairy folk, banished to live in the "Land of the Ever Young"

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<sup>10</sup> Yeats "Preface to Celtic Twilight" Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth, 108

<sup>11</sup> Mathews The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom, 92

<sup>12</sup> ibid. 11

or *Tir na n-Og*. Their mounds known as fairy forts remain today, recognizable by their circular appearances, demarcated by the twisting white thorn bushes that adorn the periphery of the circle.<sup>13</sup>

*" They went underground to inhabit the mounds and earthworks known as sidhes that are scattered all over the country. Above them, in the upper kingdom, the human inhabitants of Ireland, the descendants of the Milesians and Gaels, lived and died, helped and sometimes hindered by the People of the Sidhe. From time to time, down through the ages, these mysterious, imperishable people entered the world of mortals. Sometimes they fell in love with human beings and at other times they held humans in thrall with their beauty and their haunting music. But that kingdom was that Happy Other - world under the earth and they always went back there of the Land of the Ever Young."*<sup>14</sup>

The Milesians brought with them many new beliefs and customs, but the Tuatha de Danaan never left Ireland, they learned to co-habit the Celtic countries living amongst and beneath the landscape. They left their stories, which were collected by the scribes that arrived with St. Patrick in the sixth century.

The cycles of ancient Irish legends, stories of the Tuatha de Danaan, The Ulster cycle, and the Fenian cycle, have all been influential in my search for a sense of the Celtic past. Initially my interest lay more strongly in Scottish stories as I grew up in Scotland, however I found from my research and my experience in both countries that I gravitated more towards the Irish tales. Furthermore, both countries share similar stories and beliefs and I found a greater written collection was held by the Irish.

The west of Ireland holds a strong sense of Celtic beliefs. In Scotland I found similar views in the west coast, especially in the Outer isles – the Hebrides, islands such as, Skye, Harris and Lewis. The island culture can maintain customs and histories as they live among the natural forces and without the many distractions that one can find on the mainland. Stories filter through the generations of islanders. The Highlands of Scotland also retain haunting tales in their glens and craggy mountains. Curiously the strong bond between Scotland and Ireland does not extend to England, despite its geographical proximity. The English do not have the beliefs that the Scots and the Irish maintain;

*"....the Englishman is beating in vain upon his doors and wondering how doors of dreams can be so greatly guarded than doors of iron; and that his days pass among grey stones and grey clouds*

<sup>13</sup> New Grange, *Bru na Boinne*, in County Meath is known today as a sacred burial site from Neolithic times (built around 3500 BC), it is also thought to be the main dwelling place and headquarters for the Tuatha de Danaan.

<sup>14</sup> Heaney *Over Nine Waves* 55



*and grey seas, among things too faint and seemingly frail to awaken him from the sleep, in which the ancient peoples dreamed the world and the glory of it, and were content to dream."*<sup>15</sup>

The link between Scotland and Ireland has always been strong; Cuchulain learned his skills from the high prophetess Scathach in Skye, then returned to Ireland to fight in the great battle of the Cattle Raid of Cuailgne. Deirdre and Naoise found refuge in Alba (Scotland) as they fled from Conor the King of Ulster. In the sixth century St. Columba brought the faith to the isle of Iona. Clearly Scotland and Ireland are soundly related.

### The Saints

There is a timelessness to the Celtic tradition that transcends a particular placement. The relationship between druid and monk, mortal and god, fairy and kelpie,<sup>16</sup> are all inter - changeable. One tends to forget that at one time St. Patrick and St. Columba, both fundamental in spreading Christianity in Ireland and Britain, were friends with the druids and those that believed in the traditions and stories of old. The intimacy between Paganism and Christianity is a relationship which we tend to overlook. Both religions were for a time friends, they complimented each other, and shared festivals and beliefs. St. Bridget shows the relationship well, she was a pagan Celtic goddess and a Christian saint. Moreover Pagan kings and saints built monasteries together, such as Clonmconise founded by St. Ciaran<sup>17</sup> and the local king Diarmuid who was later rewarded for his piety with the high kingship of Ireland. The realization of faith by regal figures was helped by the promise of burial rites.

The saints have left us with legends also, St. Columba<sup>18</sup> was exiled from Ireland for secretly copying a Psalter from St. Finian. At this time a dispute occurred as St. Finian said; just as every calf belongs to its cow, so every copy belongs to the book from which it was made. A trial was held with the high king, King Diarmuid. St. Columba won the dispute but legend says that a battle raged and three

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<sup>15</sup> Yeats *The Tribes of Danu Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* 153

<sup>16</sup> Kelpie: a horse like monster that lives in the lochs.

<sup>17</sup> St. Ciaran or Kieran c.512 - 549AD



thousand lives were lost. St. Columba exiled himself from Ireland as penance, resolving to convert as many people as he had caused the death of. He left for Scotland where he founded a monastery on the Isle of Iona and converted many Pictish kings to the Christian faith. Legend says one of his deeds while in Scotland was ridding Loch Ness of its monster.

St. Patrick's presence in Ireland was neither imposing nor beguiling, he was respectful and attuned to the beliefs of the Celts. Along with bringing Christianity to Ireland and banishing Hibernia from snakes, it is believed that St. Patrick met Oisín and recorded his story when he returned from the "Land of the Ever Young". Initially St. Patrick did not believe the stories of Oisín since it had been three hundred years since Oisín had lived in Ireland, but he had the fore-sight to record his story and did not dismiss his tales.

When reading St. Patrick's Breast Plate or lorica it is clear to see the influence Paganism had on St. Patrick and the Christian religion. Used to invoke the feat of shapeshifting, the lorica would allow one to change into the shape of a deer if danger was near. St. Patrick calls upon the Trinity, the angels, apostles, confessors and virgins and then calls upon the nine-fold powers of the elements that were revered so fervently by the Celts:

*" I arise today  
Through the strength of heaven,  
Light of sun,  
Radiance of Moon  
Splendour of fire,  
Speed of lightning,  
Swiftness of wind,  
Depth of sea,  
Stability of earth,  
Firmness of rock."*<sup>19</sup>

Today you can still see the strong connection throughout the landscape and architecture as we find fairy forts neighbor the forts of kings and queens and monasteries and religious sites are neighbors to them.

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<sup>18</sup> Also known as St. Columcille c.512 - 597AD The traditional symbol for Columba was the dove. Columba in Latin translates as dove.

<sup>19</sup> Matthews The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom 153

## The Fairies / The Tuatha de Danaan

### Who are the fairies?

*"Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost," says the Book of Armagh. "They are gods of Pagan Ireland" say Irish antiquarian. "the Tuatha De Danaan, who when no longer worshipped and fed with offerings, dwindled away in the popular imagination, and now are only a few spans high."*<sup>20</sup>

Fairies are not just for children, but they lend themselves well to the childish mind that is fresh and not shadowed by doubt and cynicism. A child's imagination is open to the antics of the fairies, they are eager to believe and able to see and hear the ways of the fairies.

*"The Sidhe cannot make themselves visible to all. They are shape-changers; they appear as men or women wearing clothes of many colours, of today or of some old forgotten fashion, or they are seen as bird or beast, or as a barrel or a flock of wool. They go by us in a cloud of dust; they are as many as the blades of grass. They are everywhere; their home is in the forths, the lisses, the ancient round grass-grown mounds."*<sup>21</sup>

Jeremiah Curtin collected stories around Ireland in the nineteen hundreds, he found;

*'The people of Ireland have clung to their ancient beliefs with a vividness of faith which in our time is really phenomenal. Other nations have preserved large and (for science) precious heritages of superstition, but generally they have preserved them in a kind of mechanical way. The residuum of beliefs which they give us lack that connection with the present which is so striking in the case of the Irish....fairies are not for all men personages of the past, but are as real for some persons as any other.'*<sup>22</sup>

Belief in the fairies is not forgotten today. To build your house on a fairy fort is considered foolish and more foolish still would be to take something that belonged to a fairy fort or to chop down one of the sacred thorn bushes. There was a recent case in Ireland, in which the local council proposed to widen the road running from Galway to Limerick (N18). The proposed site would have meant the removal of a white thorn bush not far from the town of Ennis. Many people in the area regarded this bush as sacred. Edmund Lenihan a regular user of the N18, had collected evidence on tape of people who had stories of encounters with the fairies, they had seen a strange white liquid believed to be fairy blood around the bush. After a great deal of protestation and media coverage, helped even by the *New York Times*, Eddie Lenihan managed to persuade the council to reroute their course. The fairies were not disturbed

<sup>20</sup> Yeats "The Irish Fairies" Writings of Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth 8

<sup>21</sup> Lady Gregory Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland 9

<sup>22</sup> Curtin Jeremiah Tales of Fairies and of the Ghost World. 4

and the road is safe to drive on. The power of the fairies is not one to be reckoned with. No relief can be prescribed for those that disrespect the fairies, resulting often in 'fairy strokes' often leading to death. Cursed by the fairies, destined to a life of misery after disturbing a fairy fort, the best option would be to go to a land where the fairies do not exist - America.

## Celtic beliefs

The Celts believed strongly in the sacredness of the land. There were many connections between man and beast, river and tree, field and mountain. The Celts had *"an outdoor spirituality impassioned by the erotic charge of the earth."*<sup>23</sup> They believed in many gods, for example *"Lugh was the god who was most venerated. He was a god of light and giftedness. The Shining One...The earth goddess was Anu (or Danu) mother of fecundity....Gods and goddesses were always linked to a place. Trees, wells and rivers were special places of divine presence."*<sup>24</sup>

The Celts began each day with a confident blessing. This prayer articulates a sense of the day as a gift of God. The metaphor of vision suffuses the poem, "bless all that sees."

God bless to me this new day....  
Bless thou to me mine eye  
may mine eye bless all it sees  
I will bless my neighbour  
may my neighbour bless me,  
God give me a clean heart  
let me not from sight of thine eye  
bless to me my children and my wife  
and bless to me my means and cattle."<sup>25</sup>

The Celts believed in the power of the memory and had many customs to induce thoughts of one's past. *Seanchais* were the wise ones, the storytellers, they often held the answers. One of the *seanchais* jobs was to be the genealogical guardian, in order to keep the memory of long - dead ancestors fresh. This is a tradition that was common at the festival of Samhain. The celebration of Samhain (Halloween) was a time when one would call upon the ancestors and ask them questions of the past. Questions about lost knowledge, spiritual traditions, history, oracles foretelling the future and the need to gain healing or revelation were all possible questions. When in search of an answer you would

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<sup>23</sup> O'Donnahue *Anam Cara* 132

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* 132

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* 167

visit the tombs of ancestors. It was common practice to sleep on the mounds, or burial grounds. Fairy forts are thought to be burial mounds of the Tuatha de Danaan. Men and woman were buried in various forms as discussed in the *Book of Lecan* :

*A fert ( a mound made of stones) of one door for a man of science,  
A fert of two doors upon a woman.  
A fert with doors also for boys and maidens,*<sup>26</sup>

The importance of a door may have been to gain access or for the deceased to come back and forth as he or she wished. It is a foolish act to sleep or stand on a *fert* as it can provoke unsuspected occurrences.

There are many stories of men and women being taken into the mounds (fairy forts) and never returning destined to live in the "Land of the Ever Young" amongst the fairies. There are also stories of musicians that wander too closely to fairy forts and find themselves taken within. There they exchange their songs and learn from the fairies. They return hundreds of years later due to the timelessness of "The Land of Youth" to find that their family and friends have passed on. Oisín's story is perhaps the most well known as he was taken into the "Land of the Ever Young" by a princess of the Tuatha de Danaan who fell in love with him:

*"Come away with me, Oisín!" Niamh whispered. 'Come back with me to the Land of Youth. It is the most beautiful country under the there and trees bend low with fruit. The land flows with honey and wine, as much as you could ever want. In Tir na n-Og you will sit at feasts and games with plenty of music for you, plenty of wine. You will get gold and jewels, more than you could imagine. And a hundred swords, a hundred silk tunics, a hundred swift bay horses, a hundred keen hunting dogs. The king of the Ever Young will place a crown on your head, a crown that he has never given to anyone else and it will protect you from every danger. You will get a hundred cows, a hundred calves, and a hundred sheepsun. You will never fall ill or grow old there. in my country you will never die. Trees grow tall with golden wool. You will get a hundred of the most beautiful jewels you've ever seen and a hundred arrows. A hundred young women will sing to you and a hundred of the bravest, young warriors will obey your command. As well as all of this you will get beauty, strength and power. And me for your wife"*<sup>27</sup>

How could Oisín resist such delights? Leaving Ireland and the Fenians behind Oisín rode off with Niamh. Three hundred years later, with three children and a happy home life, Oisín began to get homesick. He was allowed to return to Ireland but had to promise not to dismount his horse. He must not set foot on Irish soil, or he would never be able to return to the utopia of the Land of the Ever Young.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* 116

<sup>27</sup> Heaney *Over Nine Waves* 216



In Ireland Oisín was confused when he found no trace of the Fenians. Oisín did not realize that time had passed and his family and friends were now only mere legends. In sadness Oisín rode through the glens and lands that he knew so well. He saw a group of men struggling to raise a flagstone and raced to help them. Leaning off the saddle to help the poor men from being crushed under the heavy weight of the flagstone he used all his strength and flung the stone away freeing the men below. The slab was so heavy and Oisín's exertion so great that the girth around his horse's belly snapped and Oisín fell to the ground. Standing tall above the men around him he slowly sank to the ground as the years of time caught up with him. His powerful body shrank and his eyes became clouded. He was left a wrinkled, bewildered, blind old man.

The Celts believed when you died, you went to live with the fairies. Therefore your ancestors were the fairies. This heightens the idea of the other dimension that was common practice for the Celts. *"It must be stated that there is still a widespread aversion among the Irish at being in the vicinity of tombs or ancient stone monuments, since these places are associated with the faery in many minds."* Ancestors and fairies are often considered to be one and the same. *"both inhabit a dimension that is timeless and ubiquitous, accessible to mortals only on special occasions."*

Celtic beliefs have taught me to respect and listen to the landscape, which holds many mysteries and stories. They have helped me to think in a cyclical fashion remembering that there are many dimensions which are all interrelated. They have accented the relationship between man and beast for me. They have reminded me to use my senses and to remember the instinctual feelings and emotions, found in friendships. The Celts believed very passionately in one's Anam Cara - Soul Friend. This was an understanding of love and friendship. The understanding that comes with finding your Anam Cara provides us with a sense of belonging.

#### **Ireland and Scotland - Current beliefs**

"In Ireland we like to whine of what has been lost.... The Graveyards are full of the most wonderful stories." Mr. Edmund Lenihan confirmed many of my thoughts when I had the pleasure of

interviewing him at his home in Crusheen, County Clare. Eddie has been collecting stories around Ireland and the British Isles for over twenty - five years. He has met with and recorded accounts of local stories, ancient legends and fairy encounters. He collects in order to maintain what is left of the oral tradition. He is a gifted storyteller himself.

In my interviews with Eddie we talked freely about the beliefs of the fairies. "One man's religion is another man's superstition", he would say. "I would rather see people believing in the fairies rather than nothing at all. That way at least you have something other than what you can see and touch, feel, and hear." It was from this interview that the composition "Listen to Eddie" occurred. I incorporated his voice over music in order to suggest the story telling tradition, but wanted to incorporate the common beliefs and understandings of today in a narrative fashion. It is not essential to hear every word that Eddie says, but if you listen hard you can hear the stories he tells.

"If you say that the world of the fairies can't exist then you're on a very slippery slope, because you're saying that the world of God, the saints, Mary, heaven and hell doesn't exist either." - Edmund Lenihan January 13th 2000, Crusheen, County Clare. I thank Eddie for sharing his findings with me and I thank the fairies for introducing me to Mr. Lenihan.

I spent the month of January traveling in Ireland and Scotland and found few people interested in the old story telling tradition. The stories are not relevant any longer, they are forgotten to make way for our fast paced technological way of life. It is no coincidence that the Gaelic language is also fading out, the loss of spoken Gaelic means the loss of the nuances and details that make the bards' tales what they once were, this cannot be equaled in the English, language. However it was encouraging to meet the few people that did hold on to these traditions and it encouraged me to tell the stories in whatever fashion I can. The stories are there, they have all been told before, it is now open to others to tell them as they will. The legends will always be locked in the landscape. *"These stones, ever patient, ever still, continue to praise the silence of time. The Irish landscape is full of memory : it holds the ruins and traces of ancient civilization. The landscape has a wild, yet serene complexity. In a sense, this reflects the nature of Celtic consciousness."*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> ibid

Today the strength of the Celtic tradition and perhaps the fairies themselves can be found in contemporary Celtic music. In Ireland every other pub has live music pouring as freely as their whiskey or Guinness. The pubs are where we find the remnants of a tradition that emphasized story telling and an atmosphere of timelessness. Often I would sit at the bar and ask the locals about the weather patterns, the best draught of the area. I waited for the right moment to drop the question - "Do you believe in the fairies?" Initially people laugh when you mention the fairies, but I noticed that they were swift to cover their backs, just in case; you never know I could be a fairy enjoying my own pint and it would never do to take that chance.

In Scotland on the Isle of Harris, I found Alasdair Macoiph in Reinigideal, he is the hostel manager in a magical hamlet of twelve families. Interestingly Alasdair did not have much time for stories of the fairies but he was careful not to dismiss the possibility of their presence. He shared with me mostly local stories and histories of the area, the stories that were important to him, such as the fact that it was only eight years ago that the village was connected to the rest of Harris by road. Until that time the hamlet would receive groceries and supplies by boat once a week. The post - master for Reinigideal would walk to Tarbert every other day, twelve miles in total across rough terrain, he continued his duties throughout his eighties. The Gaelic language is strong in Harris and the sense of community and eagerness to give and share that I found in Reinigideal was overwhelming and refreshing. Reinigideal held all the enchantment of Brigadoon. I thank Alaisdair for his kindness, giving his time, sharing his knowledge, and teaching me a few words of Gaelic.

## Methodology

With many of the stories and beliefs of the Celts in mind I have been weaving the many dimensions together. The world of reality and that of the dream world are brought together through various techniques. I use stark, color images in affected and confrontational poses with props and costumes to be 'tongue in cheek' attacks at the way we look at our reality. I then use techniques of motion and added texture to allude to a more transient and continual world that we do not observe at every moment. I aim to test the viewer's senses and emotions as they move from color to black and white prints and from posed to spontaneous images. The difference in scale is also important in playing with the viewers perspective.

Initially I thought that on my trip to Ireland and Scotland I would dress my fairies up in their costumes with props and perform the same antics as we had previously done, only now we would be on the fairy forts and in sacred places. However when we visited the original sites I knew it was not appropriate to act in such a fashion. My perspective changed and I began looking to the landscape, and the creatures that were close by. I did find sites to take on roles of queen and prophetess, such as at Queen Medb's old dwelling, the Hill of Rathcrogan and Scathach's arch in Skye. In these cases we were granted permission, by the farmer who owned the land or a passer by. Without permission in the hallowed fairy forts I was not comfortable mocking the fairies, as we would have with our costumes and props.

When envisioning my final exhibition in the museum I wanted to provide my audience with an experience rather than dictating a particular view. I wanted to make an environment, the importance of the circle was essential to this environment as it alludes to the cycles that the stories are written in. I also wanted to suggest the circle of the fairy forts. In the center I planned for my music to be located, as if resonating from the center of the circle, the engine of the pulse that would be fueling the experience. *"The Celtic mind was never drawn to the single line; it avoided ways of seeing and being*



*which seek satisfaction in certainty... The world is a circle' the sun and moon are too. Even time itself has a circular nature' the day and the year build to a circle. ...."*<sup>29</sup>

In my understanding of Celtic traditions I have kept in line with the Celtic calendar and celebrations. I began this idea by photographing around the time of Beltane, May eve. In the Celtic calendar this is a time to celebrate the end of winter, fires were traditionally lit and the cattle were let out into the fields often herded through the fires to rid them of any disease or parasite. This seemingly practical celebration became a spiritual time as one called upon the gods and fairies to bless the coming of summer. With the practical and spiritual renderings in mind I reenacted the events, fires were lit and a celebration of drinking and merriment took place,

Similarly in the sequence "Samhain - taken by the fairies" I recreated the story in late October, in accordance with the original celebration of Samhain, the Celtic New Year. As discussed earlier interactions with the dead are common at this time. The sequence tells a narrative about a man falling asleep on a fairy mound in order to gain knowledge. We are not sure if we are in the realm of living or of the dead, that of dreams or consciousness. To further the understanding of the story I composed the piece "Tuatha de Danaan" to follow the sequencing of images and guide the viewer from one image to the next.

It is important for me to know the details of the events and to bring them into each photograph. It is relevant that my fairies sit in oak trees, trees with a strong association with the ancestors. Further I emphasize the number three in many of my sequences, a sacred number to the Celts. I found when I was in Ireland and Scotland it was essential to return to the precise locations where the characters of the tales inhabited. The location is important to me but not essential for the viewer to understand. It is often a hidden detail that provides context to my work, but it is not essential for the interpretation of the photographs. The places were not always easy to locate, for example the Hill of Rathcrogan, from which Queen Medb ruled her county of Connacht, this was my story:

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<sup>29</sup> O'Donohue Anam Cara 108

My search for Queen Medb's ancient dwelling took me, Demecia and Julia (my friends and models) to Roscommon, a small town in county Roscommon, close to the location of the legendary hill. I was not sure of the precise location but hoped someone in the town would know. In the 'Snug', the local pub, I asked the owner where exactly the Hill of Rathcrogan was. He looked at me blankly, only my third day in Ireland and I was getting used to that "you're mad" look. I continued on my quest, explaining that I was trying to trace the story of the Cattle Raid of Cuailgne, one of best known legends of Ireland. Johnny shook his head and said he didn't know anything about it. He recalled learning something about that when he was a young but could not remember the details. He then recalled and began a story, about a mystical eel that was swallowed up by a queen's cow (an accurate recollection), he shortly faded out, shaking his head after his first sentence, saying he couldn't remember the rest and why would I be interested in such a thing anyway? Realizing I was not making much progress I changed the subject and asked him about Roscommon's castle, a substantial ruin now, but the largest attraction of the town

of Roscommon. Johnny has lived in the small town of Roscommon his whole life and was proud of the fact that he has never seen the castle. "What's it like?" he asked us. He must be fooling us I thought, the castle sits hardly five hundred yards from his pub, its admirably difficult to live in such close proximity for over thirty years and never set eyes on a structure that dominates the entire town. I found it hard to believe but he was adamant that it was something he found no need to see. He couldn't care less. His apathy convinced me he was telling the truth. He turned to watch the football match, Manchester United were playing Chelsea.

The next day we followed the road and a guide book to a hill that was supposed to be Rathcrogan. The wild goose chase began and I was soon asking in local shops and petrol stations of the whereabouts of the ancient site. I was sent to Mr. Michael's, he owned the hill now, apparently. Knocking on Mr. Michael's door, map in hand I asked him if he knew of the hill. He smirked suspiciously and pointed to small hill on his property and said I was welcome to visit it. I asked if I could take some photographs and he was extremely obliging.

I wonder what Mr. Michael's might have thought if he saw Demecia racing around the small hillock of Rathcroghan reenacting the madness and jealousy of Queen Medb. Dressed in a hodge - podge of items; my grandmother's old fur lined coat, a dress of my mother's from

the seventies, a plastic tiara and a 'Hercules' sword bought earlier that day from the toy shop in Roscommon. I suspect he may have had a similar apathetic view like Johnny finding no interest in our antics and my quest for ancient sites.

I left Ireland and Scotland with many images and a collection of sounds on tape and in my head, ready to interpret my findings of the remaining Celtic traditions. I am appreciative to all who I met on my journey and to the support and company of Julia and Demecia who added to the adventure.

### **Back in Maine**

I have been working in my studio with my two birds Ninito and Rosita throughout the year. Sadly Ninito was called to a better place and flew into a window, while attempting to fly to the moon. In actuality the poetry of that image goes little further than Ninito's hopeless romantic tendencies as he tried in vain to impress Rosita. Thinking his own reflection was Rosita he flew at a rather excited rate towards the window. Rosita finally has peace. I mention my birds as they have been extremely influential on my work. Bird imagery has infused my photographs. I have returned to their mystery and power of flight throughout the year.

The association with animals, strong in the Celtic tradition, has always played a role in my life. I grew up surrounded by cattle, horses, and various other farmyard beings. There is no doubt that the role of animals was essential in my childhood, as I would spend hours talking and playing with the animals. My brother and I would often sit in the middle of a field and wait for the curious cows to encircle us and begin their ritual mooing, perplexed at our presence in their field. In the end the lowing would stop and we collectively decided that we could all share the field.

Is not all art making simply a grasp out our past, our memories, something to help us feel grounded and stable. I am pleasantly surprised and comforted when I find reoccurring shapes or themes in my images and in my music. It seems natural to go back to a place that feeds your new experience. It is

not only in art making, I believe we spend our lifetimes searching for connections and associations that unknown to us were planted early on in our childhood.

It is only now that I find time for the Celtic mysteries that had no place when I was a child. When I was younger I had not interest in the stories of the Celts. Now that I have left my home surroundings of Scotland I feel the need to go back and fill in the pieces that I never knew. Perhaps my photographs are about creating my own memories, taking my imagination and convincing myself that the stories I now know were always in my mind.

Music has always been a large part of my upbringing , it has become a means of expression like photography which is more fluent to me than using written or spoken words. It provides a means to enchant, the literal meaning is to "en - chant," to fill with song. The Celts realized the importance of rhythm and number, pattern and color in their use of music. Music is the first assemblage of chaos. "*When the music of enchantment ceases to sound, chaos returns.*"<sup>30</sup> I use music to organize my chaos.

It is believed that the music of the fairies is so magical that you cannot stop dancing when you hear it. One woman entered a fairy fort and she returned home to find that she had no toes as she had been dancing for hundreds of years in the timeless "Land of the Ever Young."

I have been using computer generated sounds on the program Digital Performer to create my musical compositions. Working this way allowed me to produce rhythms and melodies freely with the use of the keyboard and to add a multitude of sounds to suggest the other worldly sounds of the fairies and to echo the narration of the *seanchais*. The use of these many sounds allowed me the freedom to produce music with a feeling of spontaneity and curiosity that I hear when I dance amongst the fairies.

In order to isolate the compositions that accompany my images I had to find a device that could do the job. I found the *Sound Tube*. Along with separating the compositions I wanted a way to guide the viewers vision. The *Sound Tube* allows this as by standing under the device you are directed to a specific point, the music is also only heard when standing directly under the mushroom live device. You therefore hear the appropriate accompanying sounds with the images. With both senses addressed



the viewer/listener can gain a well-rounded picture as the sounds and images intertwine to play with the emotions of the spectator.

The first *Sound Tube* exudes music of the "Tauatha de Danaan". I am addressing the fantastical world of the unknown, relating to the images that come from the intangible world of my imagination. The second *Sound Tube* was designed to tell a narrative with the help of Eddie Lenihan. The images that accompany the interview with Eddie are places lost to the disappearing tradition. I see them as back drops for the stories. The music provides the characterization for the images which are scenes to place your own adventure upon. The lack of human activity allows one to see a more powerful and magical world, where beasts and the landscape have a strong bond.

I wish to thank all my models, who became my fairies, goddesses and magical beasts. For the most part I left them to their own devices, providing them with props and costumes and a loose outline of the story that I was thinking of. I did not want to interfere with their own imaginations. I realize that I used them as colors and beats of my own, and that to them it may have simply been a time to dress up in second hand dresses and put on plastic masks made in China. I thank them for lending me their imaginations, and for their good spirits and patience.

### **Influences**

I have been influenced by the narrative and fantastical photographers, most notably, Duane Michals, Keith Carter, Cindy Sherman, and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. I am intrigued by the candid quality of their work, the use of sequences of both Michals and Sherman and the mythical elements found in their work. Sherman pulls on subjects of popular myth, stereotypical views and pop culture, these characters will perhaps one day become mythical themselves. Michals combines old mythical themes and morals into every-day life in an often humorous and bewildering manner. His use of sequencing presents a story-telling approach that is lucid and simple to digest.

I have been influenced and inspired by people, images, music, and nature around the world in many cultures. The stories and beliefs of the Celts span a distance far greater than simply Western Europe. The Celtic culture has Indo-European connections, for example with the Hindu goddess Danu,

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<sup>30</sup> Matthews *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom* 221

which the Milesians brought from Spain. They share customs and similar festivals found in many agriculturally based countries of today, celebrating the coming of seasons, the production of crops and the power of animals. The stories span through time and cross continents, they remain to me fragments of our beliefs and mirrors of our imaginations.

### Conclusion

The year has offered me many changes in my original ideas. I maintained throughout a clear picture of the relationship between sight and sound, however I did not know where the fairies would take me. In photography the introduction of color has been a large and gratifying surprise in my work. So too the set up situations and use of props has magnified to a necessity in my work. Musically I feel I have found a freedom and spontaneity that is reminiscent of the way I take photographs.

I came back from the land of the fairies and realized the mysteries are all there. They remain in the landscape, the people, the animals and to try and find those mysteries in a fairy - less land would not be true to the myths and tales that I have become so close to. Ultimately I have found that all the research and abstract efforts to avoid the exploration of my own culture have taken me exactly to the place that I did not plan on going - home. My photographs and musical compositions are important to me because of the places and the subjects that tell the stories. They are people, animals and places that are all magical to me. I returned to the Celtic lands and explored a part of my own culture that I never knew. The greatest lesson I learned from the Celts was to listen to your senses and trust your instincts, believe in your imagination and then you can believe in the fairies.

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This project could not have been possible without the help of many individuals. Thank you to my advisors Dee Peppe, Steven Nuss, Michael Marlais, and my unofficial advisor Margaret Libby, for their continual support and encouragement. Thanks also to my friends and models for their participation, most notably Julia Humes and Demecia Lloyd. The use of *Sound Tubes* was made possible by the generous loan of Bill Trombino at *AV Imaging*, Dublin, California. Thank you also to Edmund Lenihan and Alasdair Macoiph for sharing their time and knowledge. I thank also the Senior Scholar Program for allowing me the opportunity to live amongst the fairies for the year.

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Celtic Traditions  
Installation  
View of Sound Tubes



All color images are originally in transparency format.  
The prints are digitally processed using  
Photo - Shop, they have not been manipulated.



Right Wall, with detail of Sound Tube.



Dancing with the Sidhe.  
 "They take the good dances too, for they love the dance" Yeats  
 Unmanipulated digital prints



Samhain- Taken by the fairies.  
 "The Sidhe cannot make themselves ves visible to all.  
 They are shape-changers;  
 they appear as men or women  
 wearing clothes of many colours,  
 of today or of some old forgotten fashion,  
 or they are seen as bird or beast."  
 Lady Gregory  
 Unmanipulated digital prints

These musical compositions are computer generated from the program Digital Performer. The sounds relate to the images as you look counter - clockwise around the exhibition.

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#### The Tuatha de Danaan.

The music from this Sound Tube alludes to the fantastical underworld and the power of the fairies - The Tuatha de Danaan.

Listen to the fairies.

Explanation of Musical Compositions  
 Listen to the Fairies



Rear Wall  
details later.

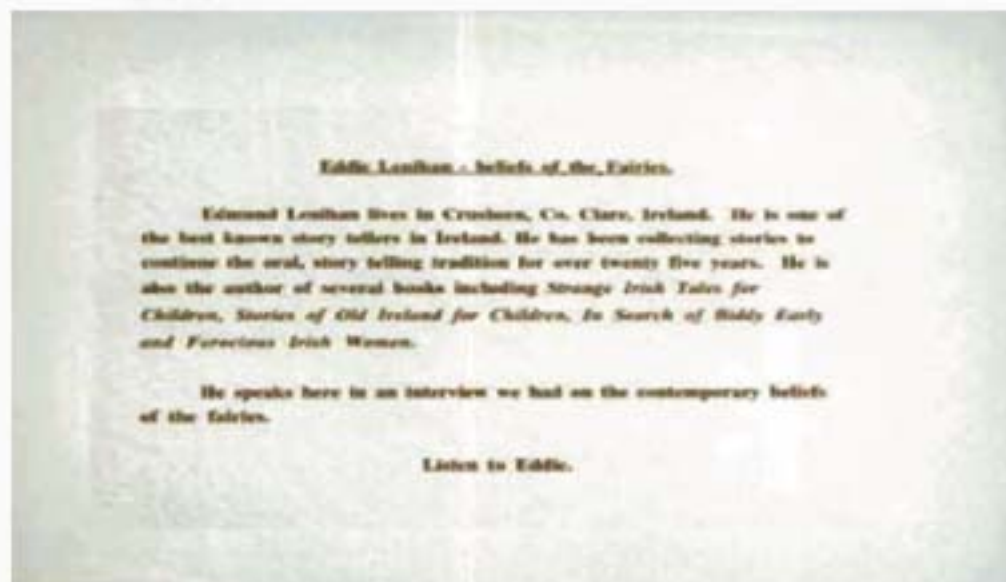


From left to right,  
unmanipulated digital prints:  
Kenmare Unicorn  
County Kerry

Clonmacnoise  
County Offaly

Kerry Fairy Fort  
County Kerry

Medb's Brown Bull of Cuailnge  
at the Hill of Rathcroghan  
County Roscommon



Listen to Eddie



*The power of flight  
and their ability to sing made birds magical in the Celtic tradition*  
Unmanipulated digital prints





The ancient trees were focal points  
of tribal meetings and they were  
thought to possess memory  
and have the power of witness.  
Yeats  
Gelatin silver prints





The Souls of the Blest take the form of a dove.  
Gelatin silver prints

*"There are angels here, and they are not  
the angels of the sky, but the angels  
of the earth, the angels of the  
city, the angels of the  
street, the angels of the  
house, the angels of the  
heart."*



"They are everywhere; their home is in the forths, the lisses,  
the ancient round grass-grown mounds."

Crusheen Fairy Fort  
County Clare  
Gelatin silver print





Kerry Fairy Fort  
County Kerry  
Gelatin Silver Print



Tomnahurich  
Home of the Queen of the Fairies  
Town cemetery, Inverness  
Gelatin silver print



"(ancient) inhabitants of Ireland (live)  
under the foots of hills, or in the woods,  
or in the deep of lakes." Yeats  
Gelatin silver print



Broch, Dun Carloway  
Isle of Lewis  
Gelatin silver print



A flock of swans appears at the time of Cuchulainn's conception  
Galway, County Galway  
Gelatin silver print



"fallen angels who were not good enough to be save, nor bad enough to be lost,"  
Isle of Harris  
Gelatin silver print



Scathach said to Cuchulainn  
 "I salute you - weary after triumph, battle eager, ice hearted!"  
 Isle of Skye  
 Gelatin silver print



Deirdre of Sorrows  
 Waterville Beach, County Kerry  
 Gelatin Silver Print





Seathach's Arch, Alba.  
Isle of Skye  
Gelatin silver prints





Queen Medb at the Hill of Rathcroghan.  
 "men massing,  
 women carried off,  
 cattle before them,  
 and heads of armies,  
 swords smash on either side..  
 great armies turning  
 from the battle plain of Cuailnge  
 now the army sleeps." - The Tain,  
 County Roscommon  
 Gelatin silver print

