

Withered Old Men and Weasel-Riders:
The portrayal of the Danes as fairies in *Seán na Bánóige*, *The Man Who Lost His
Shadow*, and *The Heather Beer*

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Interaction with other races and ethnic groups is a prominent theme in Irish folklore and mythology; Ireland's own history has included many invasions, both mythical and modern, the memories of which are still preserved in the oral traditions of the Irish people. One of the most prominent groups of invaders was the Norse, commonly referred to as "Danes" despite their mainly Norwegian origins. Their power in Ireland was ultimately broken at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. The Norsemen slowly faded from living memory and became "Danes," ancient beings in possession of great knowledge who later became assimilated with the fairies. The aim of this paper is to show the extent of that assimilation through three stories: *Seán na Bánóige*, *The Man Who Lost His Shadow*, and *The Heather Beer*.

Like some fairies, the Danes are portrayed as physically ancient creatures. An example of this is found in the story of *Seán na Bánóige*, the main version that is cited in this paper being recorded from Peig Sayers from the Blasket Islands in Co. Kerry. The Danes first make an appearance when Seán O'Se receives hospitality in the Dane's native Lochlainn while seeking his fortune to alleviate his family's poverty. After traveling amongst the poor districts, Seán seeks shelter in a mushroom shaped hovel¹ where he meets two men described as "thin and shriveled and covered with beard and rags and [having] prominent teeth."² These details of teeth and beard are common throughout all versions of the story and many ascribe small stature to the Danes as well, claiming that "they had foxes for dogs and weasels for cats, thus being like fairies."³ This small stature connection was also noted by Dáithí Ó hÓgáin in his compilations of Irish superstitions as well as folklore collector Jeremiah Curtin, who recorded identical claims in his version of the story from Munster. Reidar Christensen also supports this Dane-fairy connection and suggests that the Dane's buried treasure is the main point of the story; thus a trip to their homeland could be seen as "natural framework for the story"⁴ due to Seán's later interaction with a *lios* next to his house.

Christensen points out the similarities found in the *Ancestors in the Mountain* theme of Danish and Swedish folklore, in which troll figures are described in similar

¹ O'Sullivan 194

² O'Sullivan 195

³ Christensen 140

⁴ Christensen 140

terms as the two Danes that Seán O'Se met. Even though they are typically of large stature, the Scandinavian trolls are commonly portrayed as roughly dressed and have characteristic beards that reach their knees.⁵ This Danish and Swedish theme also ascribes certain settings to encounters with these 'ancestors' usually remote places like mountain tops and islands. Although the Danes in *Seán na Bánóige* live in a rural community instead of an isolated island or mountain, the entire country of Lochlainn itself could be seen as a link to the *Ancestors in the Mountain* theme. The Blasket Island version of *Seán na Bánóige* records Lochlainn as being a "rough, furzy land"⁶ and others give it a dangerous quality due it being covered in "hills and woods."⁷ Seán O'Se makes a conscious decision to travel to the more rural areas due to his lack of money "to enable him to go into a public house or hotel and fill his belly with a good meal"⁸ and thus leaves more modern civilization behind in his search for affordable accommodation. By leaving behind the modern hotels, Seán is going to the more remote areas of Lochlainn that would be more in tune with the past due to weaker influence of the modern money-oriented culture that the hotels represented. These remote areas would preserve many old customs and stories, much like the Gaelteachd in Ireland and Scotland, and create a setting with a link far back into history. This remote and semi-archaic setting demonstrates the *Ancestors in the Mountain* theme mentioned previously and would be an ideal place to meet trolls or Danes.

Christensen also comments on the concept of a 'link to the past' but instead applies it to the Danes and fairies found in Irish folklore. He claims that "the ancient men are said to be fairies in Nordic tales, while in Irish they are *Lochlannaigh* --Viking raiders..."⁹ Christensen draws the parallels between the Nordic fairies and the Danes in the Irish tradition and claims that both traditions appear to be using the same beings. While in their native setting, the "ancient men" are fairies but when they are encountered in a foreign land, Ireland in this case, they become tied to the local history. In this way, it

⁵ Christiansen 143

⁶ O'Sullivan 194

⁷ Christensen 140

⁸ O'Sullivan 194

⁹ Christensen p30

can be said that there is a warped folk memory of the Norse still present in Ireland through folklore.

In light of this Viking connection, the Danes in Irish folklore can be seen as a link with the remote past; they are an important part of Irish history that has survived in a different form through local fairy lore. Christensen applies this 'link to the past' to a version of *Seán na Bánóige* collected in Leitrim, in which he claims that the Danes' task for Seán is to "avenge some wrong done to the host in the distant past."¹⁰ In this Leitrim version, the sole Dane figure is claimed to have fought in the Battle of Clontarf, the Norse defeat in which could very well be the "wrong in the distant past" mentioned above. This involvement in a semi-ancient battle also reinforces the character of the Danes as ancient beings themselves, for the Dane in the Leitrim version is an actual survivor of 1014. In this way, the Dane himself reinforces the historical connection between the Norse and Irish by his past associations with the Battle of Clontarf.

In addition to being portrayed as ancient beings, the Danes had the similar connections to supernatural creatures that Irish fairies did. Abnormal animals were often thought to have fairy associations and fairy lore is full of mentions of mundane creatures with unusual characteristics. In the case of *Seán na Bánóige*, it is the Danes who have this association with supernatural creatures, specifically with a mouse. After staying with his hosts for a few days, Seán accompanies them on a hunt where they slay a tiny mouse.¹¹ Interestingly enough, Seán himself views this as an odd practice, which shows an Irish perception of being different than the Danes. Once the meager mouse is prepared for a meal, Seán tastes a broth made with its flesh and exclaims loudly about his newfound supernatural insight into the locations of the Danes' buried gold throughout Ireland.¹² The hunted animal itself is sometimes an eel, weasel, or rabbit but all result in Seán's new gift of foresight.¹³ This motif parallels the method by which the mythical Fionn MacCumhail gained his powers of foresight, right down to the cooking of a supernatural creature and being granted the skill through its juices.¹⁴ This method of

¹⁰ Christensen 143

¹¹ O'Sullivan 196

¹² O'Sullivan 196

¹³ Christensen 142

¹⁴ Christensen 145

obtaining foresight is a common European motif and is found in Norse literature as well; Sigurd the Volsung went through the same ordeal to learn the language of birds, who related to him the future.¹⁵ However, the supernatural soup in *Seán na Bánóige* plays another role in the hands of the Danes. Seán loses his gift at their encouragement to taste the mouse's flesh, which they knew was the way to remove the foresight granted. Their motives vary between versions but the version recorded on the Blasket Islands gives the Danes a helpful quality. They claim to have saved him since his gift "would have brought [him] to the gallows."¹⁶ Seán becomes a bit humbler through this ordeal and laments the loss of "knowledge that would help [him] at the end of his life."¹⁷ Upon seeing Seán's regret at losing information that could lead to the fortune he was unselfishly pursuing to alleviate his family's poverty, the Danes give him a chance to recover some of the gold from a *lios* near his house in Bánóige.

The *lios* setting is not unusual for the next section of the story. Since the Danes were so closely linked with the fairies, they became associated with supernatural places as well. They appear to be more commonly connected with the *lios*, the hill fort, as opposed to some of the more natural spaces in fairy lore, such as cliffs or bodies of water. This connection to the *lios* compliments Irish history as the Norse had strong historical connections to the defensive settlements that fell into disrepair, later becoming associated with the fairies. In *Seán na Bánóige*, the Danes in Lochlainn charge Seán with the task to recover several household objects from a *lios* next to his house in Bánóige. This validates the commonly-held idea that the *lios* was considered a fairy dwelling, for what else would contain a magical razor, towel, soap, and mirror? The *lios* once again demonstrates the *Ancestors in the Mountain* theme by showing a remote setting with links to the past being used as a fairy/Dane dwelling. The setting also reinforces the Danes' supernatural qualities due to their previous occupation of the *lios*, once again echoing the historical connection of the Norse with hill-forts.

The setting of the *lios* gives two historical connections to the Danes, namely their usage of hill-forts in the tenth and eleventh centuries, as mentioned above,

¹⁵ Christensen 145

¹⁶ O'Sullivan 197

¹⁷ O'Sullivan 197

and the fact that they are now absent from these defensive dwellings. This absence is reflected in the possessions the Danes have left behind, the same that Seán must recover in exchange for wealth. These details show that the Danes are long gone, presumably since the Battle of Clontarf, which itself could be Christensen's "wrong done to the host in the distant past." Also, the very fact that the Danes lived in fairy-forts and buried gold in them strengthens their supernatural connection, for Irish society gave the hill-forts a wide, respectful berth and it was considered to be undesirable to be living near one, let alone in one.

To obtain the magical objects in the *lios*, Seán must overcome an unusually large cat that lives in the fort itself. This cat reinforces the Danes' connection with supernatural animals because it is functioning as a 'guard cat' of sorts as well as living in the fort. The Danes in Lochlainn tell Seán to behead it and keep the head away from the body; this unusual method of overcoming the cat speaks about its supernatural character as does Seán's method of drawing it out of the *lios*. He is instructed to leave roasted meat out for the cat and wait to strike until it falls asleep after eating. Seán's overcoming of the fairy cat could be evidence of folk memory of the Battle of Clontarf for at a basic level the end result is an Irishman vanquishing a Dane-beast. This would link *Seán na Bánóige* with the *Cogadh Gaill re Gallaibh*, a compilation of manuscripts written in the 13th century regarding the Battle of Clontarf. The texts describe the battle in great detail, including lavish descriptions of the armies present, their leaders, and even their weapons. Being a compilation of Old Irish sources, there is strong contrast of imagery between the Norse and Irish, notably the former being described as "without reverence, without veneration, without honor, without mercy, for God or man."¹⁸ In direct comparison, the Dal Cassians are described as "courageous, bright, and victorious,"¹⁹ a far cry from the "murderous, hostile Danars"²⁰ that were facing them on the battlefield. This distinction could very well have lived on in folklore because, in a manner of speaking, Seán himself embodies the Dal Cassians' qualities when compared to the Danes he meets in Lochlainn. He exhibits honor, completing the Danes' task of recovering their possessions from Ireland

¹⁸ Todd 159

¹⁹ Todd 161

²⁰ Todd 158

when he could have simply taken the gold they granted him as an advance payment and never returned. Seán also shows courage by sailing to and from Lochlainn multiple times despite the tales of danger told by his neighbors. Finally, he shows compassion for the Danes despite their frightful appearance and the old enmity between them and himself, assuming the Danes represent Christensen's 'link to the remote past.' In these ways, Seán is shown as a noble, fearless, and compassionate Irishman and could be given such qualities to show the distinction put forth by the *Cogadh Gaill re Gallaibh*.

This Irish-Norse distinction could have another parallel in *Seán na Bánóige*, this time in reference to supernatural creatures and weapons. Being portrayed as barbarous pagans in the *Cogadh Gaill re Gallaibh*, the Norse are given a number of unnatural qualities, an example of which is found in their weapons. These are described as "murderous, poisoned arrows which had been anointed and browned in the blood of dragons and toads, and water-snakes of hell."²¹ In comparison, the Irish weapons are described as "well-shaped, heroic, and beautiful"²² which again puts the two armies at odds. These details infer that the Norse needed supernatural weapons in order to face the Dal Cassians, whose weapons are made with better craftsmanship and it is assumed that their power lay in the Gael who wielded them. Although a bit of a stretch, the 'guard cat' in the *lios* in *Bánóige* could be seen as a weapon of the Danes due to its nature of forcefully repelling trespassers.

As pointed out earlier, the cat is undeniably supernatural and this connection between supernatural creatures and the Norse could also reflect the *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaill*. In the text, the Dublin Vikings are surrounded by otherworldly beasts such as "the satyrs...the witches, and the goblins, and the ancient birds...and the feeble demoniac phantom host."²³ These old connections of hostile supernatural animals with the Norse could shine through in Irish folklore and thus provide justification for the 'guard cat' in *Seán na Bánóige*.

With all these supernatural connections, it is important to note that the Danes are not seen as evil nor good, they had an alignment much like their fairy brethren and

²¹ Todd 159

²² Todd 161

²³ Todd 159

similar trickster qualities as well. The first example of this trickster nature in *Seán na Bánóige* is found when a soup is made from the supernatural mouse following their hunt. After Seán exclaims loudly about his newfound gift of vision, his hosts encourage him to drink the broth of the mouse, knowing full well what is about to happen. As mentioned above, Seán loses his gift immediately and the Danes claim to have saved him from the gallows.²⁴ However in the Kerry version of the story, the Dane explains that he would've kept his gift if he had stayed silent about it but remarks "that is, and ever will be, impossible to an Irishman." This could be interpreted as teaching a lesson about being boastful but it also shows the contrast between the Danes and Irish again; this time the Danes are drawing a distinction between themselves and the Irish, who they perceive as unable to stay quiet.

Another interesting portrayal of the Danes' mischief is found in Ó hÓgáin's *Irish Superstitions* and concerns hens. According to Ó hÓgáin, hens were introduced to Ireland by the Norse and had inherited their masters' "hostile feelings towards the Irish people."²⁵ Ó hÓgáin's survey of folk belief claims that hens are constantly plotting to return to Scandinavia and scratch their claws against the floors of Irish homesteads in an attempt to burn them down.²⁶ If arsonist hens were not enough trouble, the Norse are also said to have introduced red hair to Ireland, according to Ó hÓgáin's book. He points out the connection of red hair with "magical danger," which supports the Norse devolution into fairy-like "Danes" who epitomize supernatural and magical chaos. Further evidence for Dane trickery is found in another tale in O'Sullivan's collection, *The Man Who Lost His Shadow*. In this story from Waterford, an Irishman named Brasil enters into a land transaction with a Dane who was suddenly forced to return to Lochlainn. Brasil follows him there to obtain documents of the transaction and is welcomed into the chieftain's hall. The Dane offers to let him stay in Lochlainn, promising that he "would be well off -- better off than [he] would be at home." (O'Sullivan 235) When Brasil refuses his offer, the Dane proclaims "I'll have to keep your shadow instead of yourself" and captures his shadow under a book as Brasil escapes

²⁴ O'Sullivan 197

²⁵ Ó hÓgáin 68

²⁶ Ó hÓgáin 68

out the door. (O'Sullivan 235) The connection of Lochlainn with the Irish otherworld is strong here and the ability of the Dane to capture a man's shadow is hardly unusual in such a setting. These examples of trickster qualities show how easily the Danes could be assimilated with the fairies through less-than-positive interactions with mundane people.

As shown above, the Dane in *The Man Who Lost His Shadow* has a strong association with books; in fact he is described as "sitting at a table which was covered with all kinds of documents."²⁷ The general figure of the Dane, like some of the Irish fairies, usually has a connection to knowledge, either written or memory-based. An example of the parallel between the Danes and Irish fairies through books and knowledge is seen in the story *Doctor Lee and Little Aran*, collected from Éamonn a Búrc. Through a meeting with a fairy and his daughter, Doctor Lee is given a magic book that would grant him tremendous medical knowledge if he avoided reading it for seven years. In an attempt to save his cousin from illness, Doctor Lee used the book to cure him.²⁸ Despite only having let the book lie for three years, the knowledge he acquired meant that his rival couldn't be found "in County Galway or in Connacht or even in all Ireland..."²⁹ This is one example of a fairy connection with supernatural knowledge and is mirrored by the Danes in *Seán na Bánóige*.

The Danes whom Seán met exhibit this connection to knowledge by knowing the locations of all the buried treasure in Ireland as well as the land and her people, shown by when they greeted Seán by name. This motif of old knowledge is also seen in a third story in O'Sullivan's collection, *The Heather Beer*, also referred to as *An Bheoir Lochlannach* in one of the many other versions. According to O'Sullivan's story from Donegal, the Danes were the only ones in Ireland with the knowledge of how to brew beer from heather. While routing the Danes from Ireland, presumably after the Battle of Clontarf, the Irish captured a father and son and offered to spare one of them in exchange for the brewing secret. The father asks that the son be killed, then refuses to reveal the secret, which is consequently lost.³⁰ Despite being a common European folktale, the Irish versions show the association of older knowledge with the Danes, reinforcing the

²⁷ O'Sullivan 235

²⁸ O'Sullivan 187

²⁹ O'Sullivan 187

³⁰ O'Sullivan 234

differences between them and the more mundane Irish peasantry.

Despite being ancient, supernatural creatures in possession of great knowledge, the Danes had the capacity for beauty as well. In *Seán na Bánóige*, the "thin and shriveled" Danes are restored to youth by the magic razor from the *lios*. They ask for Seán's help to shave them and make an explicit mention of the power in Seán's hand to break their enchantment.³¹ This emphasis on the power of an Irishman is curious and could be another allusion to Clontarf and how the Irish "broke" the spell of the Norse occupation over their land. With this in mind, Seán's task can be viewed in a different light. On one hand, Seán is generously assisting three beings ensnared in an undetermined spell by fetching their lost possessions and restoring them to youth and beauty. On the other hand, he is removing the Danes' influence from the *lios* near his house and Ireland itself by extension. The result of this "cleansing" is the restoration of the Danes to a more normal existence and appearance, one that is more harmonious with the Irish. This is further seen when Seán remains in Lochlainn and accompanies them fowling and hunting³², which is an implicit indication of the restoration of social norms: where once they hunted supernatural mice as shriveled fairies, they return as young men to hunt properly. In this context, Seán could be seen as removing Danish influence from Ireland and being a possible role model to those advocating Irish independence and freedom. It is interesting to see how Seán's perception of the Danes improves once their belongings are back in Lochlainn, such as his remark that "he had never in his life seen... finer young [men.]"³³

Returning to Christiansen's remark on the Danes functioning as a "link with the remote past," it is easy to see how they represented the past to the Irish in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Danes represented the centuries of occupation that led to the famous Battle of Clontarf but no longer existed in living memory. Instead, they continued on mainly in manuscripts and literature, both Irish and Norse. Since the Irish people of the time had no living memory of the Norse, they turned to the oral tradition and folklore to provide details about the Norwegians. These details became warped and were later

³¹ O'Sullivan p203

³² O'Sullivan 204

³³ O'Sullivan 203

merged with the fairy traditions to create the image of the supernatural Dane. The ability of the two groups to assimilate so cleanly speaks to the strong folkloric connection between Ireland and Scandinavia and their people, whose ancestors met face-to-face on Irish soil.

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