

Protecting Our Night Sky Heritage

A project by Mayo Dark Skies Community Group funded by
The Heritage Council



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



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Background

This report outlines the work undertaken on our project funded by the Heritage Council. Our project focus was to connect people and place through the natural heritage of our night sky using storytelling. This was achieved through a collection of stories and traditions associated with the night sky, through educational events to raise awareness of the need to protect our night sky and ultimately with a performance of storytelling and educational talks at the Mayo Dark Sky festival.

This document provides a framework for replicable projects, a report on the project work undertaken in relation to the collection and collation of night sky stories as well as a resource documenting the stories submitted by the community which provided the inspiration for the final feature performance in the Mayo Dark Sky Festival. The remainder of this report is provided by Dan O'Donoghue and presents the work undertaken to complete the Mayo Dark Skies project; Protecting the Night Sky.

Outline of Project Framework

We started by distributing our leaflet titled, *Preserving Ireland's Natural Night Skies - Irish Stories of the Sky*, to as many schools, libraries, community groups as possible, this included a visit to 22 local schools (see School Outreach Programme).

The "call" in the leaflet was to get community members involved in collecting any pisheogs or stories relating to the night sky. The results of this are in section; *Mayo Dark Sky Lore + Superstition Collection 2018*.

We realised that in the case of schools, simply distributing the leaflet wouldn't give the children sufficient motivation to go home and enquire for these stories and so we offered to return to each school and do a Night Sky Storytelling presentation. The offer was accepted by 15 schools and was very well received by teachers and pupils.

Night Sky Storytelling in 15 Schools;

My presentation consisted of telling about pisheogs, superstitions and folklore, and also some night sky basics such as moon phases, prominent constellations, Irish names for some of these constellations and little stories about how they were named in Irish. I also used magic tricks to illustrate aspects of the stories (I am a professional magician/storyteller) to illustrate the stories and excite the pupils.

After revisiting 15 schools and doing a Night Sky Storytelling presentation the children seemed very motivated to go home and ask their parents for stories etc. and we received their contributions via email. Alas, we did not get as many as we would have wished, nevertheless I included these collected pisheogs and lore in my storytelling event, *Teepee an Seanchaí*, at the Mayo Dark Sky Festival, see *Teepee an Seanchaí*.

Teepee an Seanchaí - Night Sky Storytelling

My second objective was to feature the collected pisheogs/tales in my Night Sky Storytelling event at the Mayo Dark Sky Festival 2018. This is reported under *Teepee an Seanchaí*.

Fisherman, Padraig McAvock, Collection

In addition to the above I visited a North Mayo fisherman and local historian, Padraig McAvock with a view to finding stories or traditions relating to the night sky. Padraig was not aware of many specifically night themed stories, however, he has quite a few

fishermen's beliefs and superstitions which deemed relevant I've also included in *Mayo Dark Sky Lore + Superstitions*.

Additional Research: Notes on Medieval Irish Astronomy

Because there was a dearth of new-found superstitions collected I decided to broaden my project to include some research into Irish Constellation names and history pertaining to early Irish astronomy. The results of this research are outlined in my attached document, *Notes on Medieval Irish Astronomy* (attached).

Schools Outreach Programme 2018

The following visits were conducted by Dan O Donoghue with assistance from Ged Dowling of Terra Firma Ireland.

1. St Patrick's NS Westport
2. Sacred Heart NS Westport
3. Islandeady NS
4. Derrywash NS
5. St Patrick's NS Castlebar
6. Gaelscoil Raifteiri, Castelbar
7. St Angela's NS Castlebar
8. St Joseph's Secondary, Castlebar
9. Davitt's College, Castlebar
10. St Catrionas Nursing Home
11. St Gerald's, Secondary, Castlebar
12. Lecanvey NS
13. Louisburgh NS
14. Lankill NS
15. Murrisk NS
16. Brackloon NS
17. Newport NS
18. Fahy NS
19. Lankhill NS
20. Mulranny NS
21. Drumgollagh NS
22. Ballycroy NS
23. Castlebar Library
24. GMIT, Castlebar
25. Westport Library

Mayo Dark Sky Storyteller School Performances

These performances were offered and provided to 15 schools without charge with three purposes in mind.

- To raise awareness of the Mayo Dark Sky project.
- To educate on the necessary actions to take in the gathering of stories and pisheogs.
- To tell example stories and pisheogs. This was done with storytelling incorporating magic skills and watercolour pictures to illustrate the stories.

1. St Patricks NS, Westport
2. Sacred Heart NS, Westport
3. Islandeady NS
4. Derrywash NS
5. St Patricks NS Castlebar
6. Gaelscoil Raifteiri
7. Lecanvey NS
8. Louisburgh NS
9. Murrisk NS
10. Brackloon NS
11. Newport NS
12. Fahy NS
13. Mulranny NS
14. Drumgollagh NS
15. Ballycroy NS

Mayo Dark Sky Lore + Superstitions Collection 2018

Contributions received from the schools and community have been classified as “Pisheog-Theme” or “Night sky Expressions,” so as to place them in a context with collected superstitions from other sources, e.g. Belderrig Fishermen or Irish Folklore Commission’s School Collection by Duchas in the late 1930’s.



Figure 1: Hunter's Moon by Jim Leahy

Pisheog-Theme : Solas na gCoinlinn/Gealach na gCoinlini

I received this particular and beautifully expressed old saying with slight variation from two independent sources: Mary O'Donnell of Scoil Raifteiri via email and Kay Goonan of Geesala, Co Mayo, verbally. The most interesting aspect of this saying is that Kay Goonan's interpretation of the saying has an additional meaning which leads us to suspect that if we'd done a broader survey we might have found even more interpretations of it.

Collector: Mary O Donnell, Scoil Raifteiri, Castlebar.

Told by: Sheila Carroll (nee Masterson), Murrisk, Westport

“When my mother was growing up in Kildun in Ballycroy, she remembers the women looking forward to the coming of the harvest moon or *gealach na gcoinlini*. By the light of this brightest moon of the year, the women were able to venture further for their night visits to relations and neighbours, often walking on to the next village.”

Collector: Dan O Donoghue, Newport, Co Mayo

Told by: Kay Goonan, Geesala, Co Mayo

Kay Goonan also understood “solas na gcoinlinn” or “gealach na gcoinlini” to mean that time of the Harvest Moon, when the full moon comes up very soon after sundown, this is a time when evening is longer and brighter, and the farmer can work later in the fields and

when it was traditional for women and children to go out visiting with neighbours across the fields but with this additional interpretation:

“As a child we’d go out to the fields at a time after the crops were cut and saved and we’d see the full moon shining down on the oat-stubbles (or stalks) making them shine or glisten. In our child’s eye we saw them as thousands of little lighting candles and we called this *“solas na gcoinlín”* or the light of the candles.”

Additional Lore: Protection from the Fairies – Eilbhleog of Turf

- Kay Goonan’s uncle, Father Anthony Barrett of Geesala, told me of the nighttime practice of the old folk: “When they’d go visiting the neighbours they’d bring an “eilbhleog of turf” with them so as to protect them from the fairies. The eilbhleog was usually a little tin of cinders from the turf fire.”
- Father Anthony, who is also an anthropologist, told me that this superstition or *pisheog* is referred to as “*apotropaic*,” meaning having the power to avert evil influences or, “turn away evil”.



Figure 2: Quoth the Raven by Jim Leahy

Pisheog-Theme: Halloween Moon

Collector: Mary O'Donnell, Scoil Raifteiri, Castlebar.

Told by: Sheila Carroll (nee Masterson), Murrisk, Westport

“As a child, my mother remembers that there being great hope that the Halloween moon would be bright so that the children (and adults!) could set off after dark to throw heads of cabbage and turnips at the doors of their neighbours as a form of mischief. The recipients of this mischief would be delighted to cook up the vegetables the following day for their dinner!”

- **Observations:** The October full moon is also known in folklore as “the badger’s moon.” As the historian Peter Beresford Ellis once told me, “According to the ancients this moon is so bright that the badgers dried the grass for their nests by its light. The October full moon is a sacred time and the light of Badger’s Moon will shine benevolently on all who accept its powers.”

Irish Badger in Folklore: Broc Sidhe (Demon/Fairy Badger)

- This is a folkloric belief of the nighttime called, “the Broc Sidhe.” In one version the fairy badger is a good omen and if he saw your hay in peril from rain-storms could save an entire field of hay in one night.
- In another version of the “broc sidhe” legend it is said that a monstrous badger used to ravage the land and do a great amount of damage. After some time the people were complaining and the badger was banished into Rath Lake by Sts. Macraí and Blamach. The hole in which the badger is, is called, Poll na Broc Sidhe. It is said that he is chained to the bottom of the lake and it appears once every seven years. (Duchas Collection: Poll na Broc Sidhe)



Figure 3: The Badger's Moon by Jim Leahy

Pisheog Themes - Wish upon a Star + Love

Collector: Mary O Donnell, Scoil Raifteiri, Castlebar.

Told by: Alisha, Rang 5

My Mom, Nan and ones that I heard from different people. The things that I heard were pisheogs.

The first one is from my Nan: "Starlight star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish with all, I wish with might, on the first star I see tonight."

And the last one was for my baby sister, "Make a wish to the stars."

The next one was "I love you to the moon and back." Me and my mom say this to each other every night.

Collector: Muinteoir Michelle, Scoil Raifteiri, Castlebar

Told by: Fiadh, Rang 5

I got this from my mom and grandad.

"The first star you see in the sky in the night you must make a wish and say this poem:

"Star light, Star bright,

The first star I see tonight

I wish I may, I wish I might,

Have this wish I wish tonight."

- **Observations:** "Starlight, star bright..." are the lyrics to a well-known children's song.

Pisheog-Theme: Falling Star

Collectors: Hannah and Alesha, 4th Class, Lecanvey NS

Told by: People of Lecanvey

"If you saw a falling star you had to bless yourself because it was a soul going to heaven."

Pisheog-Theme: Red Star at Night

Collector: Mary O Donnell, Scoil Raifteiri, Castlebar.

Told by: Alisha, Rang 5

I just know this from my childhood

"Red sky at night shepherds delight red sky in the morning shepherds warning."

- **Observation:** The "Red sky at night..." is very prevalent and found in the Duchas Folklore Collection in several places.

Pisheog-Theme: Moon on its Back

This pisheog was given to us in several variations, these same kind of variations can be found in the Duchas Folklore Collection.

Collected by: Padraig McAvock

Told by: Padraig McAvock and the fishermen of Belderrig, Co Mayo

"If you see the new moon lying on its back, like a saucer with its ends up, it's a sign of poor weather to come."

Collected By: Muinteoir Michelle, Scoil Raifteiri

Told by: Fiadh in Rang 5.

“When the moon lies on its back it’s a sign of bad weather.”

Collected By: Muinteoir Michelle, Scoil Raifteiri

Told by: Lucia Cloherty, Rang 5

“My nanny told me that when she was young in Connemara they could tell the weather by looking at the moon. If it was a clear night and the moon was in crescent form they would know if the next day would be good or bad. They did this by studying the moon very carefully and looking to see if the chin of the moon had a sharp curve on it the next day would be bad but if it was nice and smooth there was good weather to come.

In Mayo they say if the moon was tilted on its back it would hold the rain in but if it tilted on its side there would be lots of rain.”

- **Observation:** You can find many variations of this pisheog in the Dúchas Collection e.g. Mrs Margaret Grealy - “When a new moon sits on its back we will have bad weather but if a new moon stands up straight, good weather will come.”



Figure 4: The Moon on its back by Jim Leahy

Pisheog-Theme: Cloud Ghosts

Collected By: Muinteoir Michelle, Scoil Raifteiri

Told by: Lucia Cloherty, Rang 5

“In the recent past my family and I climbed the road up to the booster station near Castlebar with my granddad. I was only two so I only climbed half of it, but my granddad went on by himself. He told me after a while he went into some clouds. He said he couldn't see up or down. He heard noises coming from above. Suddenly, he emerged from the clouds and was at the top. He saw shadows dancing on the ground. He looked up and saw there were just clouds and the noises were turbines turning. The clouds above him

dispersed and found himself looking up at the moon. He later told me that sometimes the moon has weird effects on people and animals, like making clouds look like ghosts. This isn't a very old story, but in years to come it will be."

Pisheog-Theme: Man in the Moon

Collected By: Muinteoir Michelle, Scoil Raifteiri

Told by: Lucia Cloherty, Rang 5

"They don't know that, no more than the man on the moon"

Collected by: Padraig McAvoock

Told by: Padraig McAvoock and the fishermen of Belderrig, Co Mayo

If the kids were out in the full moon our parents would say, "Come in quick or the man in the moon will take you!" This was to get the kids home and into bed.

- **Observation:** There is a character in Irish Folklore called, Donall na Gealai, perhaps this is the origin of the saying?

Pisheog-Theme: Moon Superstitions

Collectors: Hannah and Alesha, 4th Class, Lecanvey NS

Told by: People of Lecanvey

"You would hear the banshees cries on a full moon. It would also be a sign that someone in your family would die."

Collected by: Padraig McAvoock

Told by: Padraig McAvoock and the fishermen of Belderrig, Co Mayo

"It's unlucky to look at a new moon through a glass..."

"If you see a new moon and you have money in your pocket, turn the coins around a couple of times and you're sure to get more."

- **Observation:** According to Padraig this refers to a time when money was awfully scarce; wishing for this superstition to come true was a bit like somebody today wishing their lotto ticket would come through (better odds!)

Pisheog-Theme: Fishermen's Weather Lore + Supertitions

Collected by: Dan O'Donoghue

Told by: Padraig McAvoock and the fishermen of Belderrig, Co Mayo

To quote Padraig: "Belderrig was a totally fishing village. Fishing is where they made any actual cash. Fishermen had to plan their expeditions. In the days before radio there was no broadcast weather forecast so they had to look for signs in the night sky. Signs which augured good or bad weather and fate. The moon featured a lot in this kind of forecasting."

- **Observation** Back then fishermen fished at night when their hemp nets couldn't be seen by their quarry. It's important to note that we find these same superstitions were prevalent back in the 1930s as can be seen in the Dúchas Folklore Collection.

A Ring Around the Moon - "The closer the ring is to the moon the further out in time the bad weather is due. For example, a ring that's very close suggests bad weather front is

coming in about 40 hours. On the other hand if the ring looked bigger it suggested the bad weather would be here in 10 hours or less.”

- **Observation:** Rings around the Moon are caused when moonlight passes through thin clouds of ice crystals high in Earth's atmosphere. As moonlight passes through the ice crystals, it is bent in a way similar to light passing through a lens. The shape of the ice crystals causes the moonlight to be focused into a ring. This is similar to the way water droplets in the lower atmosphere can bend sunlight to create a rainbow.

A beautiful big moon - “When you see a big, beautiful moon in summer is great for warm weather but in Sept on will bring frost.”

Sun, Moon + Stars - “On winter nights when you can see sun, moon and stars at the one time in the evening it means a very bright night and temperatures will drop (low front) - hence frosty weather.”

Shooting star - “It means a soul going to heaven.”

Glimmering stars - “It means frosty weather.”

Very bright North star - “A very bright north star means good weather.”

Northern Dawn Lights - “If the northern dawn lights were strong and low it meant bad weather.”

Northern Lights High in the Sky - “You know the way they can spring up in the air? It means something bad is happening in the world.”

Northern Lights in winter - “It means bad storms are coming from the north and will bring hail and thunder. Why it was presaging storms coming from the north, I don’t know.”

- **Observation:** The north Mayo coast is a great place to see the northern lights but, according to Padraig, fishermen at sea classed them as a sign of very poor weather coming and they would head for home as quickly as possible.

General Sky Pisheogs

I’ve decided to add in some general sky pisheogs which were contributed by the collectors above as the feedback included quite a few.

Collectors: Hannah and Alesha, 4th Class, Lecanvey NS

Told by: People of Lecanvey

“If the clouds look like mackerel skin it is going to be bad weather.

“If a bird poops on you it is good luck.

“Thunder is God stamping on the floor and lightning is God turning on and off the lights.

“There is a silver line around every cloud.



Figure 5 Ring around the Moon by Jim Leahy



Teepee an Seanchaí - Mayo Dark Sky Festival Storyteller

The “Teepee an Seanchaí - Stories of the Sky” was the final event in the Mayo Dark Sky Festival 2018, it drew over sixty people, parents and children, (photos attached) in a continuous flow of visitors for the storytelling event. The event was created and innovated with the assistance of Georgia MacMillan and Ged Dowling of Mayo Dark Skies/Terra Firma Ireland who have been the driving force behind this project.

We organised and erected a teepee-style tent in the Princess Grace Woodland Park in Newport (photos attached), which was kindly loaned to us for the event by GMIT Mayo Outdoor Education Dept, together with a fire brazier to keep attendees warm whilst waiting for the next show.

We engaged the services of the Mayo Art Squad in Castlebar to build two willow branch sculptures: a “giant” representing Orion holding a lantern, and a hare representing its folkloric connection with the moon (photos attached). We decorated the woodland with lanterns and fairy lights to create an “enchanted woodland” setting for the performance and to create a sensory experience for visitors venturing into the woodland at dusk.

My performance as the “Seanchaí” included those pisheogs and lore we collected. My entertainment also featured magic to illustrate our night sky heritage such as old Irish names for constellations.



Figure 6: The Hare & the Moon by Jim Leahy

Finally, I also presented watercolour paintings which I commissioned from astronomer/artist, Jim Leahy (see Jim Leahy Paintings). These pictures helped to illustrate the various beliefs about specific Moon phases, e.g. Badger’s Moon. I intend to use these paintings in future storytelling presentations and I’ve gotten the artist’s permission to use them in a soon-to-be written book, (working title: Superstitions and Stories of the Irish Dark Sky).

Photos below from Teepee an Seanchaí event showing Willow art sculptures and storytelling teepee, pictures taken before and after dusk. (Photos by Georgia MacMillan & Ged Dowling)



Notes on Medieval Irish Astronomy

What follows is some basic information which may be of use to other storytellers who wish to tell stories of the Irish night sky. The information herein is taken from Peter Beresford Ellis' article, Early Irish Astrology: An Historical Argument.

Ed. N.: This article was first published in 3. n. 3, 1996 Réalta (vol), the journal of The Irish Astrological Association.

In this article PBE points to plenty of evidence of early Irish understanding of celestial movements in the night skies. Don't forget that up to late 1800s Astrology and Astronomy were treated with equal deference in the scientific community.

- "...that the Irish, like the rest of the Celtic world, were also highly advanced in astronomical observation, particularly in the construction of calendars. One of the first Irishmen we can name as an acknowledged expert in this field was Mo-Sinu maccu Min (d. AD 610), the abbot of Bangor, Co. Down. [3] His pupil, Mo Chuaróc macc Neth Sémon of Munster, is recorded as having written a major work on astronomical computations. Alas, no copy of that seems to have survived but we do have a similar work by Cummian (d. AD 633), a professor at Clonfert, Galway. Then we have a mid-7th Century astronomical text by Aibhistin (more widely called Augustin and once confused with Augustine of Hippo). Aibhistin was the earliest medieval writer to discuss the question of the tides in relationship to the phases of the moon."

Then there is the amazing "Recent Discovery" showing evidence of a sophisticated lunar and solar predictor/calendar.

- "The Julian calendar appears to have been introduced into Ireland by the end of the 5th Century AD, with the incoming of Christianity, displacing native calendars. But a most exciting recent discovery has been the 'lost' Irish 84-year Easter Table covering the years AD 438-521, found during the 1980s in the Biblioteca Antoniana, in Padua. This was the calendar, or computus, referred to by Colmbanus in his famous letter to Pope Gregory to support the Celtic dating of Easter. It becomes clear from both calendrical studies and astronomical tracts that the forms of astrology being practiced in Ireland from the introduction of the Christian period would be substantially the same as those being practiced by the Greco-Romans at this time."
- "The Greco-Latin forms appear to have displaced the native Irish system when Christianity and Latin learning entered the country. This system was fairly well established in Ireland by the 7th Century AD from when our earliest surviving texts, on astronomy and related astrology, survive."

PBE then shows evidence of the Arabic Astronomy being translated into Irish:

- "During the period of the 12th to 17th Centuries we find many works on Arabic astronomy and astrology being translated into Irish and that the Irish astrological practices took on the Arabic forms which were also adopted by the rest of Western Europe."

PBE also mentions one of our last native astronomers of the early period, Fr Manus O'Donnell SJ:

- “One of the last native works was written by a Jesuit priest from Co. Down, Father Manus O'Donnell SJ in the mid-17th century which was based on the *Lunario of Geronymo Cortès*, which has subsequently been translated, introduced and edited with notes and a glossary by F.W. O'Connell and R.M. Henry entitled *An Irish Corpus Astronomiae*.”

Finally, from PBE, a list of some Constellation Names in Irish:

- “We can trace this historical development of Irish practices in a linguistic mode in the earliest writings we find that the vocabulary used to name the zodiac, planets, the galaxy and constellations, were given in native concepts.
- “The constellation of Leo was known as *An Corran*, which means a reaping hook. Next time you look at Leo note the sequence of brighter stars rising above Regulus in the shape of a back-to-front question mark?’ which consequently resembles a sickle. Mars was called *An Cosnaighe* or ‘the defender’. (in Greco-Roman Mars is the God of War) Venus was identified by at least three or four ancient names, as was Mercury. These survive in modern Manx; The Pole Star was *An Gaelin* - the beam that lights the way home. The Galaxy or Milky Way was called *Bealach na Bo Finne* (the way of the white cow). Of the sun and moon we have a surprisingly extensive vocabulary in Old Irish. There are five names for the sun and six for the moon, all native concepts.”
- “Perhaps it is superfluous to add that these terms were also backed by the necessary mathematical technical jargon required for the practice of astronomy and astrology. One should point out that while this vocabulary still survives in Irish, the English equivalents are loan words from Greek, Latin and Arabic.
- “When the Greco-Latin ideas took firmer hold on the Irish perceptions, we note a change in the vocabulary. Native ideas of planets and zodiacal signs began to be dropped in favour of the Greco-Latin concepts and these were, at first, simply translated into Irish. For example:
- “Aries became *An Rea* or *Reithe*, a translation of ram (*aries* = Latin for ram and so on); thus the constellation of Cancer was known as *An Portán*, the crab. There being no concept of lion in Old Irish the word used for Leo here was *Cú* - a large hound; while Virgo was *Oighbhean*, a young girl; Capricorn became *Pocán*, the goat; Sagittarius was *An Saighead*, an archer or soldier, and so on.
- “We can perceive areas where the native and imported concepts ran side by side for Orion was named *An Sealgair Mhór* (The Great Hunter) but the Belt of Orion was called *Buaile an Bhodaigh* (enclosure or belt or the enlightened).
- “The final linguistic process in Irish took place after Arabic learning was introduced in the 12th Century and soon even translations of the names were dropped in favour of a simple Irish-ising of the foreign word. Therefore, Orion became *Oirion*, Aires was *Airges*, followed by *Leo*, *Saigitairius*, *Mercur*, *Uenir*, *Joib* and *Mars*. The modern Irish astronomical vocabulary (in terms of names of planets, constellations and so forth) is now mainly made up of loan words just like the English astronomical/astrological vocabulary.