

Welcome to The Otherworld

*Fair Lady, will you come with me
To a land of harmony
Hair shines with a primrose glow
Body smooth and white as snow.*

*Though sweet you deem your Irish beer
Our mirthful mead is sweeter far.
It is a wonder, truth be told,
Young do not die there before old.*

*While we watch your people teem,
We walk among you, still unseen.
Dark the tragedy of Eden
That keeps our countless people hidden.*

*Woman, join my noble folk
Your head shall bear a crown of gold
Pools of milk, mead, ale and wine
We shall drink there, my Bé Find.*

This is a section of a poem from *Tochmarc Étaíne*, The Wooing of Etain¹. Midir, an important lord of the Otherworld realm, is calling on his lost love Etain after she has been reborn as a mortal woman. He is seeking to persuade her to join him in his own enduring parallel world. He describes his land as enduring, a place of beauty and delight where every sense is heightened. It is a place of natural health. The young do not die early. And, perhaps more significantly, the Christian concept of sin and judgement is absent.

This description of the Irish Otherworld is intended to be persuasive. Midir wishes to dazzle the young woman into leaving the world she knows to go with him. However, other equally attractive descriptions of this 'Other-Place' adorn a number of stories.²

The full text of *Tochmarc Étaíne* is preserved in the early 14th century 'Yellow book of Lucan' although the language would suggest that it was an 8th century story, if not earlier. Yet there are aspects of these descriptions to define this conception of an 'Otherworld' as not very common, outside Ireland, not just in early medieval times, but at any era.

From at least the early medieval period, the Irish scholars and traders had strong connections with the Greek and Roman classical world, and through them, contact with the middle eastern belief systems at least, indirectly

The optimistic descriptions of the Irish 'Otherworld' were not reflected in earlier classical models or, indeed the belief systems that preceded the classical. The epic of Gilgamesh from around 2000BCE³, had plenty to tell about the Sumerian 'Underworld. It was a dank, drear and terrible place.' Enkidu dreamed of his forthcoming death and told his friend, *"He took me down to the dark house, to the dwelling where those who enter cannot ever leave, where dust is their food and clay is their bread.... They see no light and they dwell in darkness."* Neither Enkidu or Gilgamesh himself could escape this fate. It is the fate of humankind. Only gifts made by the living might ease this everlasting discomfort to some extent.

¹ in a poetic translation by Isolde ÓBrolcháin Carmody

² Example of otherworld description

³ Gilgamesh

By the eighth century BCE Homer could offer little better, even to his great hero Achilles.⁴ Achilles tells Odysseus

“Don’t try to reconcile me to my dying. I’d rather serve as another man’s labourer, as a poor peasant without land, and be alive on Earth, than be lord of all the lifeless dead.”

Even the Wonderful Egyptian civilization who had a fully equipped and extremely attractive, Otherworld waiting for them did not imagine it was available to everybody. Either you had to be enormously rich and powerful or, at least morally unquestionable. It is true that they believed it might be possible to tip the scales in your favour with written spells and amulets, but extensive efforts, were still required. From the New Kingdom onward, a papyrus or wall painting, showing the ‘soul’ making the forty-two negative confessions became an essential. This was a list of forty-two social ‘sins’ not practised by the deceased. It also strongly suggested that the tomb owner was on ‘first name’ terms with the forty-two judges as well. Yes, it seems that, for the ancient Egyptians, at least, the answer to life, the universe and everything might genuinely have been forty-two.

By later classical times, the concept of improving personal afterlife outcomes were gaining approval. Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle had much to say on the perfecting the soul. However, later, around 19 BCE, the Roman, Vergil, still sent his Hero, Aeneas, to an unpleasantly dark Underworld where the dire effects of disrespecting burial customs were demonstrable. However, the future for, at least the morally worthy dead might be a little more tractable.⁵

“Therefore are they schooled with punishments, and pay penance for bygone sins.... when time’s cycle has removed the inbred taint and leaves unsoiled the ethereal sense and pure flame of spirit: each of us undergoes his own purgatory. Then we are sent to spacious Elysium, a few of us, to possess the blissful field”.

Ideas of judgement, punishment and purgatory were developing.

There is one more important detail that applied to all of these ‘Other’ or ‘Underworlds’. You were intended to be dead when you got there!

Being physically alive in the Otherworld was frowned upon. The whole point of the Gilgamesh story was to demonstrate that immortality was not an option for human-kind. Unapishtim, a proto-Noah, could not, again, return to the world of the living once he was declared immortal. Even though herself, a goddess. Ishtar was only allowed to return after a visit to her underworld sister after a terrible ordeal. The familiar Greek story of Orpheus, made the point that, however gifted Orpheus might be, he could not return his wife to life. All shades and ghosts had to be laid to rest or persuaded to accept their status as dead. The separation between the two worlds was implacably stressed⁶

That the rise of Christianity in late Classical period, pleaded and gained an exceptionality is fascinating. The topic is way beyond the scope of this article but it may have been that very exceptionalism that gave the movement an advantage coming appearing at a time in history when many ordinary people were seeking to realise possibilities of a personal continuation of life after death.

The Irish otherworld was a very different matter. It did not present as an underworld of dust and darkness, although one means of access might be an underground cave. It was not a world of the dead, although, because time behaved flexibly between the ‘world-we-know’ and the ‘Otherworld’ it was possible to encounter ancestors, or possibly even descendants. You might uncover treasures with super-human abilities but whether you could bring them back to the everyday world could depend on one of these Otherworld ancestors.

⁴ Oddesey

⁵ Aeneid book 6 (19BCE)

⁶ Tombs being a method of gaining immortality

The persuasive poem, spoken by Midir, to attract the reborn human version of his Bé Find, created a vision of an ideal summer-land of plenty.

The Irish Otherworld did not always turn out to be either as perfect, or indeed, safe as he suggested, but it was always a place of wonders and often, unexpected answers.

Another element that was particular to the Irish Otherworld was that it demanded no moral superiority or 'goodness' to permit admittance. Frequently, visitors were drawn across because the Otherworld needed something from them. The two worlds were concurrent and parallel. What happened in one, affected the other.

The *Echtrae Nerai*, The Adventures of Nera tells of a bet the warrior Nera accepted one Samhain night. If he is to win Aillil's golden sword, he must agree to tie a willow withy around the ankle of a recently hanged corpse. Nera had some hair-raising adventures which involved carrying the corpse on his back. However, when he witnessed the firing and destruction of Rathcroghan, he followed the attackers through the cave, Oweynagat and found himself among the fields and farms of a summer landscape. He was told by a woman of the sidhe, that the raid he had seen was still in the future. He had time to warn his friends. To his astonishment he returned to Rathcroghan within minutes of his departure.

The real purpose of the story is revealed later. Nera returns to the woman of the Sidhe to live in the Otherworld. It is from his own herd that the Morrigan is able to take the beast that will lead to the birth of one of the great bulls of the Táin Bó Cúailnge.⁷

Fionn MacCumhail ended up in the Otherworld on a number of occasions. His favourite method of entering the Otherworld was to career around the country chasing any deer (or enemy) which took his fancy. This stranded him in a variety of many strange situations including the Otherworld. However, he is often dragged into the Otherworld because his martial prowess is required.

My favourite story, the *Gilla Dacair* demonstrates all of this. It is a tale that blends awareness of Classical elements into a solid Irish, Fenian romp. Fionn and his Fianna were desperately needed to fight for Otherworld forces. He was persuaded to make the journey when fifteen of his men were dragged out to sea on the back of a very ugly horse. However, just to confirm that this was an Otherworld story, he, and Diarmuid, jumped into the Otherworld via wells.⁸

Even in a later allegorical story, it is to *Tír Tairngire*, the Land of promise, that King Cormac was transported so that he could gain the skills of kingship, especially the power of making good judgements.

There are some events that can only happen within the confines of the 'Otherworld'. The poet king, Mongan, was about to relate one of his adventures after keeping his wife on tenterhooks for seven years. Before he could utter a word there was a massive hailstorm with a flood great enough to create the twelve greatest rivers, in Ireland. As the storm subsided, Mongan, his wife and their historian poet, found themselves in the Otherworld setting, a beautiful house. It seems he had to retreat to the Otherworld to make it safe for her to hear the story.

There was a strong association with conception and birth with the Otherworld. In a time before a scientific understanding of the processes of conception and birth this is hardly surprising. A common method of conception appears to have been through the drinking of a small worm, or other small creature, in a cup of water.

Etain's second conception came about in the same manner. The gold cup was the last resting place of the exhausted purple fly, the first Etain, transformed by Fuamnach.

⁷ Tain Bo Regemmna etc. (cow and the Time machine)

⁸ Gilla Decair: Recommend reading full story

In *Compert Con Culainn*, CuChullain, who never had much luck with Otherworld interactions, was conceived three times. The first conception took place in the Otherworld. This birth was associated with two colts. The child died, although the colts survived. His second conception was either through the medium of one of these Otherworld worms, or incest (or via Lugh.) This child was deliberately aborted. The third and final conception took place, in the usual manner, with assistance from Deichtire's husband, Sualdam.

The important connection between Birth and the Otherworld is best demonstrated in the story of Macha, closely connected to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, and a *dindshenchas* story for Emain Macha.⁹ Macha: was forced to race the king's horses even though she was about to give birth, a time when women's words were seen as prophetic. It is hardly surprising that this Otherworld woman laid words on the Ulstermen that caused them to be as helpless as women in childbirth at the time of their greatest peril.

The protagonists of all these examples are very much alive when they commence, their Otherworld journey, *twice in the case of Etain*. They are neither being rewarded or punished for their deeds. They are not regarded as morally superior souls. They are not seeking to improve their afterlife outcomes. These heroes are called, persuaded or dragged into the Otherworld because their presence is required to set a sequence of events into action.

The early Irish poet-storytellers understood this. One of their prime roles, as poets was to maintain the health and prosperity of the natural world, natural world, the environment and its people. They saw themselves as guardians on the borders, keeping the flow between the worlds active and flowing. This would be achieved by ensuring that rulers upheld customs, and made 'good judgements.' Perhaps less palatable to modern tastes, it they were deeply concerned with maintaining status and order within a fairly rigidly structured society. Good order ensured healthy relations with the 'Otherworld' ensuring fertility for crops, animals and people.

Another reason that these stories remained so enduring was their context. They acted as *dindshenchas* stories, located in the landscape. There were some locations, well known to the poets. These are places that appear in several stories, such as the Cave of the Cats, *Oweynagat*, in Roscommon or Midir's 'tree girt' hill, *Brí Leith* in Roscommon. Yet the natural landscape of Ireland is contiguous to tales of Otherworld locations.

Ireland is a land of sudden mist, soft rain and wonderful sudden rainbows. The changing light may, in an instant transform a familiar vista into something surprising and unexpected. I have many times, stood at my gate, observing the long low drumlins rising like mysterious islands from a lemon and rose-tinted cloud sea. It always astonishes me.

Rural landscapes, in Ireland, wear their history lightly, uncovered. Ancient field systems, green lanes, raths and cairns stand, still identifiable, alongside the, more recent colourful crop of country homes. Even, still extant, townland names carry a wealth of historic local information. I do hope that the modern Eircode, however useful, does not cause townland names to become lost by lack of use.

The history of the landscape would have been just as readable in the days of the storyteller poets and their teaching tales of the 'Otherworld'. The stories, as we have them, were first written down in early medieval times but the language and descriptions, of weapons and chariots, for instance, locates them much earlier back into the Iron age.

The impact of prehistoric cairns and bronze age sites would have been dramatic to iron-age and early medieval observers. They would most likely have turned to their story-teller poets for explanations. For these places had to be the mysterious, possibly dangerous and fragile, borders

⁹ Ref Macha text :Ces Ulad

between the worlds. The poets did not disappoint. The stories are full of tales about those strange cairns and seemingly abandoned stone houses.

And so, the prehistoric sites, Heapstown, Knocknarea, and so many others became the 'hollow hills' the Sidhe mounds, half in this world and half in the Other. These were the homes of the Sidhe folk as they appeared in this world. They were always far more 'homely houses' in the Other. By the time of the syncretic texts of the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, The Book of Invasions they became the homes of those great ancestors and culture heroes, the Tuatha Dé Danann. So, the most spectacular of prehistoric sites in the Boyne Valley, became associated with The Dagda and the home of his son, Aengus Og.

These sites influenced the stories in many ways. Tales of strange treasures brought back from the Otherworld might have been sparked by discoveries of bronze age treasures buried in the ground or deposited in pools. There is archaeological evidence to suggest the practice of depositing valuable items in liminal places continued on into the iron age, and beyond. I have even wondered if the prehistoric cairns, those bald-headed one-eyed giants, overlooking the battle plain of Moytura, from their vantage point on Carrowkeel, may have influenced the way the Fomoiré came to be described in oral tales.

The Irish belief system underlying the old stories had some commonalities with animistic beliefs, particularly in terms of places *imbued with memory*.¹⁰ Such places are 'safe' when given respect, or at least left alone. It is when they are disturbed that trouble begins. Towards the close of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Eochaid, Etain's mortal husband is so infuriated at her loss, he attempts to dig up the Sidhe mound. Immediately chaos and confusion ensue. It ends up with fifty Etains being produced and the one Eochaid selects, turns out to be his own daughter, unborn when Etain is stolen away. Yes, in this story the Sidhe mound acts, both, as a cloning and a time machine!

The indigenous Irish belief system where every hill is a hollow hill and every well a source was, in essence, animistic, yet it was also influenced and inspired by an early absorption of Christian beliefs. It seems an unlikely mix. The practice of Christianity shows more concern with judgemental outside agency, personal soul striving, and a perfect realm beyond the world for the righteous. Interaction with the 'Otherworld does not depend on personal morality. And yet the contrasting systems survive, producing a blending particular to Ireland., Midir's cry to his Etain promises her that in *his* Otherworld she will no longer be subject to sin and judgement. "*The tragedy of Eden*".

During a visit to Japan, a few years ago now, I began to wonder how such a belief system might have continued to develop without that contrapuntal influence. I am no kind of specialist in either Japanese culture or the practice of Shinto. What follows relies on personal observation only.

Over those weeks, I became aware of similarities between the current practice of Shinto in Japan and my knowledge of Otherworld story texts from Ireland. What I observed was a very old indigenous belief system, which was still actively practiced within a forward-thinking technological society.

I visited a great many shrines, while I was in Japan for the new Year holiday, both Shinto and Buddhist. Torrigoe shrine, which I encountered early one morning, was a small area of exquisitely decorated small buildings set in a garden oasis of calm, clearly, much loved in the locality. It felt like a gateway between the Worlds and the founding story of the shrine supported my first impression.

Yamato Takeru no Mikoto was a legendary warrior prince, an ancestor figure and culture hero, who wielded a magic sword found in the body of the eight-headed dragon-serpent, Yamata no Orochi. This sword was given to him by Sunanoo, the brother of Amasratu, a mythic tale. On Yamato Takeru's death he became a great white bird. Centuries later, another warrior, Minamoto no Yoshiie, was granted strategic advice from a white bird as he rested at Torigoe. And, so, the shrine gained

¹⁰ <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/animism> for some interesting ideas.

its founding name, Torigoe, meaning 'bird going over'. At least one anthropologist has described Yamato Takeru as 'Arthurian'.¹¹ But he equally demonstrates qualities shared with Cú Chulainn or even Lugh. Yamato Takeru is a 'kami' and Torigoe is one of his 'memory places'.

The term 'Kami can be complex to explain I discovered that familiarity with Irish 'Otherworld' characters helped.¹² Kami include ancestor figures, and culture heroes. Yet people in recent history have also become Kami. I visited one shrine, the 'memory place' of a 19th century poet. However, the world of the Kami is not the place of the dead. The status of its inhabitants is as subtle and complex as the people of *Tír na mBeo*, the Land of the Living, or *Emhain Abhlach*, the plain of Apples

Kami can be *genii loci*, the spirits of place. There are kami of mountains, pools, rocks and crossroads. Some are named. Some are generic. They may even be, personified, manifestations of the natural elements, or weather. Any place which holds an aura of numinosity or a sense of 'otherness' is regarded as a place of the Kami.

Historic deposits of valuable items in water, veneration of wells, and rocks as well as traditional folklore about crossroads do suggest underlying similarities with early Irish practices. These kami infused sites are also highly reminiscent of the places where the 'Otherworld' may be encountered in Irish texts.

Kami can be animal spirits or they may manifest in animal form. White animals are frequently associated with the Kami. While in Japan, I became fascinated with Inari, the fox guide. Inari, as a human kami, or as a fox, is often found in field shrines as a protector of rice, tea, sake and agriculture. A white Inari now stands in my garden as guardian to a 'gate of the imagination'. The sionnach¹³ is, equally, a significant animal in Irish stories.

Kami are not divine". They are not gods and they are not omnipotent. Sometimes they are beneficent but they can also be mischievous and difficult. They like to be acknowledged and respected so it is a good idea to keep them on your side. I would not have wanted to get on the bad side of Midir, either, and even the wonderful Dagda, himself, had his 'moments'.

Kami are hidden but they do not live in a separate supernatural world. They live on a concurrent parallel plane. They have effects on our world and will make use of human energies to achieve their aims. This is also demonstrably true of the Irish Otherworld tales.

It was an amusing incident occurring in Tokyo that clarified my initial 'thought experiment'. My brother, his grown-up son and his daughter are obsessed with Pokémon Go, to the irritation of my sister-in-law. Tokyo was 'heaven' for these three addicts. I am afraid to say that I had previously known nothing of the game. Once the hidden ritual had been revealed to me, I stood, amazed, outside the National Museum, while a crowd of, largely middle-aged men, with rapt attention, repeatedly tapped at phones. I began to appreciate what was happening. They were attracting a 'kami' with offerings, drawing it to them and intending to steal its power. My brother informed me that this one they were attracting on their phones was an old and powerful spirit. I am glad to say, it escaped!

Later that day, another hunt commenced. My sister-in-law sighed and we followed our recalcitrant devotees up a flight of steps. They had already disappeared but the path led us on through a torii

¹¹ Covington Scott Littleton (1 July 1933 – 25 November 2010)

¹² https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/kami_1.shtml <https://www.ancient.eu/Kami/> Rather than reference book on Shinto I have added links to two basic explorations which will offer further information on the nature of Kami.

¹³ What came to my mind was the line from an early W B Yeats poem "And the little fox he murmured, "Oh, do not pluck at his rein. He is riding to the townland that is the worlds; bane." The Happy Townland" Not, perhaps his best poem but one of my childhood favourites.

gate where we found ourselves in another world. We had been transported, by a Pokémon 'kami' into the Kanda Myojin Shrine in the midst of the New Year Holiday festival. We had not even known the shrine was there but it proved a surprising and fascinating afternoon.

I grabbed the opportunity to observe the stalls that offered various divination activities including the throwing of I Ching yarrow stalks. There were 'fortunes' to hang on tree shapes and wall racks. There were also a wide range of elegant charms to buy that offered health, wealth and prosperity and success. Long queues of people waited to offer prayers, envelop themselves in clouds of sweet incense, and make offerings, with the required clapping, to attract the attention of the kami.¹⁴ The experience was vibrant, energetic, colourful and the food was very tasty.

As I describe it, it all sounds exotic, yet this religious festival was taking place right next to Akihabara, 'electric city' and the technological markets of Tokyo. I was reliably informed that people bring their new 'tech' to be blessed at this shrine. Tokyo, to me, seemed a living modern representation of the parallel worlds, existing, in harmony, together. From the 'over-the-top' commercial insanity of Shibuya junction to the gentle beauty of the Ekōin Temple in Ryōgoku, the 'shrine of lost souls', and its tower dedicated to the souls of much-loved pets,¹⁵ I was seeing two sides of a single coin. These were, two parallel worlds functioning as one.

I was wondering how the attributes of the Shinto Kami might compare to those of the denizens of the Irish Otherworld? Some conclusions could be drawn from the Irish oral tradition stories, written down long after they were first recounted. Through stories, such as those of the Goban Saor,¹⁶ famous culture heroes, the Dagda, and Goibniu the smith, could be found, acting in a very Kami like manner. The stories are replete with verbal trickery, and marvellous adventures. The characters wander through the everyday world with all the confidence and wild imagination of the Irish Otherworld. They remain immortals, craftsmen, ancestors, heroes and jesters, but are always, poets and story tellers.

The two strands of indigenous animistic spirituality and the new faith of Christianity were woven together at a very early date. The second strand of Irish Christianity also has its own foundation stories. And in the ancient hagiographies of some obscure and surprising saints we find characters whose behaviour is very much like that of the Japanese kami. Irish saints all have their areas of patronage, as does each Kami. St Colmcille is said to be the patron saint of floods, book binders and poets. Saint Ailbhe is supposed to be the patron saint of wolves. Some saints have their areas of patronage updated, as could be observed happening in the Shinto shrine near Akihabara. The Irish missionary saint Columbanus, is now the patron saint of motorcyclists. Many other examples could just as easily be identified.

Some folkloric survivals are, thankfully, disappearing. Only a generation, or so, ago fear of 'fairy forts' either led to their neglect or their destruction., Now, there is a greater awareness that these places are important archaeological and heritage sites. And, I would hope never to meet another tourism officer holding the views I encountered in the early nineties when I was informed that we should not be promoting Irish mythology in case people thought we were 'backward'.

The Irish otherworld stories tell of these 'memory places' that are deeply embedded in the Irish landscape, a part of the body of Dindshenchas, the lore of place names. Much has been written about the First Nation Australian, Dreamtime stories that tell of the "song-lines' which the creation of the landscape in a timeless setting where the worlds of past present and future are interwoven

¹⁴ They include Daikokuten, concerned with marriage and prosperity and Ebisu, who is interested in business. The third is the Taira no Masakado, who was an early human rebel sometime between (794 and 1185).

¹⁵ The Ekōin Temple was established after the Great Fire of Meireki in 1657 and remembers those who could have no place of burial.

¹⁶ Reference to Goban Saor stories

with the wealth of the land.¹⁷ Just as in the Irish tradition, there are liminal 'memory places' where the borders are fragile and which must be held open and secure.

There is an old folk belief that tells that you can see into the Otherworld by covering one eye, preferably while looking backwards between your legs. I doubt it is necessary to go to that extreme but it does express a way of approaching the creativity that is 'hidden in the 'Otherworld' of the imagination.

It could be that the hidden treasures of this world that have come down through the centuries include an appreciation of new ideas, adaptability, a willingness to adopt a different view-point and perhaps, an added extra, a playful, even surreal sense of humour, perhaps a surprisingly useful skill.

The Otherworld of imagination and the Everyday world of activity are, in some ways, just two methods of perceiving experience and the borders between the two are best kept open for the sustenance of creative health. Maybe those Irish storyteller-poets were reminding us of something we already know, or should know, for ourselves.

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¹⁷ Reference Dindshenchas and Dreamtime article