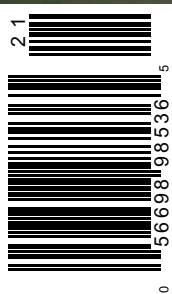


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IRISH WAKE AMUSEMENTS

SEÁN Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN

MISCHIEF-MAKING

A story in *Béalóideas*¹ is concerned with the experience of a migrant labourer from Kerry at a wake in Tipperary. Like myself, this spalpeen knew only of wakes which were carried on with decorum and good behaviour. The wake which he saw in Tipperary was of a different kind, however. Clods of turf were thrown in the wake-house², and the corpse itself was not immune from violence. The Kerryman, relating his experience, told of tears falling from the eyes of the corpse when it was struck. "A wedding should be a wedding, and a wake should be a wake," concluded the honest spalpeen.

The Kerryman, in his day, and most of us nowadays may not like such mischievous behaviour as was carried on at wakes in olden times, but it must be stated that it was the norm, not the exception, throughout the greater part of Ireland. Unruly conduct was always the rule at the wakes of old people.³ As already stated, this was not intended as disrespect for the corpse or for the relatives; rather was it the common traditional pattern of behaviour on such occasions. Those who were present enjoyed it, and it was stopped only if it went beyond the bounds of decorum.

As at the wake which I myself attended in Mayo over forty years ago, where potatoes were the missiles, turf-sods or portions of them (*cadhráin*) were equally used in this way over most of Ireland. Even persons who were no longer young took a hand in the "croosting." Besides turf, the shanks of clay pipes were also broken off by those who did not smoke and used as missiles; the targets were usually unpopular individuals or crusty old men, who were easily angered. Whatever was ready to hand would be used: potatoes, water or anything convenient. "We'll have a night of croosting," the young folk would cry with joy, whenever they heard that some old person had died in the parish.

Other types of mischief were also carried on.⁴ Pepper might be mixed through the tobacco which was distributed in clay pipes at wakes, or else it would be blown in through the keyhole of the door, causing all present to sneeze violently. When they tried to get out into the fresh air, they would often find that the door was tied firmly from the outside to make matters worse. Even the chimney might be blocked with grass-sods or a wet sack, and those at the wake would be half-suffocated before they could open the door.

Other mischievous acts included putting tobacco in the tea-pot, or, if it were Autumn, placing nuts in the fire (these would explode with a loud bang). Meat for the visitors was often boiled in a pot at wakes, and tricksters would look for an opportunity of stealing it and inserting an old boot or a garment into the pot

instead. If the relatives of the deceased happened to be miserly and provided little food or drink for the guests, the young fellows at the wake wreaked vengeance on the stacks and ricks in the haggard before morning.

In the semi-darkness of the wake-house other pranks were carried on surreptitiously, such as pricking people with pins or needles; tying together the boot-laces or coat-tails of two persons who sat side by side; secretly fastening some old man to his chair, or sewing his coat-tails to the shroud about the corpse; suddenly extinguishing the lights in the wake-house; or leaving a player who was blindfolded during a game alone in the house with the corpse. Idle hands and high spirits provided ample means for mischievous behaviour on these occasions.

It often happened that an old person would doze or fall fast asleep at a wake as the night wore on; when this happened he was an immediate target for some trick.⁵ Stories by the hundred are told around the Irish countryside about wake-sleepers who awoke minus their beard or moustache; or else their faces would be blackened with polish or soot while they slept, or, on awaking, they would find themselves bound hand and foot, unable to move.

As already stated, even the corpse occasionally became involved through these pranks.⁶ One of the commonest stories in this regard tells how the limbs of an old person who had died were so bent through rheumatism or arthritis that they had to be tied down with ropes to straighten them for the period of the wake. In the dusk-like atmosphere of the wake-house, some trickster would secretly cut the ropes causing the corpse, as it were, to sit up, terrifying those around.⁷ Or else a rogue might hide himself under the bed on which the corpse was laid out and cause it to shake from side to side, frightening everybody. Some accounts tell how such a trickster was, himself, found dead underneath the bed later. I have already mentioned how cards might be played on the bed where the body lay, or else on the corpse itself; and the corpse too would be given a hand of cards. A pipe was sometimes placed in its mouth; and occasionally it was taken on the floor to dance. ... It can be readily understood that, when rough games and horse-play were carried on in small wake-houses, it might easily happen that the bed or table on which the corpse lay would be overturned, causing the body to fall to the floor.

Young fellows sometimes found that they had not enough scope for their mischievous instincts within the four walls of the wake-house itself, and went off to neighbouring houses and farms in the darkness to cause trouble there. Unpopular farmers were the targets on these nocturnal forays. Gates would be removed from their posts and hidden; crops would be pulled up; apples or other goods would be stolen. I have heard how fellows stole some hens from a farmyard

and took them to the wake-house, where they cooked and ate them. In the northern parts of Ireland where cockfighting was a popular sport, young fellows from a wake-house would steal cocks from local farms and set them to fight on the floor to entertain the wake-guests. A priest from Co. Wexford has told me about one of his uncles who had one hundred and twenty stooks of oats in a field near a wake-house. The young fellows at the wake went into the oat-field during the night and doubled up the stooks, so that the farmer thought next morning that half of his harvest had been stolen, the stooks having been reduced to half their former number.

ROUGH GAMES AND HORSE-PLAY

Many of the games played in the wake-house were rough.⁸ The players were, for the most part, young and robust, and spared neither themselves nor others. Several games involved penalties on the losers, mainly consisting of heavy strokes with a strap; or else, in the hurly-burly of horse-play, similar punishment was inflicted on those who were, for some reason, unpopular.⁹ Indeed, I have heard that sometimes people were hurt so seriously at wakes that their injuries affected them for the rest of their lives.

Tinkering Them Out was an example of such over-strenuous games. Two groups of men formed up within the wake-house, and each did its best to force the other through the doorway. They pushed, struck, pulled and knocked one another until the kitchen resembled a battle-area, with furniture either broken or upset all over the place. The final paragraph of this section describes a game of a somewhat similar nature, The Fat and the Lean Sheep,¹⁰ in which political factions took part. In The Spy and in Beat Out the Bull, men concentrated on ejecting a single individual from the house. Mud, farmyard manure or dirt of any available kind were rubbed to players or thrown about indiscriminately in other games, such as The Stocking of Ashes, The Spinning-wheel, and Shooting the Buck.¹¹ In the last-mentioned game, a man entered the kitchen dressed as a buck-goat (clad in an old goat-skin) and carrying a three-legged stool on his head to represent horns. A second man in the kitchen would then pretend to shoot the "goat" with a stick, while three or four others stood ready to catch the animal when he fell. As the "goat" fell to the floor, he toppled a dish of dirty water which was on top of the stool-legs down on anybody who was nearby.

FIGHTS AND FACTIONS AT WAKES

It will be realised by now that there was ample cause for an occasional fight to break out at a wake, because of the rough character of some of the games, the nature of some of the tricks and the mischievous behaviour and horse-play indulged in. Fights often occurred

too, both in the wake-house and outside, without any apparent reason; they seem to have been started intentionally in many cases to pass away the night.

- 1 *Béaloidéas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*, no. 9 (1939), p. 276.
- 2 Hans Hartmann, *Der Totenkult in Irland: Ein Beitrag zur Religion der Indogermanen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1952), p. 113.
- 3 Thomas Dineley, "Extracts from the Journal of Thomas Dineley, Esquire, Giving Some Account of His Visit to Ireland in the Reign of Charles II," *The Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society*, 2nd Series, vol. 2, nos. 1-2 (1858-59), p. 29, footnote.
- 4 Séan Ó Ruadháin, *Pádhraic Mháire Bhán* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1932) p. 121; *Ireland's Own*, 15 April 1903, p. 7; George A. Little, *Malachi Horan Remembers* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son Ltd, 1943), p. 71.
- 5 Séan Ó Ruadháin, *Pádhraic Mháire Bhán*, op. cit., p. 123; *Ireland's Own*, 15 April 1903, p. 7; John Dunton (third letter), reprinted in Edward MacLysaght, *Irish Life in the Seventeenth Century* (Cork: University Press, 1950), p. 360.
- 6 Michael J. Murphy, *At Slieve Gullion's Foot* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1940), p. 70; John Coulter, ed., *Curious Notions, Chiefly Concerning Alcoholic Liquors, Tobacco, and Those Who Consume Them* (Belfast: John Reid, 1890), p. 58; *Father Matthew Record*, vol. 22, no. 7 (July 1929), p. 215; Hans Hartmann, *Der Totenkult*, op. cit., p. 113.
- 7 Hans Hartmann, *Der Totenkult*, op. cit., p. 113.
- 8 William Carleton, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, vol. I (Dublin: William Curry, 1830), p. 106; George A. Little, *Malachi Horan Remembers*, op. cit., p. 71; *Béaloidéas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*, no. 13 (1943), p. 250; Brendan MacEvoy, "The Parish of Errigal Kieran in the Nineteenth Century," *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1954), p. 124.
- 9 Hans Hartmann, *Der Totenkult*, op. cit., p. 113.
- 10 See p. 72.
- 11 Patrick Kennedy, *The Banks of the Boro: A Chronicle of the County of Wexford* (London: Simkin, Marshall, and Co., 1867), pp. 74-75; *Dublin University Magazine*, vol. 60 (July-December 1862), p. 157; Hans Hartmann, *Der Totenkult*, op. cit., pp. 115-116.

This excerpt from Séan Ó Súilleabháin's 1967 book Irish Wake Amusements has been reproduced by kind permission of Mercier Press.

GLOSSARY

SPALPEEN

n Irish

1. an itinerant seasonal labourer

2. a rascal or layabout

[from Irish Gaelic *spailpín*, itinerant labourer]

CROOSTING

v Irish

1. throwing stones or clods from the hand

[from Irish Gaelic *crústa*, meaning a missile, a clod]

HAGGARD

n Irish

An enclosure beside a farmhouse in which crops are stored.

[in Ireland and the Isle of Man]