

## Supernatural Whirlwinds in the Folklore of Celtic Countries

Daniel Giraudon

This paper is based largely on a series of fieldwork recordings made by me in the Breton countryside over the last few years. The interviews in Breton refer in particular to my home area of Trégor in the northern part of Lower Brittany, where the Celtic language is still widely spoken by older people.<sup>1</sup> The survival of the native idiom in this area explains why so many oral traditions have been kept alive in the people's memories. Here we deal with some of the folk beliefs associated with whirlwinds and comparable gusts of wind, recorded by myself and others in Brittany. We also relate them to similar folk beliefs about remarkable wind occurrences found in Ireland, Scotland and elsewhere, and explore the supernatural associations often attributed to these phenomena.

Weather and atmospheric occurrences were of particular interest to people living in the countryside, and they were not slow to give their own explanations for any unusual climatic manifestations. These explanations, however, were based more on fantasy than on scientific realities. This was the case, for instance, in relation to whirlwinds which, in broad daylight, would suddenly raise coils of dust or carry away hayricks, straw or flax, through the air, sometimes as far as the neighbours' fields. In Brittany, the older people still talk about them and call them generically in their native language – *barrioù avel-dro*, *barrioù avel-gorn* ('gusts of wind', 'whirlwinds'). In different parts of the Breton-speaking area, they are given other names – such as *korventenn*, *barrioù-*

---

<sup>1</sup> The great majority of people over fifty years of age, brought up in the countryside in this area, spoke only Breton until they went to school, where they learnt French. Today, Breton is also taught in schools and the number of pupils studying Breton continues to increase.

*korbon, barrioù korc'hwezh, barrioù-korve, barrad kelve, avel c'hwildro, avel vildro*, and so on – which have similar meanings.

These unusual whirlwinds played their part in weather forecasting. For some, if the whirlwind turned towards the southwest, they would ‘say it was fetching rain’ (*‘ar gorvetenn zo vont da gerc’hat ar glô’*).<sup>2</sup> Others would be more precise and say: *‘ur c’haouad avel gorbell, glô tri deiz goude’*– ‘*a whirlwind of that kind foretells rain [for] three days later.*’ According to others still, the sudden gust of wind that carried away wisps of hay or straw meant that the coming winter would be a rigorous one. Some sayings incorporated Christianised imagery: *‘Ur c’horc’hwezh veze graet diontañ, un tamm plouz d’an aotrou Doue, hennezh lake an ed da bark dit-te, un tamm plouz a zo aet d’ober e wele d’an aotrou Doue, goañv start a vo “wit bloaz”’*<sup>3</sup> – ‘it was called “*korc’hwezh*”, some straw for God, some straw to make a bed for God, winter will be very cold this year.’

The popular interpretation of the whirlwind phenomenon, however, cannot be reduced just to predictions and prognostications. It obviously goes beyond a simple matter of weather forecasting. In the example above, the reference to whirlwinds that would ‘go and fetch rain, go and fetch hay or straw to bring to Heaven’, implies a belief that there is some supernatural strength behind them.

In fact, when people saw those columns of air suddenly spinning upwards towards the sky, the first suspicion was that the priests were interfering with the weather. In the past, the priest was often one of the few educated men in the village, along with the schoolmaster or the mayor. In Brittany, there was a

---

<sup>2</sup> Collection Daniel Giraudon, Mini-Disc (MD)122/51 Recorded on 7 July 2006, from Adèle Le Rolland, 85 years, living in Locarn (Côtes d’Armor, Brittany).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, MD4/27. Recorded on 16 May 2000, from Amédée Barzic, 62 years, Rospez (Côtes d’Armor, Brittany).

strong belief in the ability of the clergy to work wonders,<sup>4</sup> and people even considered them to be sorcerers. On more than one occasion, in Trégor for instance, I have been told that the priests were able to transform themselves into black dogs in order to bring their flock to heel and return the stray sheep to the fold. It was also said that, having assumed the shape of a black dog, they would follow people who were out late at night, and frighten them into returning home. In Lower Brittany, the young clerics were said to use their magic to raise whirlwinds.<sup>5</sup> Here is what my old friend Jules Gros (1890-1992) recorded about such events: *‘Ar gloer a lakee an ed da sevel ha dañsal gant barriou avel a veze graet anezhe barriou-korbon (ou barriou-korc’hwezh) a gase anezhe en-dro*

---

<sup>4</sup> This belief was also widespread in Ireland. See Pádraig Ó Héalaí, ‘Cunhacht an tSagairt sa Bhéaloides’ [‘The Power of the priest in Folklore’], *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 8 (1977), 109-31.

<sup>5</sup> In the region of Lannion there were two priests, Placide-Marie Guillermic (1788-1873) and Cloarec Prat. It was said that if they had found a third man as clever as themselves they could have prevented the wind from blowing. (Daniel Giraudon, *Jakez Monant, le réel et l’imaginaire*, in *Tud ha Bro*, Mondes paysans, N°9-10. pp. 7-14. In Cancale (Brittany) a priest was said to possess the rope that could make the wind abate or change direction (Paul Sébillot, *Le Folklore de la France*, Tome 1, Paris 1968, 102. First edition 1906 The art of tying up the wind in three knots, so that the more knots that are loosened the stronger the wind will blow, has been attributed to wizards and to witches in Shetland, Lewis and the Isle of Man and Ireland. Frazer recounts how Shetland seamen bought winds in the shape of knotted handkerchiefs or threads from old women who claimed to rule the storms. (J.G Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition, vol 1, New York, 1957, 107; for Ireland and Scotland see, Derek Foran, ‘The Three Wind Knots: A Maritime Migratory Legend in Irish Tradition’, *Sinsear* 8, 1995, 55-70). This could be related to the following belief : ‘Three knots on a piece of string were needed to work the magic: if one knot is undone a soft breeze would arise, if two a fair wind; slipping the third knot would unleash a storm that might easily sink ships.’ (quoted by Bodil Nildin- Wall & Jan Wall, in ‘The Wizard from over the Sea, Legend and Reality in the Seventeen Century’, in Patricia Lysaght, Séamas Ó Catháin, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin (eds.), *Islanders and Water-Dwellers*, Dublin 1999, 349. Not so long ago, on April Fool’s Day in Brittany, children were sent as a joke to fetch the rope that would make the wind turn.

*avel an avel-dro*<sup>6</sup> ('the young seminarians would make corn straw fly up and dance by causing gusts of winds that were called *barrioù-korbon* [or *barrioù-korc'hwez*], and would make them turn as if by a whirlwind).

Explanations like these, which pin responsibility for sudden gusts of wind on the clergy, are still given by the country people, as follows: 'It was the clerics who would test their knowledge by performing magic tricks' ('*Ar veleien yaouank 'esa ôr o maji*'),<sup>7</sup> or, 'It was the priest testing what they had learnt at the seminary' ('*Ar barrioù korbon a veze graet gant beleien oc'h aprouv o studi*').<sup>8</sup> The clergy were said to possess a book called 'Agrippa'<sup>9</sup> and to be the only ones able to read<sup>10</sup> it. They used it to perform their magical deeds, their '*fizik*' as people would say. As will be seen below, their power was not limited to causing such gusts of wind. Like sorcerers '*a ia gant ann avel, ker skanv hag eur bluen*',<sup>11</sup> 'who travel on the wind as light as a feather', the clerics, too, were thought to travel in a similar fashion.

The sorcerers were believed to have been taught to travel in this way by the Devil himself. In Upper Brittany, it was said that such whirlwinds

---

<sup>6</sup> Jules Gros, *Le Trésor du breton parlé*, tome 2, art : *barr*, Saint-Brieuc, 1970. Jules Gros devoted most of his long life to the collection of Breton words and phrases which he published in four volumes under the title: *Le Trésor du breton parlé*. Tome 2, Saint-Brieuc, 1970; Tome 3 Lannion 1974 ; Tome 4 , présenté par Daniel Giraudon, Skol Vreizh-Impram, 1989. Incidentally, he met with and interviewed Charles Gavan Duffy (1816-1903) in Paris.

<sup>7</sup> Collection Daniel Giraudon. Collected 28 October 2006, from Albert Le Guyader, 82 years, Le Vieux-Marché (Côtes d'Armor, Brittany).

<sup>8</sup> Jules Gros, *Le style populaire*, tome 3 du *Trésor du breton parlé*, p. 345, Lannion, 1974

<sup>9</sup> From the name of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, a German magician and an occult writer, astrologer and alchemist (1486-1535). *Dictionnaire Larousse du XIXe siècle*, sous la direction de Paul Augé, Paris 1928.

<sup>10</sup> According to tradition, it had to be read backwards.

<sup>11</sup> F.M . Luzel, *Sainte Tryphine et le roi Arthur*, Quimperlé 1863, 50.

represented Satan carrying an immoral woman to Hell with him.<sup>12</sup> As the abducted ‘soul’ was thought to struggle to get free, he would have had to step up his efforts to prevent her from escaping, thereby causing the blast of wind and much damage en route to the netherworld. Others asserted that the damned soul imprisoned in the reeling gust was condemned to wander continuously from one end of the world to the other. In its rage it was trying to harm people or their crops.<sup>13</sup>

In Ireland, when a great wind was seen whirling everything into the air, it was often interpreted in terms of the fairies – that the fairy host was passing by, sometimes carrying mortals away with it. Indeed, almost any death, other than a gentle and gradual departure in old age, was open to interpretation as the work of the fairies.<sup>14</sup> In the case of a young person’s death, people would talk about abduction by the fairies. According to oral tradition ‘on Midsummer Eve, when the bonfires are lighted on every hill in honour of St. John, the fairies are at their gayest, and sometimes steal away beautiful mortals to be their brides.’<sup>15</sup> They were also believed to be continually trying to abduct newborn children (usually males) to replenish their own fairy population, and to take young mothers into

---

<sup>12</sup> I was given the following phrase, collected in Plogoneg (Finistère, Brittany) 1970-80, by my colleague Lukian Kergoat: ‘*Pa vez bannet ur maen e ya kuit gant an diaoul*’ (‘If you throw a stone it goes away with the devil’). The belief in the power of demons to travel in whirlwinds is old and widely disseminated (see Archer Taylor, *The Black Ox*, Helsinki 1963, 24, note 1). In the Bible, God is said to carry people away in a whirlwind: ‘And it came to pass, when the Lord would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal.... And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven’. *The Holy Bible*, Kings II, chapter 2/1-11, Cambridge, n.d., 420.

<sup>13</sup> Anatole Le Braz, *La légende de la mort chez les Bretons armoricains* Tome 2, Editions Champion, Paris, 1912, 193.

<sup>14</sup> Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*, London 1999, 29.

<sup>15</sup> W.B. Yeats, (ed.), *A Treasury of Irish Myths, Legends and Folklore*, New Jersey 1986, 2.

fairyland in order to suckle such abducted children.<sup>16</sup> As the fairies were thought to be very keen on music, it was said that they would also try to abduct mortals whose musical skills far exceeded theirs. In the ‘Legend of Knockgrafton’ related by T. Crofton Croker this was what happened to ‘little Lusmore who was conveyed into their company with the eddying speed of a whirlwind.’<sup>17</sup> Consequently, it was considered dangerous to find oneself in the path of a whirlwind. W.B. Yeats said that that fear was expressed in the attitude of the peasantry when they saw such whirlwinds: ‘They would take off their hats and say “God bless them!”’<sup>18</sup>

According to another Irish belief, there were known paths in the countryside through which the trooping fairies, *an slua sí*,<sup>19</sup> were said to travel. It was thought wrong to obstruct these paths in any way. The story was told of a man who insisted on building his new house in a place considered a fairy path by the old people. Although they warned him against doing it, he proceeded to build it, and then a mighty blast of a *sidhe gaoithe* knocked him down one night as he was holding a lighted torch. Assisted by the wind the thatch was ablaze within minutes and the dwelling was destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

The fairies apparently also considered that the land on which they dwelt, as well as what was growing on it, belonged to them. This was particularly the

---

<sup>16</sup> Seán O’Sullivan, *Folktales of Ireland*, London 1992, 273. Reprint.

<sup>17</sup> *Yeats, op. cit.*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Lysaght, *The Hunt that Came Over the Sea : Narratives of a Maritime ‘Wild Hunt’ in Irish Oral Tradition*, in Lysaght, Ó Catháin, Ó hÓgáin, *op. cit.*, 138: ‘Known also as *an slua aerach* (‘the airy host’, *an dream aerach* (‘the airy group’) and *an slua le doineann* (‘the inclement/stormy weather host’), they are, because of circumstances of their origin according to Irish oral tradition “linked (though not exclusively so) to the upper regions of the sky” or considered to be the cause of gusty or stormy weather.’

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Danaher, *Folktales of the Irish Countryside*, Cork and Dublin 1967, 54-5.

case around ring forts. They would thus raise a wind in order to claim their crop, according to the following story collected in County Limerick in 1940:

There was a man in this townland by the name of Jim Egan, and he died about thirty years ago. Well, one time in harvest he had a lot of mowing to do, and this night there was a full moon so he said he would break into [stary cutting in] another field of hay before he went to bed. So he started off mowing away in a meadow that had a fort in it, and after a while he noticed that six other mowers were after falling in behind him. He never saw them coming, but only heard the cutting behind him, and when he looked to see what it was, he saw the six men behind him and they all keeping time with his stroke. So he cut away and they were making short work of the meadow until they came to a stream that was running through the middle of it. And then one of the men said to him that they could not cross the running water, but that he should jump across it himself and leave his scythe behind him.<sup>21</sup> So he did that and he went home to bed. When he got up in the morning, the meadow was all cut, and they [the family] saved it. They had it in wynds in the field and he thought that everything was all right, but then one day a fairy wind rose of a sudden and swept most of the hay away. The fairies were after cutting the hay, so they did not forget to take it away with them too.<sup>22</sup>

Some people who owned fields on ‘fairy land’ were thought to be luckier

---

<sup>21</sup> This interesting story describes a man cutting hay on ‘fairy ground,’ as the place was close to a ring fort and the work was being done at night, that is to say when humans should be sleeping and not working. Fortunately for him, the meadow was crossed by a brook. Supernatural beings are, in principle, unable to cross water and that is how his life was saved.

<sup>22</sup> NFC 1248: 124. (NFC – National Folklore Collection, in the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin). Entitled ‘The Fairy Reapers’, this story was collected by

than others, and the fairy wind might even bring them prosperity. But this was probably more a matter of chance than of real intention on the part of the fairies, as shown by the following anecdote. It comes from Monkstown, County Cork and was told by his grandfather to Sean Doyle, aged thirteen years at the time, and was recorded by him in the Irish Folklore Commission's Schools' Manuscript Collection, dating from 1937-8.<sup>23</sup> The story was presented as referring to an actual happening:

This story happened about a century ago on a farm in Ballyfoulooloo. An old woman who lived there at that time went picking sticks or furze as was her custom to boil the skillet.<sup>24</sup> When she came to the corner of the field where a big hawthorn bush was growing, or as they called it at that time a 'scardeen' [Irish: *scairtín*, "a thorny bush"],<sup>25</sup> her eyes stood in her head with fright, for almost on every thorn there was paper, as she thought, stuck. On drawing closer she discovered that it was paper money; she was afraid to touch it because she said it surely belonged to the fairies. She ran home in haste. She told the neighbours about it, and, of course, the news spread like wild fire. It eventually came to the ears of the farmer who owned the land. He, of course, went to the spot and claimed it as his, because it was found on his land. How the money got there is a mystery, but the old people say that the money was blown onto the bush by a 'shee-gee' [Irish: *sí gaoithe*, 'whirlwind']. This story is true, it was told to me by

---

Caoimhín Ó Danachair, from Séamas Chawke, Ballylanders, Co. Limerick, 23 February 1940.

<sup>23</sup> Preserved in the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection, University College Dublin.

<sup>24</sup> 'Skillet': a small cooking pot.

<sup>25</sup> The belief in such spiky sanctuaries is well-known on either side of the British Channel. In Brittany, they talk about the souls of the dead that live amid gorse bushes, nine souls at the tip of each thorn. (Collection Daniel Giraudon, MD82/2. Recorded on 2 August 2003, from Adèle Le Rolland, Locarn).



my grandfather John Doyle late of Ballyfouloo.<sup>26</sup>

But these tales of the wind bringing good fortune were not so common. In general, the whirlwinds were dreaded, all the more because, as well as carrying souls, crops and even human beings away, they could also cause physical hurt to people. In Brittany, for instance, if a whirlwind arose suddenly, it was highly recommended to lie on the ground for its duration,<sup>27</sup> as anyone who dared to remain in its path might suffer harm or facial deformity: ‘*Veze lâret d’an dud nompas beañ tapet ‘barzh ar gorventenn hend-all chomje e c’henou a dreuz*’<sup>28</sup> (‘they said that if you were caught like that your mouth would become crooked and remain so’).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> NFC S 390: 232. (NFC S = National Folklore Collection, Schools Collection 1937-8). Communication also from Dr Rosaleen Murphy, Sean Doyle’s cousin. The story does not say whether the ‘fairy money’ turned into withered leaves as happens frequently in stories of this type. In Brittany, I heard the story of a man ploughing his field who came across a pot of gold. He put the coins into his pocket but when he arrived at home they had turned into autumn beech leaves. The belief was that if he had thrown his rosary on them they would have remained as gold coins.

<sup>27</sup> Collection Daniel Giraudon, MD 116/66-67. Recorded on 9 November 2005, from Anna Veuzic, 82 years, Chapelle-Neuve (Côtes d’Armor, Brittany),.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, MD56/55. Recorded on 11 April 2002 from Francine Joseph, 76 years, Plouigneau (Finistère, Brittany).

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, my own mother would warn me against squinting, saying that should the wind change direction I would have been left cross-eyed for ever. Another story tells what happened to the flounder’s mouth when it laughed at the Virgin Mary or also at St Columba’s feet : According to a widespread belief, as Saint Columba was wading through shallow water, he trod on a flounder. The fish cursed Columba's crooked feet and the latter retorted by cursing the fish's mouth, which has been crooked ever since. See *Folklore, Myths and Legends in Britain*, London 1973, 523. This kind of story is popular in Irish tradition and is told, for example, about the plaice’s twisted mouth. When this fish mocked St. Patrick, the fish turned its mouth and it has remained thus ever since. When, on the other hand, the salmon leaped into the saint’s bosom, to show his respect for him, he conferred its ‘salmon leap’ on it in order to enable him to jump higher than other fish. (See Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Scéalta Craibhtheacha*, Baile Átha Cliath 1952, no. 77, 190-1).

The whirlwind could also affect one's limbs, chilling them or even bringing on a sudden paralysis:

*Ur barr-korbon a veze lâret a wechoù, se veze pa veze arnev en hañv, a veze lâret alies, ur gorventenn veze lâret deus se ivez. Hag a veze lâret a wechoù an hini veze tapet 'barzh ur gorventenn pe ur barr-korbon, mod-se, 'wechoù veze seyet. Tomm veze an dud peogwir 'veze en hañv ha pa veze tomm dezhe o labourat. Hag a vezent yenet dre en un taol a vezent seyet. Dastum ur barrad paourentez. Mont a rae an nerzh digantañ, pad ur c'hrogad bopred. Se zo memes mod an hini veze tapet dindan ur pilad dour. Lâret veze, paouranteret.<sup>30</sup>*

[In the Summer, they would talk about a 'barr-korbon' when a storm was brewing. They would also use the word 'korventenn'. People would say that if you were caught in a whirlwind like that you would be paralysed. People would be as hot as if they had been working hard. And they caught a chill. Their strength would be sapped for a while at least. It is just as if they were caught in pelting rain. One said they were chilled to the bone and paralysed.]<sup>31</sup>

If someone was caught unexpectedly by a whirlwind while hoeing a field with his body bent towards the ground, he was thought to remain round-shouldered for the rest of his days:

*Pa deu ur barr-korc'hwezha ma out tapet gantañ o c'hwennat, pe oc'h ober un dra bennaket, ma tremen dreiout, sur a chomi ordin 'pad da vuhez 'barzh ar bosition pa vo tremenet dreiout.<sup>32</sup>*

---

<sup>30</sup> Collection Daniel Giraudon, MD54/7. Recorded on 22-02-2002, from Jean Goasdoué, 78 ans, Plougras.

<sup>31</sup> Translated by the writer.

<sup>32</sup> **Collection Daniel Giraudon** Collected in 2000, from Emile Allain, 81 years, Ploubezre. (Côtes d'Armor, Brittany).

[When a whirlwind happens to catch you when you are weeding a field or something of the kind, you are sure to remain for life in the position you had when it passed over you.]<sup>33</sup>

In Ireland, it was again the fairies who were blamed for such afflictions. It was said that one should never look in the direction of a whirlwind,<sup>34</sup> and people would speak about the ‘*poc sí*’, ‘fairy-stroke’ as resulting from their wind-induced attacks. As Kevin Danaher has pointed out in relation to the ‘*poc sí*’

It could take many forms. Any sudden fall or injury or any unexplained laming, deafness, loss of speech, fainting spell, distortion or swelling could be attributed to it, particularly if an unusual puff of wind had been observed about the time of the onset.<sup>35</sup>

In Cork, young children were told that if they stood in the middle of it, they would not grow any more.<sup>36</sup>

However, tradition also provided people with the means of counteracting the supernatural powers of the beings thought to create whirlwinds – for example, priests, fairies, and the devil. In Brittany, anybody had the power to exorcise such whirlwinds, as it is a well-known belief that supernatural beings hate iron, so one had only to throw an open knife<sup>37</sup> – preferably a black-hafted one – or any other steel implement at them, to counteract their force. ‘*Bez ‘veze lâret gant lod deus an dud ma piñe gallet skeiñ ur forc’h ‘barzh kreiz ur*

---

<sup>33</sup> Translated by the writer

<sup>34</sup> Dáithí Ó hÓgain, *Irish Superstitions*, Cork 2002, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, Cork 1972, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan O’Regan, Monkstown, Co. Cork, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Kevin Danaher referring to tradition forms of protection against fairies wrote : ‘A piece of iron in the pocket gave some protection; a black-handled knife was the best form of iron.’ See Danaher, *op. cit.*, 121.

*gorventenn arete eno*<sup>38</sup> ('some people would say that if you had been able to throw a fork into the whirlwind, you would have stopped it at once'). It was also thought by some that the person who had caused the sudden gust might receive the blow and be hurt. As I was told in Rospez (Côtes d'Armor, Brittany):

*Ar c'horc'hwez, hennezh zo un avel a gas gantañ pe plouz pe lin tout pezh  
'vez war an douar, veze lâret dit : tenn da gontell deus da c'hodell ha sko  
'nei 'barzh ar barr-korc'hwezh-se a goueo pe e viz pe e fri goueo war an  
douar - Fri piv ? - An hini neus laket ar c'horwezh-se da don.*<sup>39</sup>

[... what they call '*korc'hwezh*' is a whirlwind that carries away everything in its path, straw or flax, and you were told: 'take your knife out of your pocket, throw it into the whirlwind and you will see dropping to the ground the finger or the nose of the person who caused it' – 'Whose nose'? 'That of the one who caused the whirlwind to rise'.]

This story was confirmed to me in Bégard (Côtes d'Armor, Brittany): '*Mamm gozh nâ lâret n'hini nâ laket e forc'h a-benn d'an awel 'wele gwad war beg bizied e forc'h*'<sup>40</sup> ('my grand-mother told me that the person who flung his fork at that wind would see blood on the prongs'). Elsewhere, in Ploubezre, for example, the story was told of a day labourer who had thrown his knife into the whirlwind. A few days later, a young man, a seminarian, came to see him and showed him a gash in his shoulder saying: 'You'd better not play such games, throwing a knife into a whirlwind like that. Look what you have done to me!'<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Collection Daniel Giraudon, MD54/18. Recorded on 22 February 2002, from Jean Goasdoué, Plougras.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, MD4/26. Collected on 16 May 2000, from Amédée Barzic, Rospez.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, MD121/94. Recorded on 5 May 2006, from Yves Le Bihan, 91 years, Bégard (Côtes d'Armor, Brittany).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Collected in 2000, from Emile Allain, 81 years, Ploubezre. (Côtes d'Armor, Brittany).

The same belief was to be found in Ireland. If someone flung a fork at the whirlwind, moaning might be heard. This was considered proof enough that there was a being in it, and that is why, in order to avoid evil consequences, the person who threw the sharp tool was supposed to say at the same time: *M'olc agus m'urchóid leat!* ('May my misfortune go with you'!)

In the event that the whirlwind contained a person who was being abducted, it might be the victim who would receive the blow, but this would have a beneficial effect. According to the French folklorist Paul Sébillot, the consequence was that it could save the person who had been taken away by a demon:

One day, some people were haymaking when a gust of wind suddenly arose. A maid who happened to be holding a knife at that moment threw it in the midst of the whirlwind. The whirlwind vanished immediately, to the satisfaction of the haymakers who were shouting that the devil was inside in it. Then, everyone looked for the knife but they could not find it. They thought that it was probably embedded in the body of someone being carried away by the devil. One day, as the same maid was washing clothes in a neighbouring farm, she recognized her knife in the hands of a young washerwoman. She asked her where she had got it from. The girl answered that she had sold herself to the devil in order to be rich because she was fed up with working. But the devil had carried her away in a

whirlwind: ‘Without your throwing a knife<sup>42</sup> into that whirlwind, I would have become a lost soul’, she said.<sup>43</sup>

In Scotland, too, the fairies were thought to travel in companies in eddies of wind. According to J.G. Campbell: ‘In Gaelic the eddy is known as *oiteag sluaigh* (‘the people’s [fairies’] puff of wind’) and its motion as *falbh air chuisseagan treòrac* (‘travelling on tall grass stems’). These gusts of wind were unexpected and hard to explain since they happened when the air was still, which went to confirm the folk idea that the fairies could master the wind. Scottish fairies were also thought to carry people off in the air and to take them far from their homes. J.G. Campbell thus talks about the ‘Lady of the Green Island’, *Baintighearn ’n Eileen Uaine*, in this context, and the ‘light folk’, ‘*an sluagh eutrom*’,<sup>44</sup> as the abductors. Here again, throwing such things as one’s bonnet, or an unsheathed knife, but also a left shoe, or even some soil from a mole-hill, at the eddy of wind, could make the abductors drop their prisoner.<sup>45</sup>

It is worthy of note that we can find similar beliefs about whirlwinds outwith the Celtic regions. In the south of France, for instance, the blast of wind called *Fouletoun*, *Follet*<sup>46</sup> was thought to be caused by a mischievous sprite, if

---

<sup>42</sup> This can be related to another widespread popular belief – that of restoring to normality a human being who had been turned into a werewolf by making him bleed as a result of a blow from a sickle or a black-hafted knife. See, in tis connection, Daniel Giraudon, *Du coq à l’âne*, Douarnenez 2000, 332. See also Gaël Milin, *Les Chiens de Dieu*, Brest 1993, pp 185-6.

<sup>43</sup> Translated by the writer from, Paul Sébillot, *Coutumes populaires de la Haute-Bretagne*, Paris 1967, 302-3. New edition. Paris 1886.

<sup>44</sup> John Gregorson Campbell, *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* Glasgow 1900, 87. See also Ronald Black, (ed.), *The Gaelic Otherworld*. John Gregorson Campbell’s *Superstitions of the Highlands & Islands* and *Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands & Islands*, Edinburgh 2005, 13. Commentary by Ronald Black.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 87.

<sup>46</sup> In old French, this word *follet* means ‘bellows’, hence the connection to the ‘blowing’ wind.

not by the devil himself. If we are to believe the orders of the White Book,<sup>47</sup> women in Toulouse had to be very careful when encountering a whirlwind as it was thought that it could make them pregnant, a belief that used to be common in the Basque country also:

*Quand les femmes iront se promener  
Si elles trouvent le Vent-Follet  
Qui court au sol en tourbillon  
Elles s'arrêteront aussitôt,  
Elles croiseront leurs cuisses  
Afin qu'il ne puisse les atteindre  
Ni s'emparer d'elles par devant  
En soufflant dans leur tablier.<sup>48</sup>*

[When women go for a walk  
If they come across the elfish wind  
That runs whirling at ground level  
They will stop immediately  
They will cross their thighs  
So that it might neither reach them  
Nor seize them from the front  
By blowing in their apron.]<sup>49</sup>

In Marsillargues, in the Gard, young girls in their childhood were taught to fling stones against the mischievous wind while uttering words of incantation.

---

<sup>47</sup> *Las ordenansas et costumans del libre Blanc*, Paris, 1876, lines 374-381

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Pierre Piniès, *Croyances populaires des pays d'Oc*, Marseille 1984, 45.

<sup>49</sup> Translated by the writer.

In the Roussillon<sup>50</sup> also, little girls and young maidens feared that whirlwinds were linked to a goblin that might make them pregnant. In order to protect themselves from this danger, they used to throw grains of sand, wheat or maize behind them, as the goblin was supposed to count the grains before approaching a woman. In the Aude valley, (Département (county) of Southern France) if a girl caught sight of a whirlwind, she was supposed to scatter cereal grains in front of her house and to stay indoors in order to prevent any sexual impregnation. These ideas may be linked to a tradition of celebrating the carnival called ‘*La Bentadoro*’ (from Occitan ‘*bentar*’, ‘to make wind’), in the Luchonais region [département de la Haute-Garonne, Southern France]. During the carnival young men would try to catch nubile girls in order to shake them and to hit their belly or buttocks with some phallic-shaped object, such as a stick, a clog, or a stone. Unwittingly, they were keeping alive a very old belief about the impregnating power of the wind.<sup>51</sup>

To mention just one other region in Europe – the episode of the whirlwind and the knife is well known in Scandinavia as is evident from the comprehensive study entitled *The Black Ox*, by Archer Taylor,<sup>52</sup> who found more than one hundred variants of that theme in Finnish tradition. As the scene usually takes place in the haymaking season, the throwing of the knife is most often described as the consequence of the farmer’s anger when his hay has been scattered by a whirlwind. The story is similar to that found in Brittany – the farmer has heard that by throwing a knife he would cause the whirlwind to disappear, and having done so, he is later reprimanded by the person who was supposedly wounded in the whirlwind when he did so. In most versions cited by

---

<sup>50</sup> A former province of Southern France corresponding to the *Département des Pyrénées orientales*.

<sup>51</sup> For Breton ideas about the impregnating power of the moon, see Daniel Giraudon *Le ciel dans les traditions populaires en Bretagne* ; in *Etudes sur la Bretagne et les pays celtiques*, *Kreiz 4*, Brest, décembre 1995, 99-131.



Archer Taylor, the farmer is also borne away to unknown regions where he is forced to eat, and there he finds his knife again.

It would be possible to pursue these parallels further, but enough evidence has been adduced to show the widespread similarity in beliefs about whirlwinds in many regions of Europe. Before we conclude, however, let us consider the etymology of the Breton word '*Korc'hwez*' ('whirlwind'). Its root '*kor*' is also found in Cornish '*korwez*', and in Welsh '*cor-wynt*',<sup>53</sup> and it could describe the circular movement of these gusts of wind. In Irish, the term, '*cor*', also refers to the idea of a turning movement, and it is to be found in an Irish dance called '*Cor na síóg*', '*The Fairy Reel*'. The Irish word can also be related to the Breton '*Koroll*', to dance in a circle. But could not the group implication implicit in the word '*Kor*' link it to another meaning, that is, 'an army', which would bring us back to the trooping fairies – the fairy host of the '*sí gaoithe*'? This other sense of '*korr*' is present in the Breton '*Koskor*', meaning 'troop', ('*coscorée*' in Upper Brittany), and in regional names, such as, Trégor ('three armies') and Périgord ('four armies'). One could imagine that, as a result of homophony, this popular etymology might have been accepted by some.

It is possible also that the root '*Kor*', which is also to be found in the Breton words '*Korr-iganed*', and '*Korr-nandoned*', meaning '*fairies*', might have reinforced the belief in the magical whirlwinds thought to have been caused by these little supernatural beings (later replaced by the clerics through a Christianisation of the belief). Curiously, an identical phenomenon seems to have happened in Ireland according to Dáithí Ó hÓgáin :

---

<sup>52</sup> Archer Taylor, *The Black Ox. The Study of the History of a Folk-Tale*, Helsinki 1963. FFC70.

<sup>53</sup> The Welsh word "(g)wynt": strong wind, can be found also in the Breton words '*korventenn*' 'gale', and '*gwentañ*', 'to winnow', and '*gwenterez*': 'winnowing machine'.

The belief that a whirlwind is caused by fairies as they pass by is of a kind likely to be quite ancient but it must have been reinforced by the similarity in sound of its title ‘*sí gaoithe*’, originally ‘*sidhe gaoithe*’ and literally meaning ‘thrust of wind’ with the word ‘*sí*’, originally ‘*sidhe*’ for the fairies themselves.<sup>54</sup>

If this were the case, then the physical and mythological aspects of the Celtic whirlwind would close in a magical circle.

### **Acknowledgments**

Together with my informants in the field mentioned in the footnotes, I wish to thank the following for their generous assistance: Professor Patrica Lysaght, Dr Rosaleen Murphy, Joe Mac Gowan, Brian Mac Gaharan, Yannick Oulc’hen, The UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, the National Folklore Collection, and the library of Centre de recherche Bretonne et Celtique, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest, Brittany, France.

---

<sup>54</sup>Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance*, New York 1991, 190.