
Dust and Ashes: Sweeping the Souls in Celtic Countries

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Introduction

All over the world and through the ages, man has certainly always been worried about the afterlife. The belief that the dead can still have some influence on people's lives led the living to try to propitiate them. Not to do so was to invite misfortune upon the family or the community. As a consequence, certain gestures, rituals and behaviours were and are still respected today, although those who perform them now may not always understand their original meaning. In Brittany as in the other Celtic countries, traditional folk beliefs die hard, and this paper will consider one such belief which is mentioned in the eighteenth century in Jacques Cambry's *Voyage dans le Finistère* ('Travel in Finistère').¹

In 1836, the Chevalier de Fréminville (1787-1848) published a new edition² of Jacques Cambry's book, which included some historical, archaeological and geographical notes, together with a description of the fauna and flora of the Breton *département* of Finistère. In the preamble, after praising the work, de Fréminville wrote the following:

Cet ouvrage possède encore un avantage qui chaque jour devient de plus en plus précieux: il rapporte un grand nombre de traditions

¹ The original edition *Voyage dans le Finistère ou état de ce département en 1794 et 1795*, was printed in 3 volumes in 8° in Paris by Imprimerie-librairie du Cercle Social, 4 rue du théâtre-Français, en l'an VII de la République française.

² *Voyage dans le Finistère par Cambry*, nouvelle édition accompagnée de notes historiques, archéologiques, physiques et de la flore et de la faune du département, par M. Le Chevalier de Fréminville, capitaine des frégates du Roi, Membre de la Société royale des Antiquaires de France, des Sociétés philomathiques et d'Histoire naturelle de Paris, Imprimerie J.-B. Lefournier, Brest 1836.

*locales, de pratiques superstitieuses, dont l'origine remonte aux tems les plus reculés, et dont les sources appartiennent non seulement aux plus vieilles légendes du christianisme, mais même à la mythologie celtique, et sont d'appréciables débris du culte mystérieux des druides armoricains. Ces traditions, ces superstitions, encore vivaces, encore répandues dans le Finistère il y a quarante ans, s'y effacent rapidement chaque jour par les progrès que la civilisation avec ses innovations souvent désolantes, a faits depuis lors dans les régions sauvages de la vieille Armorique. Beaucoup sont aujourd'hui oubliées ; dans quelques années toutes auront disparu et ne se retrouveront plus que dans le livre de Cambry*³.

(This book has a further advantage in that it is daily becoming more and more precious: it relates a great number of local traditions and of superstitious practices whose origins date back to the most ancient times, and whose sources belong, not only to the oldest legends of Christianity, but even to Celtic mythology, and are appreciable remnants of the mysterious cult of the Armorican druids. Those traditions, those superstitions, which were still to be found all over Finistère forty years ago, are disappearing on a daily basis, due to progress that civilisation, with its often disappointing innovations, has made in the wilder parts of old Armorica. Many of them are forgotten today; in a few years' time, all of them will have vanished, and will only be found in Cambry's book.)⁴

In these lines, as well as in the then fashionable fascination with all things Celtic, one can distinguish what becomes a *leitmotiv* in later writings, that is, the foretelling of the imminent death of all these customs and beliefs, and the urgent need to collect them. However, in this the Knight of Fréminville erred on the side of pessimism, for he underestimated the weight of these beliefs in the people's memory – memories which until then had not been consulted to any great extent. In fact, as the folklorists of the nineteenth century found, much remained to be collected among the people of Brittany. My own research in the field of folklore confirms that, at the present time, the source has not yet dried up. I can testify that field research

³ de Fréminville, *op. cit.*, 'Avertissement de l'éditeur', 1836, vj-vij.

⁴ Cambry, edited by Fréminville: *Voyage dans le Finistère, édition accompagnées de notes historiques, physique et de la flore et de la faune du département*. It was published in 1836 in Brest, at JB Lefournier, imprimeur-libraire, rue Royale en un volume in 8°. Translation by DG.

in the Trégor area of Brittany alone, yielded numerous echoes of the elements collected by Cambry in the domain of popular traditions.

When Cambry was travelling through Finistère, the great majority of its inhabitants were monolingual, speaking only Breton. Cambry had the idea of going to the ordinary people in his quest for traditions. He was not a Breton speaker himself but he thought highly of the language all the same. He did not agree with the negative policy of the French authorities towards Breton, and even considered that it was 'barbarous to annihilate the Breton language, the language of the Celts'.⁵ Cambry, therefore, had to rely on interpreters. Yet, the manner in which he separated words when writing Breton sentences, show that his aides could certainly speak Breton, but were not literate in their mother tongue. Cambry did not give many details about those who gave him the various items of information. Most often, he starts his testimonies as follows: 'It is told that... it is said that...' It was not the custom in his day to give the names of informants, unlike the practice of later times.

Many passages in Cambry's book are devoted to traditional beliefs and funeral rites. I will choose one example from that field, compare and enrich it with the work of nineteenth century Breton folklorists, and with what I myself have been able to collect over the last thirty years of research in the Trégor – my home area in Brittany. I will also make some comparisons with similar customs found in Ireland, England and Wales.

Dust and Ashes

I will set aside common practices such as the stopping of the clock, the covering of mirrors, and the emptying of the buckets of water, when a dying person has breathed his or her last. I will not speak either of the washing-women,⁶ *ar c'hannerezed noz* (mistranslated by Cambry as 'singers of the night'⁷), or of the Death cart, *Karr an*

⁵ *Voyage dans le Finistère*, Edition critique par Dany-Guillou-Beuzit, Quimper 1999, 188.

⁶ See Daniel Giraudon, 'Lavandières de jour, lavandières de nuit', in *Kreiz 9, Fontaines, puits et lavoirs en Bretagne*, Brest CRBC, juin 1998, 89-130.

⁷ The mistake arises from the fact that two verbs have a virtually similar spelling but different meaning: *Kanañ* 'to sing', and *Kannañ* 'to wash'.

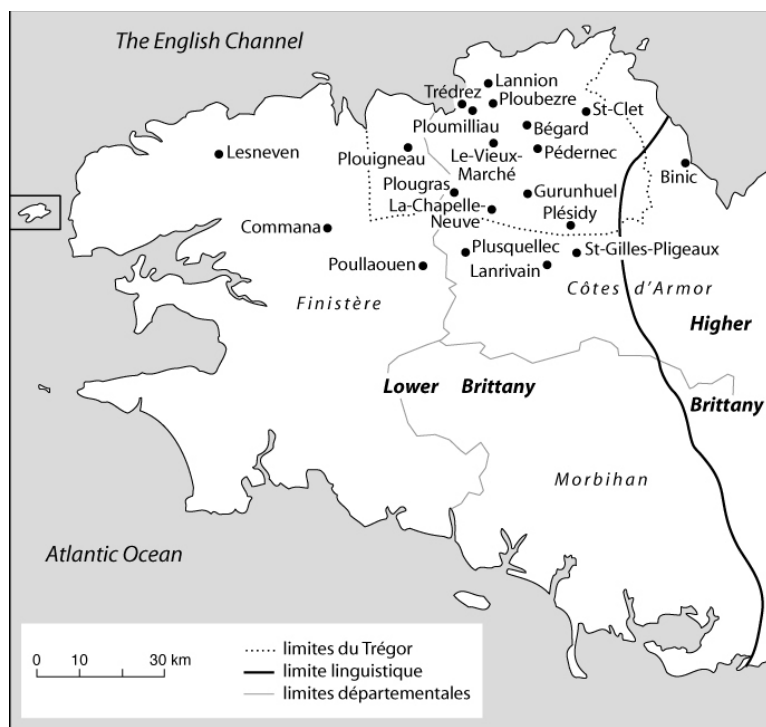


Fig. 1: map of Lower Brittany showing the border of the Breton-speaking area, and the places where field work relevant for this articles was carried out.
(Map drawn by Gilles Couix)

Ankou.⁸ I will pass in silence over the rites at wells, the mourning bees, the wavering flames of wax candles, and other beliefs of the kind that have already been dealt with by others on many occasions. This paper is concerned mainly with what happens to souls after death and the ongoing influence of those who are deceased on the everyday life of their kinfolk.

Cambry recognised a great concern for their dead among the Bretons of Lower Brittany.⁹ A century later, nothing had changed, if

⁸ See Patricia Lysaght, 'A Choiste gan Cheann dén tAm san Oíche É?', in *Sinsear, The Folklore Journal* 2 (1980), 43-59.

⁹ A distinction is made between Lower and Higher Brittany. The former is the western part of Brittany where Breton is still spoken, and the latter is the eastern part, where the 'Gallo' dialect still survives.

we are to believe Anatole Le Braz and his *Légende de la mort*.¹⁰ Cambry wrote: '*On a dans ces contrées une profonde vénération pour les mort*'¹¹ ('They have a great veneration for the dead in these parts'), and: '*La nation bretonne est remarquable par sa piété pour les morts*'¹² ('The Breton nation is remarkable for its piety for the dead'). Le Braz confirms this, saying: '*On a pu dire de la Bretagne qu'elle était avant toute chose le pays de la mort*'¹³ ('It has been said that Brittany was first and foremost the country of death'). And also '*Au fond, toute la conscience de ce peuple est orientée vers les choses de la mort*'¹⁴ ('Fundamentally, the whole consciousness of this people is set towards matters of death').

The material conception of the soul and its fate have not changed either over the centuries. For the people of Lower Brittany, those who are deceased never leave this world completely. In fact, it is believed that their souls regularly return to the places where they used to live. This is especially the case on three important occasions (nights) in the year: at Christmas, on Saint John's Eve and, even more so, at *Samhain*. This is what Cambry noted from the people of Lesneven: '*Ils disent que la veille de la fête des morts, il y a plus d'âmes dans chaque maison que de grains de sable dans la mer et sur le rivage*'¹⁵ ('They say that on the eve of the feast of the dead, there are more souls in every house than grains of sand in the sea and on the shore'). The same image is given by Léon Marillier:

*Les âmes ne restent point enfermées dans les tombes des cimetières; elles errent la nuit par les grandes routes et les entiers déserts; elles hantent les champs et les landes, pressées comme les brins d'herbe d'une prairie ou les grains de sable de la grève.*¹⁶

¹⁰ Anatole Le Braz, *La légende de la mort en Basse-Bretagne*, croyances, traditions et usages des Bretons armoricains avec une introduction de Léon Marillier, maître de conférences à l'école des hautes études de Paris, Paris 1893. (Numerous subsequent editions).

¹¹ Cambry, 1999, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 132.

¹³ Anatole Le Braz, *La légende de la mort chez les Bretons armoricains*, Paris 1912, XXXV. See also Marillier in first edition, *La légende de la mort en Basse-Bretagne*, Paris 1893, XLIV.

¹⁴ Anatole Le Braz, *op. cit.*, T1, 1912, XLII.

¹⁵ Jacques Cambry, *op. cit.*, 1999, 175.

¹⁶ Léon Marillier, *op. cit.*, 1893, XLIV

(The souls do not stay confined in the churchyard graves; they roam at night on the high roads and deserted places; they haunt fields and heaths, as thick as the blades of grass of a meadow, or the grains of sand on beaches.)

Anatole Le Braz also provides a similar comparison: *‘Aussi pressées que les brins d’herbes dans les champs ou que les gouttes d’eau dans l’averse sont les âmes qui font sur terre leur purgatoire*¹⁷ (‘The souls who serve their purgatory on earth are as thick as the blades of grass in the fields or the drops of water in a downpour’).

This belief is to be found not only in Brittany but is also well known in Ireland:

... and the souls of my own dead as thick as bees around me... It is said that on this one day in the year, the souls of the dead are allowed to revisit their native districts: and if only human eye had the power to see them, they would be observed about one on every side ‘as plenty as thraneens¹⁸ in an uncut meadow’.¹⁹

In fact, there is a widespread belief that on the eve of 1 November, the souls of the dead return to their former homes. This belief can be found elsewhere in France, other than in Brittany – for instance, in Haute-Savoie, where the phrase used in relation to the dead, recalls the preceding ones. It was said that on the eve of All Hallows: *‘il y avait autant d’âmes sur terre que de chalavrons, (tiges de chanvre), dans les champs’, ‘et qu’il y avait ce soir-là des processions d’âmes par les chemins’*²⁰ (‘There were as many souls that night on the earth as hemp stems in the fields and the processions of souls could be seen along the country lanes’).

¹⁷ Anatole le Braz, *op. cit.*, T2 1912, 25.

¹⁸ Tráithnín, thrawneen, thraneen, traneen // n. a straw, a rush; something of little or no value; thrawneens n.pl. long stems of dog’s tail grass; a hard stem of a rush used to free the tube of a smoker’s pipe; fig. long spindly legs < Ir. ‘I don’t give a traneen for your opinion’, ‘Them cows haven’t had a thrawneen of hay for the last two days’; Canon Sheehan, *Glenanaar*, 181: “‘I don’t care a thraneen for all that the gossips can say agin her’” (Prof Terence Patick Dolan : A Hiberno-English Archive. www.hiberno-english.com)

¹⁹ Kevin Danaher *The Year in Ireland*, Cork 1972, 229, with reference to All Soul’s Day (2 November).

²⁰ Claude Lecouteux, *Chasses fantastiques au Moyen-Age*, Paris 1999, 41.

The belief in the return of the dead to their former abodes on certain nights seems to have become generalised to a belief that this could be a daily event, or rather a nightly one, because, as everybody knows, the night belongs to spirits and other supernatural beings. This was asserted by a western Irish peasant to Daniel Deeney at the turn of the twentieth century, as follows:

You know that your dead relatives always like to spend their nights in the old homes...the peasant, an intelligent man, assured me that this belief was very general, which accounts for a custom I have observed on several occasions, viz., that of carefully sweeping round the hearth, and arranging the 'stools' in a semicircle in front of the raked fire before the person who is last up retires to rest...What would they think if the place was not tidied up before them ? 'Tis little respect we had for them, they'd say.²¹

These customs and beliefs could have had their origins in a conception of purgatory being served on earth, a belief noted also in Ireland, where it was said that:

the spirits of the dead are not taken from earth, nor do they lose all their former interest in earthly affairs, but enjoy the happiness of the saved, or suffer the punishment imposed for their sins in the neighbourhood of the scenes among which they lived while clothed in flesh and blood...The spirits of the good wander with the living as guardian angels, but the spirits of the bad are restrained in their action, and compelled to do penance near the places where their crimes were committed.²²

All this gives sense to what Cambry said in his book:

Jamais dans le district de Lesneven on ne balaie une maison la nuit ; on y prétend que c'est en éloigner le bonheur, que les trépassés s'y promènent et que les mouvements d'un balai les blessent et les écartent. Ils nomment cet usage proscrit : Scubican aoun,²³ balaïement des morts.²⁴

(In the district of Lesneven they would never sweep the floor in a house at night; they said that it would mean brushing happiness away,

²¹ Daniel Deeney, *Peasant Lore from Gaelic Ireland*, London 1901, 5-6.

²² D.R. Mac Anally, *Irish Wonders*, Avenel, New Jersey 1996, 111. First edition, Boston 1888.

²³ This should be written in three words: 'Scubic an anaoun', 'Sweeping the souls'.

²⁴ *Voyage dans le Finistère, op. cit.*, 175.

that the dead move about the floor, and that the sweeping of the broom would hurt them and thrust them aside. They call this forbidden activity *Scubican aoun*, sweeping the dead).

I have recorded this interdiction on numerous occasions from my informants all over Brittany. Some more specific details were added in the Breton-speaking area. Firstly, this prohibition started at sunset,²⁵ or after the Angelus bell, and secondly, it was important not to throw the dust out of the house. If the floor was swept at nightfall, the dust had to be left in a heap near the fireplace, or in a corner behind the door inside the house, and thrown away the next morning: '*Skubañ an ti etrezek an tan ha pas kas ar bouldrenn er-maez*'²⁶ ('To sweep the dust towards the fireplace and not throw it out of the house').

Marillier tells us that the soul used to be considered as a physical body, smaller than a normal human one.²⁷ After entering the house, the soul was thought to loiter about at floor level. Thus, if it was struck by the broom as it was swept, it was, according to Cambry, 'injured' not only physically, but also morally. Let us keep in mind that people used to believe that 'the dead remained close at hand and continued to interest themselves in the affairs of the living, either helpfully or harmfully', according to the treatment they received from the living. Striking them with a brush would anger them and they would retaliate by taking away the luck of the house.

Traces of this belief were recorded in Ireland by Kevin Danaher, although he states that it was expressed jokingly: 'The floor was swept towards the open hearth not towards the door. There were joking references to 'keeping the luck in the house and not sweeping it out'.²⁸ There is an interesting idea here; not only is the good luck kept in the house, but the dust is swept towards the fireplace. One

²⁵ Noted as well by Anatole Le Braz, *La légende de la mort chez les Bretons armoricains*, Vol. 2, Paris 1912, 22.

²⁶ Interview with Antoinette Conan on 8. 11. 2005, in Gurunhuel ('sweep the dust towards the fireplace and not throw it out of the house').

²⁷ Léon Marillier, *op. cit.*, 'Introduction', *La légende de la mort chez les Bretons armoricains*, Paris 1893, XL.

²⁸ Kevin Danaher, *Irish Country Households*, Cork 1999, 73.

might speculate that this is in order to send the souls towards the fireplace where they will be warm, as one way of propitiating them. But, as Danaher says, although the memory was kept, the belief itself was no longer taken seriously.

Kathleen Wiltshire reported the same belief for England:

Whenever a woman swept a floor, she would sweep the floor inwards, never outwards through the door; if she swept it outwards, it would carry away all the money and good fortune of the family.²⁹

This is a very old belief,³⁰ The persistence of the idea in many parts of Lower Brittany that sweeping the dust out of the house would bring bad luck was confirmed to me by many of my informants over the last couple of years. In Lannion, sweeping the dust out after sunset was '*Kas ar chañs er-maez*' ('Throwing luck away, outside').³¹ In La Chapelle-Neuve, '*Skubañ an ti deus noz, se oa bouto ar re varv er-maez, skubañ ar re varv er-maez*' ('Sweeping at nightfall was throwing out the dead, sweeping out the dead'),³² while in Bégard, according to Yves le Bihan (see Fig. 2): '*Ma vez skubet an ti goude koan veze lâret veze laket an anaon er-maez*' ('If you swept after supper, you would throw the souls away').³³

Still in Plésidy, '*Skubañ an ti barzh porzh en noz. Oa ket chañsus*' ('Throwing the sweepings outside in the yard would bring bad luck'), according to Eloise Correc (Fig. 3),³⁴ while in Plusquellec:

Pas skubañ pa vez noz anei. Veze ket zroed d'ôr. Me meus soñj oan ôr, mamm-gozh oa deut; skubet feus an anaon 'bar porzh veze lâret din. An diweañ a oa marvet e-barzh an ti oa an anaon ha ma veze skubet an ti veze skubet er-maez.

²⁹ Kathleen Wiltshire, *Wiltshire Folklore*, Salisbury 1975, 88.

³⁰ *Idem* 88. The story is told of Lady Alice Kyteler (an alleged Irish witch in Kilkenny in the fourteenth century) sweeping the dust from all the people's doors, saying as she went: 'To the house of William my son / Hie all the wealth of Kilkenny town.'

³¹ Interview with Annette Pezron (1919), in Lannion on 23.11.2000 (MD13).

³² Interview with Anna Veuzit (1925), in La Chapelle-Neuve, on 9.11.2005 (MD 116).

³³ Interview with Yves Le Bihan (1915), in Bégard, in July 2006 (MD 121). See Fig. 2.

³⁴ Interview with Eloise Correc (1921), in February 2002 (MD 49). See Fig. 3.



Fig. 2: Yves (1915) (right) and Céline Le Bihan (1920).
(Photo: Daniel Giraudon-2007.)

(You were not supposed to sweep the house floor at night. Once, when my grand-mother had seen me doing it, she said: you have swept the souls away in the yard, the *anaon*. You have swept the last dead person of the house.)³⁵

Another important point in this last testimony is that it mentions sweeping ‘the last dead person’ out of the house. While earlier references have stated that at *Samhain* all souls report to their former homes, this last suggests, perhaps, that on other nights, it would be only the last, most-recently dead, member(s) of the family who would do so.

³⁵ Interview with Alice David (1910), in Plusquellec, on 4.10.2002 (MD 63).



Fig. 3: Eloise Correc (1921) Plésidy. (Photo: Daniel Girausdon, 2007.)

In some places the sweeping of the souls, or of the ancestors has been Christianised, as happened quite frequently with former pagan beliefs. In Ploujean, for example, it was said: *‘Lorsqu’ on jette les balayures dehors après le coucher du soleil, on balaye le Bon Dieu dehors’*³⁶ (‘If you throw the sweepings outside, you sweep God away’). In Lampaul-Plouarzel, a similar saying was reported: *Le soir, il ne faut pas mettre hors de la maison la poussière balayée à l’intérieur ; il est impératif d’attendre le lendemain. Ce serait mettre dehors ce que le Bon Dieu a fait dans la journée*³⁷ (‘At night, you should not throw outside the dust that has been swept on the house floor, you should wait until the next morning. It would be throwing out what God has done during the day’). I myself heard it said in Plouigneau: *‘Lâret veze pa veze skubet an ti deus an noz, veze taolet an aotrou Doue er-maez’*³⁸ (‘They said not to sweep the house at night, it would be like sweeping God away’).

³⁶ *Revue des traditions populaires*, vol. 9, nos. 8-9 (1894), 492.

³⁷ Yann Riou, *Echos du bord de mer*, Emgleo Breiz 2004, 135.

³⁸ Interview with Francine Joseph (1926), in Plouigneau, on 18.9.2007 (MD141).

In Saint-Clet, there was a rhyme to remind people of the belief:

*Skubañ an ti goude kreisteiz
'Vez taol er-maez an aotrou Doue.*³⁹

(Sweeping after midday
Is sweeping God away.)

Quite recently I heard the following in Binic: *'Il ne fallait pas balayer le soir car la sainte Vierge allait passer dans la nuit !'*⁴⁰ ('You were not supposed to sweep the floor in the evening because the Virgin would visit the place at night'). Here again, one can assume that the Virgin had taken the place of the souls of the dead in an earlier version. Such sweeping was even considered to be a sin: *'Ur pec'hed bras eo kas ar skubennachou al leur-zi war-zu toull an nor pa 'z eo deut an noz'* ('It was a big sin to sweep the floordust outside when it was dark'). Christianisation of beliefs such as this was certainly encouraged by the Catholic Church in Brittany in order to try and wipe out the old pagan beliefs.

For some people, the souls that entered the houses were souls undergoing penance, *eneoù 'ôr pinijenn*, begging the living for prayers. An old friend of mine, Yves Pichon, from Poullaouen, told me once: *'Quand un crapaud entrait dans la maison le soir, ma mère disait que c'était: an anaon'*⁴¹ ('When a toad entered a house at nightfall, my mother would say that it was some poor soul'). The poor soul was thought to be serving its time in purgatory in the 'awful' shape of a toad and came to ask for prayers in order to be saved.

A specific belief about sweeping the floor was mentioned by Jules Gros.⁴² It concerns what should happen when a wake – formerly lasting two or three days – was held at home: *'Pa vez tud varo ne vez ket kaset ar skubien er-mêz euz an ti ken na vez eet ar horv'* ('When there is a dead person in the house on its death-bed, the

³⁹ Interview with Suzanne Le Favennec in Saint-Clet, 1995.

⁴⁰ Interview with Claude Giraudon (1934) on 1.11.07, in Binic.

⁴¹ Interview with Yves Pichon in September 1989, in Poullaouen.

⁴² For further information on Jules Gros as a tradition-bearer, see *Béaloideas* 75 (2007), 4-6, 20-3.

sweepings will only be thrown out when the corpse has left for the burial').⁴³

I have recorded a similar account in Ploumilliau: '*Veze ket skubet an ti er-maez tro pad veze ur c'horf 'barzh an ti, korf an hini marv en ti, veze skubet tout trezek an oaled ha skoet tout bar an tan pa veze aet ar c'horfer-maez'*'⁴⁴ ('When there was a dead man in a house, one was supposed to sweep the floor towards the fireplace and the dust was only thrown away when the corpse had left the house'). The same informant told me that throwing the sweepings out was like throwing someone out of the house: '*skubañ un bennak deus an ti*', and soon afterwards, someone of the family would die, as if the dead person was taking revenge.

A corresponding belief in Ireland was that the people of the house were not supposed to take the ashes out of the fireplace during a wake.⁴⁵

In these beliefs, there is an assumption that the soul of the dead person remains near the corpse until the latter has left the house. In Ireland, in Dingle, for example, it was not only the dead man's soul that would be present at the wake, but also all the souls of those family members who had preceded him: 'It was also strongly believed that all who were dead in the family would come at that time to accompany the person on their journey to the next life'.⁴⁶

In the Irish tradition, the dead and the fairies appear to be inextricably linked, and similar stories were often told about both of them. It was believed that at nightfall, the fairies were on the threshold of houses ready to enter. They, like the dead, were thought to be short-tempered and were not to be offended. That is why when people threw

⁴³Jules Gros, *Le trésor du breton parlé*, tome 2, Saint-Brieuc, 1970, 478.

⁴⁴Interview with Joseph Jégou on 5.7.2006, in Ploumilliau. In fact, this was a universal belief. In Russia, it was commonly forbidden to clean and sweep the *izba* (Russian house) until the corpse had been removed for burial. (Elizabeth A Warner, 'Russian Peasant Beliefs and Practices Concerning Death and the Supernatural, Collected in the Novosoko'niki Region, Pskov Province, Russia, 1995. Part II: Death in Natural Circumstances', *Folklore* 111 (2000): 267.

⁴⁵Daniel Deeney, *Peasant Lore from Gaelic Ireland*, London 1901, 78.

⁴⁶Pádraig Tyers, *Malairt Beatha*, Dún Chaoin, Co. Kerry 1992. Translation by Dr Rosaleen Murphy.

⁴⁷Padraic O'Farrell, *Irish Customs*, Dublin 2004, 84.

feet-water out into the yard, it was advisable to shout: ‘*seachain*’ (‘beware’), or ‘*chughaibh an t-uisce*’ (‘beware of the water’) to give ‘them’ time to move away so as not to be drenched – which they would not have not appreciated.⁴⁷ As is well known, they have a hatred for what is dirty. Consequently, bad luck would strike the household. Traces of such a belief can be found, for instance, in Co. Clare: ‘It is unlucky to throw dust or slops out of a house on New Year’s Day, as you throw away with them all the good luck of the year’.⁴⁸

This is exactly what I have heard in Brittany – in Plouigneau – about the souls of the dead: ‘*Deus an noz pa veze taolet dour e-maez deus an ti, goude kuzh (ss)-heol, a veze taolet an dour gant fas an anaon*’⁴⁹ (‘At night, if you threw out water into the yard, you would throw it at the faces of the souls of the dead’). The souls, with their ‘faces’, are again considered to be physical beings. And one can imagine that evil consequences would ensue for the person who had drenched them with the water, just as would be the case with the fairies.

Moreover, in the same Irish county mentioned above, it was also reckoned unlucky ‘to take fire out of a house,—so that, if you light a pipe indoors, it should be smoked out before leaving’.⁵⁰ This is a well-known belief – and responsibility – particularly with regard to the eve of the first of May. Here again, we can point to the link between the fire embers-ashes, the souls of the dead returning to their former earthly homes on that particular day, *Beltaine*, and the taking away of the luck of the house.

Another of these domestic taboos was that the trivet should not be left in the fireplace at night without having anything on it. It had to be hung against the wall next to the hearth. According to Marcel le Guilloux (Fig. 4), it was said that the souls, after entering the house, would get close to the smouldering fire to get warm.⁵¹ The dead are

⁴⁸ T.J. Westropp, *Folklore of Clare*, Ennis 2000, 45.

⁴⁹ Interview with Francine Joseph (1926) on 11-04-2002 in Plouigneau, (MD 24). I was told elsewhere that it was also forbidden to fetch water from the well after sunset. Interview with Gabrielle Le Hir, on 19.2.2008, in Commana.

⁵⁰ Westropp, *op. cit.*, 45.

⁵¹ Interview with Marcel Le Guilloux, 8.2.2008, Lanrivain : ‘*Oa ket mat teurel dour war an tan pac’h ae an dud da gousket, leuskel an tan, benn teue an anaon da dommañ e dreid*’ (‘It was not good to throw water on the fire in the fireplace when people would go to bed, because the souls of the dead would come and warm their feet’).



Fig. 4: Marcel le Guilloux (1930), Lanrivain. (Photo: Daniel Giraudon, 2008.)

always cold, it is said. Thus, if they saw the trivet with no pot on it, they would get onto it and get burnt:

*Pa vez un trebez noaz war an tan
A vez an anaon o soufr poan.*⁵²

(When the trivet is on the fire without anything on it
The souls suffer.)

This would obviously be a matter of discontent for the souls and, as a consequence, bad luck would strike the family. Thus, a variety of sayings to prevent this happening were in common use. For instance, it was also said that the master of the house would grow old prematurely if the trivet was not put away: *'T'eus ket savet an trebez'* ('You have not removed the trivet'), *'lâre ma mamm d'am zad'*, (my mother would say to my father'), *'ez da c'hrizañ'* ('your hair will turn grey').⁵³ Others would say that the devil would enter the house, *'pas leuskel an trebez war an tan petramant arrio an diaoul 'barzh an*

⁵² Jules Gros, *Le trésor du breton parlé*, Pédernec 1976, T3 319.

⁵³ Interview with Lucien Goneau (1923), on 2.8.2001, in Pédernec, (MD 32/66)

ti.’⁵⁴ Some people said also that if the trivet was left like that in the fireplace, the wind would howl in the chimney: ‘*Leuskel an trebez war ar glaou war e dreid a teu an avel da yudal barzh ar chiminal*’.⁵⁵ Perhaps that would be considered another reaction of the souls?

The same applied to a loaf of bread that would have been left on its back on the table. It would have made the souls suffer according to the following saying in Breton :

*Pe ve’ ‘r bara wa’n tu gen,
Ve ‘n anaoun en poen.*⁵⁶

(When the bread is on the wrong side
It makes the souls suffer.)

Another, and related, belief was that when people moved house at Michaelmas, those leaving the house were not supposed to sweep the floor or even dispose of the ashes from the fireplace: ‘*Pas skubañ an ti ha lezel al ludu ‘barzh ar chiminal*’,⁵⁷ because it would have brought bad luck on those who would replace them on that farm. According to some of my informants the ashes left in the fireplace as well as the dust were even considered as a ‘*porte bonheur*’, (‘good luck bringer’). Once again, we are talking about the souls of the dead being contained in them. The souls are there to welcome and protect the newcomers.

Moreover, when people moved house, they would take a piece of charred wood from their fireplace, thus, in a way, bringing with them the soul(s) of the family, or at least their power contained in the ashes. They would use the dead ember to light their first fire in the new dwelling. Some people said it had to be done by a neighbour.⁵⁸ Thus, the chain that linked them to their ancestors would not be broken and a new chain as well was established with the new neighbours on whom they would have to rely too. According to Seán Ó

⁵⁴ Interview with Francine Joseph (1926) on 28.1.2008. in Plouigneau.

⁵⁵ Interview with Jean Goasdoué (1927) on 18.9.2007, in Plougras (MD 141).

⁵⁶ Letter from Y.F Kemener received on 4.2.2008. from St Gilles Pligeaux. ‘The loaf should not be put on its back. People say that it would cause the devil to enter the house’.

⁵⁷ I have heard that very often in Tregor and also in Commana, Maël-Pestivien.

⁵⁸ Interview with Yves Laouenan, Paimpol 4 April 2008.

Súilleabháin, there seemed to be same tradition in Ireland: ‘Some coals [= embers] of fire from the old house were often taken into the new one but the *croch* (chimney-crane for hanging cooking vessels on) was always left behind.’⁵⁹

That reminds us of the remnants of the Christmas log in Brittany that were kept and used to rekindle the log of the following Christmas. The new log was supposed to burn slowly until Twelfth Night. The piece that remained was kept aside and put in a corner of the house or even under a bed. This Christmas fire was made in order to warm up the ‘visitors’ at night, that is, the souls of the family dead. Consequently, the ashes became sacred and charged with power. The piece of the log left would protect the house from thunder. Another informant told me too that when there was someone ill in the house the remnant of the Christmas log was put back in the fireplace and left to burn a little. This was supposed to help to cure the sick person.⁶⁰ Alice David, born in 1910 in Plourac’h, told me that the ashes of the Christmas log were carried to the field the next morning and they would ensure a good crop.⁶¹

The same belief can be found in Wales:

An account of the festivals observed in Llansanffraid, Montgomeryshire, in the first half of the nineteenth century describes how the ‘Yule log’, was taken out and its ashes stored: On this day (The Epiphany) was removed from the fire place the Cyff Nadolig, or the Yule log which had been placed with great ceremony on the fire on Christmas night, and being of large dimensions had continued burning for these twelve days. The ashes of this log were considered infallible in preventing evil and a portion was carefully kept for the next ‘seedness’ and was placed in the first hopper with the seed corn to act as a charm, and thus cause the corn to grow and become a fruitful crop. An old farmer living on the banks of the Verniew (i. e. Efyrynwy) went to the field forgetting to place the sacred ashes in his hopper, when the old woman, more mindful of this duty, ran shouting after her husband, ‘Sion, Sion, remember the lludw cyff nos nadolig’ (‘ashes of the yule log’). ‘Ah ! Betty’, said Sion, ‘How very fortunate for you to

⁵⁹ Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folk Custom and Belief*, Dublin 1967, 17.

⁶⁰ Interview with Gabrielle Le Hir, in Commana, on 19 February 2008.

⁶¹ Interview with Alice David on 4 October 2002.

remember. Plague on my forgetfulness!’ And having placed the ashes with the corn, Sion felt happy at the prospect of a good crop.⁶²

Another comparison can be made with the fire-brand and the ashes of the Saint John’s bonfire in Brittany. Like the Christmas log, the former would protect the house from thunder and the latter would ensure a good corn crop. The ashes were sold by auction and the person who acquired them laid them on his field the day after purchase. The buyer would be assured of getting a good crop. Anatole le Braz reports being told that the person who bought the ashes of the Saint John’s Eve bonfire was thought to be assured of not dying during the coming year.⁶³

In Ireland, there are no traces of such auctions but the ashes as well as the embers of Saint John’s bonfire (family and communal) would be thrown or placed on each field to get a fruitful harvest. If, for any reason, the embers or ashes could not be brought from the fire to the fields on Midsummer eve, the blessing might still be conferred on them the next day by procuring ashes or cinders from the fire and putting these in the crops. This, however, was only a second-best expedient and not at all as potent or as certain as the real ceremony.⁶⁴ The belief in the presence of the souls of the ancestors at the bonfire was already denounced as a superstition by the Breton priests of the seventeenth century:

‘C’est une superstition de croire que l’âme de l’homme vient la nuit de la Saint-Jean et de la Saint –Pierre se chauffer sur les pierres qu’on range autour du feu de joie.’⁶⁵

(‘It is a superstition to believe that the soul of man comes on Saint John’s and Saint Peter’s night to warm up on the stones that are purposely put down for it around the bonfire’.)

On en voyoit plusieurs qui mettoient des pierres auprès du feu que chaque famille a coutume d’allumer la veille de la feste de saint Jean-

⁶² Trefor M. Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs*, Cardiff, 1978, 48.

⁶³ Anatole Le Braz, *op. cit.*, 1912, T2, 69.

⁶⁴ Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland*, Cork 1972, 145, 146

⁶⁵ Emile Ernault, *Idées populaires des Bretons d’après le Doctrinal et le père Maunoir* in *Le fureteur breton*, avril-mai 1907, N°10, 146.

*Baptiste, afin que leurs pères et leurs ancêtres vinssent s'y chauffer à l'aise.*⁶⁶

(Many people could be seen setting shingles near the bonfire that every family is wont to light on Saint-John's eve so that their fathers and their ancestors might come and warm up at ease).

In Wales, too, people would throw white stones on which they had drawn a mark into the ashes of the Saint John's bonfire. If they could not find the marked stone again the next morning, it was taken to mean that they were going to die.⁶⁷

In each of these instances, the interaction of the dead with the bonfires gave the ashes a sacred value. By providing warm seats for the souls of the dead, the living in turn would be repaid for their kindness by the souls, who had the power to make the soil fruitful or to inform human beings about their destiny.

One final example showing the existence of the belief that the dead can influence human affairs, and of the presence of the souls of the dead in dust, is found in a custom mentioned in the seventeenth century in Brittany, by Mikael Le Nobletz :

*Il se trouvoit des femmes en grand nombre qui baloient soigneusement la chapelle la plus proche de leur village, et ayant ramassé la poussière la jettoient en l'air afin d'avoir le vent favorable pour le retour de leurs maris ou de leurs enfans qui estoient en mer.*⁶⁸

(There could be found a great number of women who would carefully sweep the floor of the nearest chapel, and having gathered the dust, would throw it in the air in order to have favourable winds for the return of their husbands or their children who were at sea.)

The same practice was noted by Cambry⁶⁹:

La seule singularité que Roscoff m'ait offerte (usage ancien) est un usage qui se pratiquait encore avant les secousses des dernières années : des femmes, après la messe, balayaient la poussière de la chapelle nommée de la Sainte Union, la souffloient du côté par lequel leur époux, leurs amans devoient revenir et se flattoient par ce doux

⁶⁶ Verjus, *La vie de Monsieur Le Nobletz, missionnaire de Bretagne*, Paris 1666, livre V, chapitre III, tome I, 194.

⁶⁷ *The Cambro-Briton*, t. 1, 1820, 351. (See Anatole Le Braz, *La légende de la mort*, T2. 69).

⁶⁸ Verjus, *op. cit.*, 1666, 188.

⁶⁹ Cambry, *op. cit.*, 1999, 78.

*sortilège, d'obtenir un vent favorable à leur amour, à leur impatience.*⁷⁰

(The only peculiar thing worthy of interest (old rites) is one practice that was still common before the great upheaval of the past years: after Mass, women would sweep the dust of the chapel la Sainte-Union, and would blow it in the direction from which their husbands or their lovers, were to return and they claimed that by casting this charm that they could obtain a favourable wind.)

Remembering that people in Brittany were, until mid-eighteenth century, buried inside the churches, one could suggest that we have here the same idea – that the virtue of the dead lies in the dust over their graves.

Conclusion

The belief in the power of the dead, especially of ancestors, to influence the lives of their descendants, is found in many places throughout the world. The association between the souls of the dead and the dust over their graves, or the ashes of the fire, must also have been very strong at one time in order to have persisted so long in people's memories. Could this possibly be caused by some faint memory of a time when cremation was performed regularly, thus giving rise to the assimilation of dust and ashes to souls pervading and haunting the human environment ? In any case, one can trace through these sayings and customs both the great respect for, and the fear that our ancestors felt towards the dead. As Anatole Le Braz has aptly put it:

*Le mort a ses sympathies et ses aversions, ses amours et ses haines. Un manque d'égards le met hors de lui ; si on lui fait du tort, il se venge.*⁷¹

(A dead man feels sympathies and aversions for others as well as love and hatred. Should anyone lack respect for him, he will be furious; if anyone wrongs him, he takes his revenge.)

The belief that the dead continued to feel emotions, and that they could take revenge on the living and needed to be placated, marked people's minds for centuries.

⁷⁰ *Idem.*

⁷¹ Anatole Le Braz, *op. cit.*, 1912, 'Introduction', XLVII.