

Ghosts of Old Dublin

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WHEN I was only a few years old I was brought around everywhere by a spinster aunt whose main occupation was going to wakes and funerals. At this period, the 1920s, there weren't as many diversions as nowadays. At that time the art of conversation persisted, and with less noise around generally people could listen and be heard in comfort.

Wakes were a social occasion with the corpse as a sort of centrepiece, while the funeral was a day's outing. I still have pleasant memories of all the lemonade I had at the former, and the current buns that were given to me as a treat at the gates of Glasnevin Cemetery. It must have been around this time that I heard my first ghost story. I have vague recollections of the banshee being mentioned. "Did you hear her?", a woman might ask in a whisper, while another would add more drama to the occasion by claiming to have seen her as well — "on the window sill combing her hair," "outside the front door," or "in the backyard."

Maybe this was the right sort of introduction to the supernatural in my native city, for no doubt the early inhabitants who lived in their wattle dwellings near the Ford of the Hurdles also mentioned the woman of the sidhe who foretold death, as they huddled around their fires at night. Perhaps they spoke with a shudder of the terrifying Morrigan, the Goddess of Battles, or, being fishermen, of the proud, but sometimes angry seagod, Manannan Mas Lir.

During my schooldays I also heard many stories—a boy from Dundalk told me that he lived near a castle where the ghosts of Cuchulain and the Red Branch Knights used to appear, but I took that with a grain of salt! One dark December evening after choir practice a group of us were walking home along the South Circular Road and the conversation turned to ghosts. Out of the blue one of the group said he knew where you could see the ghostly shadow of Robert Emmet!

We laughed, but he said he could bring us there in less than 10 minutes. He led us to Harold's X Bridge, and about 100 yards further on we came to a very dark avenue, on the left of which stood a large forbidding looking house. The house was called Mount Drummond, but has since been renamed Emmet House. At that time there were no other houses in the vicinity, and one lamp at the corner on the main road.

As we passed the main gate our companion gave a triumphant shout — "Look!" he said, pointing to the wall at the far side of the railings. On it was the shadow of a man's head and shoulders, and it bore an uncanny resemblance to the well-known profile of Robert Emmet's face in the famous portrait.

We were all terrified. But then one adventurous boy climbed up on one of the gateposts, and "hey presto", the mystery was solved. The shadow disintegrated and the boy's waving hands

were seen instead. The profile was formed by the tops of the ornamental gateposts. It was in another house at the side of Mount Drummond House that Major Sirr arrested Emmet in 1803. It was demolished at the turn of the century.

In the 1930s I lived in Rialto and next door, living with his married daughter was an old man who was in his 90's at the time. He had been reared by an aunt who had watched the execution of Robert Emmet from the window of her house in Thomas Street, and had worked in the Corporation with James Carey, informer on the Invincibles after the Phoenix Park assassinations in 1882. I dropped in regularly to the old man during the winter months to be entertained by his amazing collection of ghost stories.

I was always sorry I never wrote them down. His favourite was one about an apparition known as "Larry the Wax" (a cobbler in his lifetime) who appeared somewhere around the Liberties, and who disappeared if anyone told him to "go to Hell". One night he told me a terrifying story of a Corporation lamplighter he knew who encountered the devil in the form of a black dog on the banks of the Grand Canal near Rialto Bridge, then a very lonely area.

Leaving the house, I had only to go a few yards, I found the street lamps had gone out and I was in pitch darkness. To my horror I saw an enormous black dog appearing before me! For the only time, so far, in my life my hair actually stood up on end. The dog then came nearer and to my great relief I found it was a loveable black Labrador belonging to a retired D.M.P. man in the next street.

Strangely enough, there was a carved stone head of a devil-like creature embedded under the arch of the old Rialto Bridge. When the bridge was pulled down, it was transferred to the Grand Canal offices at James's St. harbour where it may still be seen on the wall to the left of the gateway.

Tales of phantom dogs are very common. In the hard winter of 1840-41 a skating party was in progress on the icy pond in the grounds of Rathfarnham Castle. Among the group was a man who had with him a fine specimen of a curly-coated retriever dog. The ice cracked suddenly and the man disappeared into the murky water; the dog jumped in after him and both were drowned.

A monument was later erected in the grounds to perpetuate the dog's heroism. Possibly, as a result of this it was reported locally that the ghost of the animal was seen regularly along the Dodder between Lord Ely's Gate and Rathfarnham Bridge.

Another phantom dog was said to be seen in St. Patrick's Cathedral, this time it was the master who was the hero—Captain McNeill Boyd whose statue stands inside the cathedral. On the night of Saturday, 8 February 1861, one of the worst gales ever recorded sprung up in the Irish Sea, and on the following morning, when the inhabitants of what was then called Kingstown now Dun Laoghaire, went down to the harbour, it was choked with debris and wreckage of all kinds from boats which had foundered, and what was more horrible, dozens of bodies, which were taken ashore and laid out in long pitiable lines on shore.

Among those employed in this work was the crew of the Royal Naval coast guard ship, *Ajax*, under Captain John McNeill Boyd. Suddenly it was reported that three stricken vessels carrying coal were making for the harbour (the fury of the gale had not abated and snow was also falling). They could not make the harbour mouth, however, and the fierce winds swept them towards the treacherous rocks off the East Pier.

Captain Boyd and his men hurried towards the rocks to see could they save some of the unfortunate men in the ships. As the captain was endeavouring to do so, he found he was encumbered by his great-coat, so he started to take it off. At the same time, however, a huge wave descended over him and his men, and they disappeared. A short while later two of the vessels, the *Neptune* and *Industry*, from Whitehaven, were wrecked within 100 yards of each other with great loss of life. The third ship, the *Mary*, was swept on to Sandymount where it was also wrecked.

The bodies of Captain Boyd and his men were not recovered for several days, and while a life-boat from the *Ajax* patrolled the waters when calm had returned, a sad sight was seen—the captain's black Newfoundland dog sitting in it. When the body was found Captain Boyd had one of the biggest funerals ever seen in Dublin, with thousands of people walking behind the hearse to St. Patrick's. And right behind the coffin walked his dog.

The dog sat beside the coffin as it lay in state in the Cathedral, and followed it to the graveside. When the grave was filled in it lay on top and refused to leave, eventually dying of hunger. Not so long afterwards a statue was erected in the Cathedral by the citizens of Dublin to the memory of the brave Captain Boyd. Since then the figure of a dog has often been seen at night-time sitting at the base of the statue. The last person who reported it was Dean Wilson, who died in 1950.

The inscription on the statue reads: 'Erected by the citizens of Dublin, to the memory of John McNeill Boyd, R.N., Captain, H.M.S. *Ajax*, born Londonderry, 1812, and lost off the rocks at Kingstown, February 9th, 1861, attempting to save the crew of the Brig, *Neptune*.'

A few years ago there were reports of a phantom cat being seen in the area of Killakee, the mountain district about five miles beyond Rathfarnham which was once the demesne of the Massey family. This cat legend apparently goes back to the 18th century and the nefarious activities of the Hellfire Club, which is remembered by Dubliners because of the famous ruin of that name on Montpelier Hill which can be seen from the city itself. The club was said to be frequented by members of the Dublin branch of the society. Wild carousings and sacrilegious ceremonies were said to have been carried out there, and up to the present day few people will go near the ruins after dark.

The Irish Hell Fire Club was organised by Richard Parsons, first Earl of Ross and Colonel Jack St. Leger, and confined its membership to men, the majority being recruited from the leading 'bucks' of the period. St. Leger lived in a magnificent country mansion, 'Grangemellon' near Athy where he entertained lavishly, and many stories were told about the wild orgies held there.

A regular meeting place of the club in Dublin was the Eagle Tavern on Cork Hill which was the setting for James Worsdale's famous painting which is in the National Gallery in Dublin. Painted about 1735 it shows a group of five men seated around a table on which reposes a huge punch-bowl.

The group consists of Henry Barry, fourth Lord Santry, Colonel Clements, Colonel Ponsonby, Colonel St. George and Simon Luttrell of Luttrellstown, afterwards first Earl of Carhampton. The punch-bowl contained the club's special beverage-scaltheen (hot whiskey and butter). A black cat, supposed to represent the devil, presided, and sometimes when the meeting ended after midnight a member of the club emerged as Satan, wearing the skin, tail and horns of a cow, to the terror of any citizens who happened to be around at the time.

On one occasion the large tom cat was immersed in the scaltheen and set on fire. It was pushed outside the door, and when it appeared, the crowd who had gathered to listen to the ribald shouts and singing inside, seeing a fierce animal with flames leaping from it rushing straight at them, thought the devil had really appeared and fled for their lives.

The club's activities began about 1720, and lasted until about 1740 when most of the members had either died or gone to England. There were two other similar clubs in Ireland at the time — the Blasters, founded by the miniaturist, Peter Lens and the Limerick Hell Fire Club which had one female member, a Mrs. Blennerhasset.

It was probably during the summer months that the group met in Montpelier House, which was originally built as a shooting lodge by the Right Honourable William Conolly of Castletown, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, about the year of 1725, shortly after he purchased the Duke of Wharton's estate in the neighbourhood. Up to that time a large cairn, or cromlech had stood on the spot, and the stones from this pre-historic monument were used to build part of the house.

Not so long after the house was completed the slated roof was blown off one night in a tremendous storm. Local people said this was caused by the agency of the devil in retaliation for desecrating the old cairn.

A colleague of mine, who has since died, told me the following story: Lord Luttrell fought on the side of King James in the Battle of the Boyne, but when he saw the tide was turning against James he changed over with his men to King William, and so saved his estates from forfeiture. Some years afterwards he was being carried down Stafford Street (now Wolfe Tone Street) in a sedan chair when a dandy who was walking nearby drew his sword and plunged it into the noble Lord's heart.

Luttrell was buried in the castle in North Co. Dublin that bears his name, but some time afterwards some of his enemies dug up his bones and scattered them all over the place. Some years ago, my friend had to call to the castle on business. It was a dark winter's evening, and when he was leaving he had to walk down the long avenue to the gates.

"After I had walked about a hundred yards", he says, "suddenly I heard footsteps behind me. I looked back and saw a white figure following me. I stopped and the figure stopped

also. When I continued the figure did likewise and kept in step with me. When I crossed the little bridge the figure followed but it did not come any further. I could still see it as I hurried towards the gate and I felt positive I had seen the ghost of Lord Luttrell.'

The Marshalsea Barracks, off Thomas Street, was used by the military during the 1798 and Emmet risings. A large number of insurgents were taken there after the '98 defeat where they were tortured before being executed. One of them, Pat Doyle, a Wexford man made a desperate effort to escape. A muscular well-built fellow, he overpowered three of the guards, and managed to scale the very high wall. When he reached the top, however, he lost his balance, and tumbled to his death in the backyard of a house in Bridgefoot Street. For years afterwards many people claimed to have seen his ghost hovering along at the top of the wall.

A story also was current about a notorious character of the same period. John Toler, better known as Lord Norbury, the Hanging Judge who presided at the trials of many of the '98 leaders and that of Robert Emmet, who lived in a big house in Cabra. Until the house was pulled down just before the last War it had the reputation locally of being haunted and people avoided passing it at night. One story was that the bloodthirsty judge was, on his death, changed into a phantom black dog condemned for eternity to prowl around the area, dragging a large chain behind him.

Another said he wrongfully convicted a young married man from Blanchardstown of sheep-stealing, a capital crime in those days, and the man was hanged. His widow went into a decline and died soon after him. On her death-bed she cursed the judge and vowed that whether she came back from Heaven or Hell she would never let Norbury have an unbroken night's sleep in his own house. As a result, he was said to have suffered from chronic insomnia for the rest of his life.

My mother, God rest her, around the turn of the century said she saw the "Headless Coach" as it was known locally (the driver, not the coach was headless). If you didn't die after seeing it, some of your family would, the legend went. She said she saw it at night at Roper's Rest, near Blackpitts.

The origin of the tale was said to date back to the beginning of the 19th century when the "Sack-em-ups" were in operation. These were the men who dug up newly buried bodies from the graveyards to supply the medical schools, who found it hard to get any at the time for research.

The bodies were put into the back of a coach of the type used at the time for transporting goods. The body-snatchers, naturally did their work at dead of night, and as they didn't want anyone to catch them, they spread the story of the "Headless Coach", and made sure that the driver always had his head deep down in his voluminous greatcoat. This kept people in late at night, and made everyone think that every coach they saw or heard in the dark was the phantom one. It also gave rise to the many stories handed down in Dublin and other parts of the country.

Carman's Hall, off Francis Street, apparently got its name from the fact that stage coaches started and ended there in the