

DEATH *and*
the IRISH:
a miscellany

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Contents

<i>Introduction—Death and the Irish: reflections from a Moneygall childhood</i> Salvador Ryan	1
<i>1—Terms for 'death' and 'dying' in Irish</i> Ruairi Ó hUiginn	8
<i>2—Into the west: a fifth/sixth-century lady and her horse join the ancestors</i> Elizabeth O'Brien	11
<i>3—Markers of heroic deaths</i> Catherine Swift	15
<i>4—Buried among the saints</i> Thomas O'Loughlin	20
<i>5—The journey to the grave and the feast of death-lying</i> Catherine Swift	23
<i>6—Death in the north: Norway's Irish saint</i> Alexander O'Hara	26
<i>7—Sexual transgression, exclusion and redemption</i> Elizabeth Boyle	29
<i>8—Visions of the afterlife in the Liber Exemplorum</i> Anthony Shanahan	32
<i>9—The bardic elegy</i> Pádraig Ó Macháin	35

10— <i>The Black Death in Kilkenny</i> Bernadette Williams	39
11— <i>The Pride of Life: the first medieval morality play</i> Alan J. Fletcher	42
12— <i>Some grisly and otherwise quirky deaths in the Irish annals</i> Nollaig Ó Muraile	46
13— <i>Death and remembrance in medieval Dublin</i> Margaret Murphy	50
14— <i>Mapping the marvels of death and the afterlife in Ortelius's map of Ireland (1573): the legacy of Gerald of Wales</i> Diarmuid Scully	53
15— <i>The one true faith: the burials of Bishop Matthew Sanders (d. 1549) and Bishop Thomas Filay (d. 1567)</i> Pat Thompson	57
16— <i>Philip O'Sullivan Beare's sensational representation of the death of Spain's 'mortallest enemy', Sir John Norris (1547x50–1597)</i> Mary Ann Lyons	61
17— <i>The concept of life in death and the quest for eternal glory in Carlow</i> Pat Thompson	65
18— <i>Aqua mortis: a cautionary tale</i> Eamon Darcy	68
19— <i>Memorialisations of clerical wives in early modern Ireland</i> Bronagh Ann McShane	71
20— <i>The strange burials and 'afterlives' of William Bedell and James Craig</i> Brendan Scott	75
21— <i>The forgotten Connacht massacre of 1647</i> Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin	78
22— <i>Voices from beyond the grave: a seventeenth-century Belfast ghost story</i> Raymond Gillespie	81

23— <i>Heraldic funerals, 1552–1729</i> Clodagh Tait	85
24— <i>Dublin elegies, 1720–30: lamentation and lampoon</i> Penelope Woods	91
25— <i>Dying to the old, rising to the new: an Icelandic saga with an Irish twist</i> Thomas O'Connor	97
26— <i>Laying the executed corpse at the prosecutor's door</i> James Kelly	101
27— <i>Sacrificed on 'the mountain of final death': the Drumkeeragh bog body, 1781–5</i> Angela Byrne	105
28— <i>Abide with me: the funeral hymn of a former curate in County Wexford</i> Patrick Comerford	108
29— <i>A dialogue between Death and the Patient</i> Barbara McCormack	112
30— <i>Stranger than fiction: the story of John 'Lippy' Linn</i> Jonathan Jeffrey Wright	115
31— <i>Captain William Coppin, the ghost and the lost Arctic explorer</i> Shane McCorristine	120
32— <i>'The unlucky cabin boy': a tale of cannibalism and the 'custom of the sea'</i> Mike Finn	123
33— <i>Grieving through the sublime: Dorothea Ladeveze Adlercron at Lake Garda, 1844</i> Angela Byrne	127
34— <i>What did people die of during the Great Famine? The world of James Dillon (1788–1859), Offaly county coroner</i> Ciarán Reilly	130
35— <i>Memento mori in Irish provincial Freemasonry</i> David J. Butler	133

36— <i>The suicides of Thomas Judkin Fitzgerald (1864) and Lord Waterford (1895)</i> Georgina Laragy	138
37— <i>Aristocratic funeral rituals and the death of Irish landlordism</i> Terence Dooley	141
38— <i>The city morgue in Cork and Dublin</i> Georgina Laragy	145
39— <i>'4 shillings per square foot': burial costs in St Joseph's Cemetery, Cork city, 1884</i> Aoife Bhreatnach	148
40— <i>Bringing the bodies home: J.J. Murphy and the 'Pickled Earl'</i> Patrick Comerford	151
41— <i>Father Cahill's last journey</i> Sarah Roddy	155
42— <i>The banshee</i> Patricia Lysaght	158
43— <i>Keening and gravestones in Australia</i> Val Noone	161
44— <i>A holy brotherhood? Death and the Irish Jews (1839–1914)</i> Natalie Wynn	167
45— <i>James McNally: head crushed by elephant</i> Conor Dodd	172
46— <i>A cause worth dying for: the last letters of Pearse, MacDonagh and Clarke</i> Daithí Ó Corráin	176
47— <i>Perspectives on death from Irish folklore</i> Anne O'Connor	179
48— <i>Graveyard folklore</i> Clodagh Tait	183
49— <i>Children's burial grounds (cillíní) in Ireland</i> Colm J. Donnelly and Eileen M. Murphy	186

50— <i>Wake and funeral offerings in the province of Armagh</i> Frank J. Sweeney	190
51— <i>The ritual and social use of tobacco in the context of the wake</i> Jenny Butler	194
52— <i>Dying with a priest</i> Lawrence Taylor	199
53— <i>Praying for a happy death</i> Beendán McConvery CSsR	202
54— <i>Preaching on death</i> Beendán McConvery CSsR	205
55— <i>Memorial cards in Irish funerary culture</i> Mary Ann Bolger	208
56— <i>'Don't have a row over a coffin': an undertaker's perspective</i> Gus Nichols	212
57— <i>Irish Presbyterians and death</i> Laurence S. Kirkpatrick	216
58— <i>A window on Catholic funeral rituals in 1950s Ireland</i> Patrick Jones	219
59— <i>Two state funerals: windows into Irish religious, political and social life</i> Kerry Houston	223
60— <i>'I have fierce devotion to the Holy Souls of God's Acre': the social memory of the Famine in Tralee, Co. Kerry</i> Ciara Breathnach	227
61— <i>A parish priest's perspective on funerals</i> Bernard Cotter	231
62— <i>Enduring memories: roadside memorials in Ireland</i> Una MacConville and Regina McQuillan	234
63— <i>Funeral rites in the Travelling community</i> Neil and Michael McDonagh	238

64— <i>Compassionate companionship of the dead: deathbed visions</i> Una MacConville	245
65— <i>'Grotesque and gaudy morbidity': Raymond Deane's Seachanges</i> (with Danse Macabre) Wolfgang Marx	248
66— <i>An Irish volunteer ('If' in a hospice)</i> Max Watson	251
67— <i>The Muslim funeral prayer (Salat al-Janazah)</i> Shaykh Umar Al-Qadri	254
68— <i>The fragmentation of orthodoxy</i> Tom Inglis	257
69— <i>Death and dying in contemporary Irish Pagan cosmology</i> Jenny Butler	260
70— <i>The Irish death notice</i> Rita Larkin	264
71— <i>Always look on the bright side: death, the Irish and the use of humour</i> Kevin Myers	267
72— <i>Palliative care and the embrace of wholeness</i> Michael Connolly	270
73— <i>What you don't know: Irish attitudes towards death and dying</i> John A. Weafer	273
74— <i>The other side of the grave: trends and patterns in death-related beliefs in Ireland in a comparative light</i> Brian Conway	277
75— <i>Keeping the dead alive: death and the use of social media in contemporary Ireland</i> Kevin Myers	280
Notes on contributors	283

The journey to the grave and the feast of death-lying

Catherine Swift

In his most recent book, *Marriage disputes: a fragmentary Old Irish law-text* (2015), Professor Fergus Kelly examines a compilation of 39 Old Irish citations, together with associated Middle Irish commentary, which culminates with a discussion of some of the difficulties that might arise after the loss of one's spouse.

Irish canon law recognised that a married couple might be buried in the same grave but also recognised the right to be buried with one's original kin, especially after multiple marriages. *Marriage disputes* decreed that a fine equivalent to a heifer should be paid, presumably to the relatives of the deceased, if the proper procedures were disregarded. If the illegal burial was inadvertent, no fine was due, but the body still had to be removed. The dead person was brought to his burial place on a wooden bier which, according to *Marriage disputes*, was carried by people of equivalent rank to his own. Restitution had to be paid if the body was not in a proper state for burial; this included both a heavy fine of up to three milch cows to the church involved and a payment of the original bride-price by the surviving spouse who had impugned his/her partner's reputation in such a way.

The most intriguing section in terms of proper behaviour towards the dead begins by listing a variety of foodstuffs: seven loaves as well as a bushel of winnowed meal, and condiments such as onions or honey to add flavour. This provides a preface to the discussion of the *fled chrólige*, translated by Professor Kelly as 'feast of death-lying', which he sees as a distinct ceremony, separate from the *sechtbairgen* involving the seven loaves. Another tract, entitled *Anfuigell*, refers to the clothing of

the deceased after three days, the cow of last payment after five days, the seven loaves after a week and the *fled chrólige* after a month. Other texts describe similar dues as expenses paid by members of clerical communities to the church in which they were residing at the time of death. One nice detail is the proviso that the *fled chrólige* will only be held *dia mbe linn*—‘if there be beer’. Full attendance at this feast was calculated as being 30 persons, and it was seen as the equivalent of the *lán-biathad* or the full supply of food-renders owed annually by a client to his lord. The context provided by *Marriage disputes* suggests that these were expenses which the surviving spouse was expected to bear in order that due honour be paid to the deceased. Professor Kelly concludes that ‘the *fled chrólige* can be compared with the “month’s mind” of medieval and modern Christianity, when a Requiem Mass is said for the deceased and a meal held in his or her honour’.

A study by Frederick Paxton entitled *Christianizing death* allows us to explore this comparison in more detail. His book examines early Irish evidence concerning the sick, the dying and the dead, and places these in the context of contemporary liturgical developments in other parts of Europe. In the Late Antique *Ordo Defunctorum*, those approaching death were offered communion. Immediately after death, Psalm 113 or 114 was sung with antiphons and then the body was washed and placed on a bier. Before it left the house the priest would say further prayers, and the body would then be carried in procession to the church by mourners singing psalms such as ‘The Lord is my shepherd’. There, a period of communal prayer for the deceased’s soul would ensue, including reading lessons from the Book of Job, before the body was finally placed in its tomb.

Elements of these rituals concur with the situation in Ireland, but Professor Paxton draws attention to incidents in Adomnán’s seventh-century *Life of Columba* as well as later Céli Dé material which indicates that at least some Irish communities scrupulously followed Leviticus 21: 1–12, in which the priests of Aaron’s caste were told to avoid all corpses lest they render themselves unclean. If early Irish priests were not present in the house of the deceased and the body was prepared for burial by the family alone, this could help to explain the heavy fines envisaged for those who arrived *inmlán* or ‘not in their proper state’ at the church.

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Further reading
Kelly, F. 2015. *M*
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Like other northern Europeans of the seventh century and later, the Irish also followed the teaching of Pope Gregory the Great in viewing the offering of the Mass as helping to end the interim suffering of souls, who had to pass through an initial period of darkness before reaching heaven. The Vatican Gelasian sacramentary indicates that such Masses were initially offered on the seventh and thirtieth day after a burial and, in the case of penitents, they were to be accompanied by fasting and the offering of alms by the family to the officiant or community singing the Mass. The earliest examples of such Masses are found in the late seventh/early eighth-century Bobbio Missal.

This helps to confirm that the *sechtbairen* involving seven loaves, which Professor Kelly speculated might symbolise the Eucharist and which took place on the seventh day, and the *fled chrólige*, celebrated at the end of a month, both probably originated in Christian ceremonies marking stages in the gradual purification of the soul of the deceased. Paradoxically, however, the phrase 'month's mind', which we use for these ceremonies today, may perhaps hark back (linguistically at any rate) to the secular Norse tradition of *minni*, when a toast was proffered to the deceased by the heir before taking his father's seat in the banquet hall. It may be that the Irish *fled chrólige* should be seen as yet another example of how Christian teaching accommodated itself to pre-existing traditional practices. Ultimately, it may originally have emerged as a symbol of the end of the initial period of mourning, with festivities designed to focus on happier memories of the departed. As such, it is a true precursor of the Catholic 'month's mind' today.

Further reading

- Kelly, F. 2015 *Marriage disputes: a fragmentary Old Irish law-text*. Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin.
- Patton, F.S. 1996 *Christianizing death: the creation of a ritual process in early medieval Europe*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.