

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Prof. Patricia Lysaght, professor emeritus of the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, for her mentoring and instruction. Her scholarship and supervision proved invaluable in the completion of the thesis upon which this monograph is based. I also wish to extend my gratitude to several former and current members of the UCD Delargy Centre for Irish folklore, including Prof. Séamus Ó Catháin, Prof. Bo Almqvist, Prof. Ríonach Uí Ógáin, Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, Peter Mc Guire and Dr. Kelly Fitzgerald. Patricia Moloney, the centre's librarian, was a constant source of help. Of particular mention is Criostóir Mac Cárthaigh, whose technical assistance was key to the creation of a comprehensive digital database. I must also extend my gratitude to Dr. Robert Sands of the UCD School of Archaeology, who kindly shared his time and expertise in GIS mapping and database architecture. Conchubhar Ó Lúasa also generously assisted me in the creation of the many maps used throughout this book. I must also thank my colleague, Dr. Catherine Swift of Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, who shared her considerable knowledge on early Ireland. I wish to give special mention to An tOllamh Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, a major figure in my academic life, whose enthusiasm and knowledge proved a constant source of inspiration throughout my time in UCD. *Suaimhneas síoraí air.*

I wish to thank Pekka Hakamies, Petja Kauppi and the editing team at the Folklore Fellows for their guidance and assistance in producing the current work.

I gratefully acknowledge the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences for their generous funding of this thesis with a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship. I also wish to thank the Máire Mac Neill Scholarship and the UCD Postgraduate Scholarship Programme for their substantial financial support.

I benefited from the help of a long list of people who assisted me in translating documents from a variety of different languages, including Prof. Bo Almqvist, Aurora Vincente, Noemie Beck, Dr. Thomas Kador, Dr. Kelly Fitzgerald, Dr. Holger Lonze, Dr. Cordula Hansen, Dorte Frandsen,

Lise Andersen, Dr. Iglíka Mishkova and Dr. Rumi Peeva. My friend and former colleague at the University of Limerick, Dr. Ian Ó Catháin, assisted me several times with Irish language transcription.

I received considerable assistance during my fieldwork experience in south-west Co. Clare, and foremost amongst those who helped me is Brigid O'Shea. As well as being a valuable informant, she offered me hospitality and guidance on many occasions, and often provided a warm meal on a cold November night. I am grateful to the many people who were kind enough to agree to be interviewed, and who provided me with a wealth of information on their personal beliefs. Without such generosity, studies such as this would not exist. I also wish to thank Michael Kelly for his help in filming the many interviews.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I wish to thank my family for their endless help and support. Special thanks go to my wife, Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh, and my mother, Gerdi McGlynn, for their endless patience. *Bíonn rudaí maithe mall.*

Introduction

The cult of St. Martin of Tours has existed in Ireland for a long period of time, beginning as early as the seventh century, and possibly earlier. The aim of this work is to examine the folk veneration of the saint in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by examining the beliefs, customs and oral narratives surrounding St Martin's Day, November 11. The custom of killing animals on St. Martin's Eve, or 'spilling blood for St. Martin', was known in a large part of Ireland until recently, and it is surprising to note how unfamiliar it has become to people of younger generations in most parts of Ireland in recent decades. That ritual animal sacrifice should play an important role in the religious calendar of thoroughly Christian communities in Western Europe has proven noteworthy to several authors on the subject over the last two hundred years, although many were quick to jump to conclusions about ancient pagan survivals being involved in the festival, without conducting in-depth study into the matter. (Wood-Martin 1901: 305.) This thesis is an attempt to address this situation, and to offer both an account and an analysis of the folk manifestation of the cult of St. Martin, and to present theories on the origin, meaning and function of much of its associated traditions and narratives.

The first part of this study examines the nature of Martinmas customs in Europe, in order to provide a background and context from which Irish customs and beliefs can be assessed. This also includes a brief account of early ecclesiastical sources about St. Martin. The next section addresses the rituals of animal sacrifice, including who performed the ritual, where it was done, what was killed, and what the meaning of this act was. There was much prohibition associated with St. Martin's Day, and many actions were forbidden on the feast-day of the saint. This will be examined, along with narratives outlining the potential repercussions for violating custom. Consideration will then be given to placenames, wells, and other topographical features associated with St. Martin. Next, an assessment will be made of sayings, prayers and miscellaneous narratives to do with St. Martin's Day. The relationship between the feast-day and other Irish calendar customs will be examined, and finally, elements of continuity and change will make up the final chapters.

The primary period of focus for the current study centres on the twentieth century, particularly the first half. Source material from this time is by far the richest available, due to the wealth of information that was collected by the Irish Folklore Commission during this period. Consideration will, of course, be given to the history of the cult in Ireland, and an overview of developments in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the early twenty-first, will be provided towards the end of the study.

Sources

Material housed in the archives of the National Folklore Collection are to be the main primary source for information available for research this project. It represents the results of fieldwork interviews, questionnaire surveys and sound recordings conducted by collectors and scholars over a number of decades. The archives also house a collection of material collected by schoolchildren, as part of the Schools' Folklore Scheme (1937–1938), which is discussed below. Broadly speaking, this material can be considered a reliable primary source of information on the topic at hand, and will, therefore, be used as the main source of data.

Main Manuscript Collection

The material in the National Folklore Collection relevant to this study can be arranged in three different groups. The first is the Main Manuscript Collection, and represents material collected and compiled by fieldworkers from the Irish Folklore Commission, and later the Department of Irish Folklore. Most of the information from this source that is relevant to the current study was obtained through the process of fieldwork interview, and subsequent transcription by part-time and full-time collectors. The Commission was tasked with saving the traditional forms of folklore that were fast disappearing in the modernising Ireland of the twentieth century, and the rapid decline of the Irish language. Through extensive fieldwork interviews and recordings, hundreds of volumes of folk traditions, customs and narratives have been preserved for posterity. As a result of the careful indexing of the material in these volumes, material relevant to the current study was easily located. This material was found to span a range of dates, with accounts spanning a period from

between 1926 and 1975. A total of 88 accounts, of varying length and detail, relevant to St. Martin were found in the Main Manuscript Collection.¹

Schools' Manuscripts

The second section of the archive of relevance to this study is the Schools' Manuscript Collection. The collection is the result of the Schools' Folklore Scheme, a project undertaken by the Commission in 1937–1938 in collaboration with the Dept. of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation. Primary school students from fifth and sixth class in the Republic of Ireland were instructed to document folklore and local history from their native place, and the results were compiled as a separate manuscript collection in the National Folklore Collection. (Ó Catháin: 1988, 19–30.) Students and teachers participated in weekly discussions on a given folklore theme, and at the weekend pupils were tasked with collecting information on this topic, and writing a resultant composition in English or Irish. Topics relevant to the current study include feast-days and festivals, local holy wells, folk cures, and so on. Material thus gathered was compiled in manuscript form, and sent to the Irish Folklore Commission, to be bound into archive volumes. Over 90% of primary schools in the Irish Republic took part in the scheme, and information was gathered by around 50,000 pupils. This ensured a fairly comprehensive assessment of many folklore themes throughout most of the country in the late 1930s. The material tended to be found amongst information on saints, holy wells and feast-days, and accounts were often more concise than those in the Main Manuscript collection. There are a total of 543 mentions of St. Martin's Day in this collection, of varying length and detail, a quite considerable number when preparing statistical data and frequency analysis.²

Questionnaire Material

The third major source of relevance is a series of manuscript volumes that contain the results of a questionnaire survey on the Feast of St. Martin that was

- 1 Sources from the National Folklore Collection have been abbreviated to NFC, followed by manuscript volume number, and then page number e.g. NFC 123: 45
- 2 Sources originating in the National Folklore Collection, Schools' Manuscripts have been abbreviated as NFCS, followed by volume number and then page number e.g. NFCS 123: 45.

issued in 1938.³ Although contained in the main collection, these manuscripts, primarily comprising of volumes 674–684,⁴ can be considered a separate body of information. The results of the questionnaire came from over five hundred different places in the island of Ireland, and in a manner similar to the Schools' material mentioned above, provides a 'nationwide snapshot' of the calendar custom.⁵ The system of postal questionnaire investigation undertaken by the Irish Folklore Commission took advantage of contacts that had been established with dependable informants who participated in the Schools' Folklore scheme, as well as other contacts throughout Ireland. When taken as a single body of material, the resultant responses comprise the single largest source for Martinmas customs in Ireland. In total, it encompasses 619 entries, although 169 of these were negative responses. The amount and quality of the questions on the questionnaire ensured that the accounts given are, for the most part, rich and comprehensive, and can be considered generally very reliable. Together with the material from the Main Manuscript Collection and Schools' Collection, a very thorough and consistent body of primary source material is available for this study. It should be noted that no systematic attempt was made to standardise the Irish language material. On occasion, minor amendments were made for the sake of clarity, but the material is, for the most part, presented as it appears in the original manuscripts.

Printed Sources

A total of 53 print sources, of varying length and quality, were uncovered. Some amounted to little more than a single-line mention of some custom or belief, while others contain examples of narratives thousands of words in length. Publications range from statistical assessments and geographical surveys such as that conducted by William Shaw Mason (1814), to popular magazines such as *Ireland's Own* and Irish language newspapers such as *An Claidheamh Soluis*. Several academic papers and articles have also been included, mainly dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These represent the growing antiquarian interest in Irish folk custom, and can provide relatively early examples of the customs so extensively outlined in later archival sources.

- 3 See Ní Fhloinn, Bairbre, 'In Correspondence with Tradition: The Role of the Postal Questionnaire in the Collection of Irish Folklore', in Ó Catháin, Séamas (ed.), *Northern Lights. Following Folklore in North Western Europe*, Dublin (2001) 215–228.
- 4 A small number of additional responses were bound in volumes 766 and 1153.
- 5 See Ó Danachair, Caoimhín, 'Distribution Patterns in Irish Folk Life', *Béaloidéas* 25 (1957) 108–123: 122.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork material, which will be briefly considered towards the end of the project, has also proven beneficial in attempting to understand the subject in hand. This was conducted in Co. Clare in recent years, primarily in the area surrounding St. Martin's Well in Clarefield, in the southwest of the county. In the main, it has elucidated the factors at play in the decline of customs, as well as the elements that have survived into the twenty-first century, and the conditions that ensured their survival. The fieldwork material has provided insight into certain personal elements of belief that informants may not have mentioned in the archive material. It offers information on the economic, religious and social functions of certain aspects of belief and practice, and complements the archive material in this regard.

Dating of Sources

When considering the dates of the source material for the current project, it must be borne in mind that over 99% of it was gathered from the period 1930–1945. In fact, 87% of this material dates from the three-year period from 1938–1940. The reason for the particular clustering of dates in the source material is that the 1930s saw a dramatic increase in folklore collection, with the foundation of the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930 and the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. The middle of the period coincides with the Schools' Folklore Scheme of 1937–8, and the issuing of the St. Martin's Day Questionnaire in 1938. Comparatively little material on the subject was collected after 1945, which is unsurprising given the vast amount of information which had been gathered in the first ten years of the Commission. Thus, the material is, by and large, a snapshot of the state of the celebration of St. Martin's Day at a particular point in the twentieth century.

The Irish Folklore Commission tended to focus their attention on older persons, believing them to possess a more complete repertoire of narratives, and to be more familiar with older customs and traditions. Also, in the case of the Schools' Folklore Collection, although the accounts were documented by schoolchildren, some of the information was collected from persons who were remembering traditions from their early years, and may have been quite elderly at the time of recording. If informants were elderly at the time of their disposition, say approximately 80 years old, and they themselves received the information from other elderly persons, then this would provide us with a maximum *terminus post quem* for these accounts to around 1800 AD.

However, it is not likely that all, or even a majority, of the questionnaire respondents were advanced in years, and on the balance of probability, most accounts are likely younger, and likely describe events that date to the mid to late nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth.

Source criticism

The nature and limitations of the archive material must be considered, since not all entries are equal in scope and quality. As mentioned above, the material from the Main Manuscript Collection was often collected by professional and trained full-time collectors, and on occasion by part-time collectors, many of whom had studied the best practices of ethnological fieldwork. Although the aim of collectors was to gather material from every part of the country, the reality was such that, for a variety of reasons, areas in the west of the country, and Irish speaking areas in particular, received the lion's share of attention, and English speaking regions are thus proportionately underrepresented. (Almqvist 1977–1979: 6–26, 13.) Despite such imbalances, a wealth of information has been drawn from this part of the collection, and, in some instances, it provides well-developed examples of narratives that were not forthcoming from other sources. It also offers material from a range of dates, with examples spanning a period from 1926 to 1975. A total of eighty-eight accounts relevant to the feast of St. Martin were found in the Main Manuscript Collection.

In contrast, the material from the Schools' Folklore Project is often less detailed. There may be little reason to doubt their reliability, but they are certainly in some instances less comprehensive, often being simple one- or two-line statements. One of the drawbacks of the Schools' project was its limited distribution. Schools in the six counties of northern Ireland did not partake in the scheme, and therefore a comprehensive view of any distribution patterns is necessarily incomplete when it comes to Ulster. Many cities and towns were also excluded from the scheme, which further hampers a complete overview, giving as it does undue emphasis to rural Ireland. The nature of the material recorded in the Schools' Manuscripts means that accounts are sometimes less detailed than those in the Main Manuscript Collection. Schoolchildren were tasked with writing about saints or feast-days in their area, but mentions of St. Martin's Day are often quite brief. They tend to be found amongst accounts of other festival days, and the amount of festivals covered by a single essay meant that material concerning St. Martin is often not as extensive as those from other sources. They are very useful in conducting frequency analysis, however, as mentioned above. In relation to the specific customs under investigation in

the current study, one disadvantage of the Schools' Collection is that the persons compiling the accounts were often not the same as those who conducted the rituals described, such as the killing of the animals and the spilling of the blood. Thus, when questions about the meaning of certain customs are raised, these accounts are necessarily less reliable, as the informants are at something of a remove. In any case, notions of meaning are not as frequently raised in the Schools' accounts.

The information contained in the Questionnaire responses is by far the richest, in terms of both subject and detail. The cleverly-formatted questions of the original questionnaire were designed to elicit a broad range of information, regarding not only what customs were practised, but why they were undertaken. It probed all aspects of the feast, and offered suggestions about certain sayings and oral narratives. The accounts tend to be very long, and contain the most extensive descriptions, and examples of narratives. Thus, the Questionnaire responses are an extremely valuable resource when coming to any understanding of St. Martin's Day beliefs and traditions. One of the advantages of the questionnaire material is the presence of negative responses. Other types of sources confirmed the presence of a custom, belief or narrative in a given area, but in many instances, an absence of evidence did not necessarily mean that the custom itself was not present there. The questionnaire on Martinmas elicited a lot of responses from people saying that there were no customs or stories regarding the saint known in their area, thus providing evidence of absence, and allowing for a more accurate picture of the extent of the celebration of the feast-day.

The publications represent the most problematic sources, in terms of consistency and reliability. Although fifty-two additional literary sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were used to bolster the archival material, a significant disadvantage is their comparative lack of consistent structure. For example, in many cases, a location for a belief or narrative is not specified, and statements about traditions can be presented as if they pertain to all of Ireland. In others, the names of informants are not supplied, or the specific year in which material was recorded is not given. Considerable difficulty was encountered when establishing a location for the information referred to in these accounts. Only twenty-four accounts provided sufficient information to establish from where exactly the customs or beliefs originated. In a further three, only the county could be established, while a further two only mentioned the province.

Literary sources of this nature can on occasion prove to be unreliable, since they can be the result of editing or modification for aesthetic or ideological

reasons, and caution must be shown in accepting them at face value.⁶ Thus, the reliability of these accounts as an accurate reflection of genuine folk custom and belief can vary, and sweeping statements about beliefs do not indicate if they are only locally held, or refer to a wider area. The use of such information must therefore be tempered by caution, but their role in supporting the material from the primary sources is not insignificant, and some of the older examples can be useful in establishing the age of a given belief, custom or story. When they have been deemed reliable, examples from these printed sources have been utilised in the current study.

As with any study on folk religion, certain general caveats must be taken into consideration. When addressing written accounts of beliefs and customs, such as those relating to St. Martin's Day, particularly scholarly or antiquarian accounts from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is important to note that, on occasion, 'single, even unique, notes have at times mistakenly been used to characterize the culture or religion of a particular area.' (Pentikäinen 1979, 35–52, 37.) In addition, it must be borne in mind that when addressing ideas concerning folk belief, such as concepts of luck and taboo, in archival sources, the written form in which they are presented can vary somewhat from the conceptual form in which they existed prior to writing. This can arise from the lack of nuance in written accounts, the generalization of beliefs on the part of the person documenting them, or simple misinterpretation. Thus, in the transference from the oral to the written, sources can present alien forms of folk belief. (Rooth 1979, 53–70, 57.) Frequency analysis, therefore, must be paramount. If beliefs are modified through the transfer from concepts of the mind through to oral and then written forms, frequency analysis may help to elucidate common forms, patterns of thought and ideas that might be true to the original in a general sense.

Theoretical Framework

The current study has sought to draw on a number of different theoretical approaches, where deemed necessary, in order to best elucidate the nature of St. Martin's Day customs. The decision to utilize mapping and distribution patterns as a starting point for analysis of the archive material was influenced by several authors. Works by scholars such as Alan Gailey and Caoimhín Ó

6 See Lysaght, Patricia, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death Messenger*, Dublin 1986, 25 for a discussion on the potential pitfalls in using such secondary sources, and strategies to employ to ensure accuracy.

Danachair have proven the value of ethnological mapping, and its usefulness to the folklorist. (Gailey & Ó Danachair 1976: 14–34; Gailey, 1974: 1–6.) This should be seen against a background of a well-founded tradition of ethnological mapping in continental Europe, particularly in German-speaking countries.⁷ Matthias Zender, a major figure in the field of ethnological mapping, addressed the question of distribution of customs associated with St. Martin on a European scale, and his insights have proven to be of great importance to the current study. (Zender 1970: 227.) Furthermore, works such as Patricia Lysaght's landmark monograph on the traditions of the Banshee in Ireland amply demonstrate the usefulness of distribution maps in analysing folk tradition. (Lysaght [1986] 1996.)

In terms of further methodologies, the work of Finnish folklorists since the 1970s has proven to be of value. Scholars such as Lauri Honko and Juha Pentikäinen have demonstrated valuable approaches to understanding, and finding meaning in, the study of folk religions. (See Honko 1985; Pentikäinen 1979.)⁸ Other elements of the current thesis have relied in part on the work of structuralists such as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) and Celticist Joseph Nagy (1985) in order to provide potential insight into certain beliefs and customs. Wayland Hand (1983) and Patricia Lysaght's (1993) work on portals, thresholds and liminality were key influences in contextualizing St. Martin's Day traditions in the Irish folk calendar.

An important point must be made concerning the analysis of narratives in the current study, in terms of the theoretical framework. Lauri Honko has emphasised the potential weaknesses of the historical-geographical method in analysing and explaining forms, variants and distributions of narratives. (Honko 2000, 3–29.) Criticisms of these approaches include the notion that organic variation within texts is not studied well enough, and a lack of engagement with certain elements of oral narrative performance. Central to a proper understanding of narratives is the development of a 'thick corpus', where they are studied in a performance context, and meticulous records are made of the myriad elements involved in the transmission of oral texts. It also includes intensive fieldwork, where multiple examples of a narrative are recorded in

7 For example, the *Atlas der Deutschen Volkskunde*, first published in 1939, was very influential in European folkloristics.

8 Both scholars were involved in the establishment of the *Science of Religion. Study Conference of the I.A.H.R.* in Turku, Finland in 1973. See Honko, Lauri and Pentikäinen, Juha, 'Communication: Methodology of the Science of Religion. Study Conference of the I.A.H.R. in Turku, Finland August 27–31, 1973,' *Numen* 19, no. 2/3 (Aug. – Dec., 1972) 241–242.

a relatively limited geographical or social area. When analysing the legends and folktales in the current work, it must be pointed out that they are essentially derived from archival records, and are devoid of much of the contextual information required of the tradition-ecological approach analysis. In most instances, urforms are not sought, but the emergent themes and concepts, and potential significance within their given cultural context are discussed in relation to the cult of St. Martin, in an attempt to see how they relate to beliefs regarding the saint and his feast-day.

Finally, mention must be made of other studies into Irish calendar custom. Máire Mac Néill's seminal work on Lughnasa traditions is a key example of the richness of material in the archives of the National Folklore Collection, and a key text in the understanding of Irish calendar customs (Mac Neill 1962). Séamas Ó Catháin's comparative approach regarding St. Brigid is another recent example of Irish calendar custom study that has produced some intriguing hypotheses (Ó Catháin 1995). Patricia Lysaght's work on *Bealtaine* traditions and the Banshee, as previously mentioned, has also been hugely influential on the current work.

Translation

It should be pointed out that a large proportion of the source material was collected in Irish-speaking areas, and that many of the examples provided below were originally in that language. Quotations enclosed within square brackets have been translated to English, and all such translations are the work of the author unless otherwise indicated. In instances where the form and sound of language is of importance, such as rhyming couplets or prayers, the original Irish form is also provided.