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The folklore of Jim Peters and Tom Kennedy

By Donal O'Regan

While visiting relatives during the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was introduced to my cousin-in-law, one Tom Kennedy of Ballyheen, Barnane, Templemore, a farmer and former employee of the Department of Forestry who had a keen memory for local lore. Many of the stories which I gleaned from Mr. Kennedy, who was in his mid to late 'fifties when I first met him had in turn been passed on to him by the late Jim Peters who died, aged 94 during the 1960s.

The first of these concerned a great black dog or puca which traditionally haunted a house at a crossroads known as Kelly's Cross, situated c. three miles or five kilometers north west of the town of Templemore, in the district known as Barnane. According to Mr. Kennedy's informant, Mr. Jim Peters, this was an evil spirit which took the form of a great black dog, the size of a calf, which had burning red coals the size of saucers in place of his eyes. The house at Kelly's Cross had, in the first instance, been allegedly built on a Mass Path, a cause of impending misfortune in Irish tradition. In addition, a woman of means who lived locally, had intended to travel to America and had agreed a rendezvous at the point where the house later stood, with her suitor, who, I understand, was a local man. However, when the suitor arrived, he murdered her, taking her money and burying her on the spot. Later, a two storey farmhouse was built on the site and this was owned by a family named Kelly, hence the name Kelly's Cross. According to Tom Kennedy, the house came to be haunted by the black dog which had a habit of causing mayhem, both day and night. When the family were downstairs during the day time, the dog could be heard tearing away the bed clothes, upstairs, and when they had made their beds afresh and were asleep upstairs at night, the dog could be heard clawing away at the embers of the hearth on the floor below. In the morning, the ashes of the hearth would be scattered across the kitchen floor as would the dying embers from the previous evening's fire. At length, the situation became intolerable and during the early decades of the twentieth century, the family decided to have an exorcism performed.

Fr. O'Connor, the Parish Priest of Drom and Inch, was called upon to banish the spirit but, on attempting to confront it, found it to be too powerful. He was then joined by another priest and the two priests between them succeeded in banishing the black dog into a bottle and throwing the bottle into the River Shannon. Thus was contained the trouble making spirit, but only for a time! One hundred and fifty years later or so, it would be able to escape from its captivity and wreak havoc once more. According to Willie Sheridan of Barnane, aged in his late fifties in 1003, the priest commented to one member of the family that "They would be playing hurling under the bed". This facet of the story I have not received from Mr. Kennedy and, indeed, this multi-faceted story serves to demonstrate the rich weave of folklore that occurs in the area. The main part of the story concludes with a warning by Fr. O'Connor to members of the Kelly family not to look out the window of the house at a certain time, as this was the time at which the spirit would be leaving. However, one curious member of the Kelly family proceeded to look out the window at the forbidden moment! It was said that he was never the same again and died shortly afterwards in England.

The foregoing is a classic account of the "Black Dog" story, which is widespread through

Ireland and, indeed, enjoys an international dimension. According to Mrs. Gretta Butler (nee Ryan) of Toher, Templetuoghy, now deceased, she was cycling home from a dance, close to Barnane, as a young girl in the 1920s, when a large black dog, the size of a calf and with flaring red coals in his eyes jumped out on the road in front of her and accompanied her bike for some distance. The Black Dog was evidently seen by more than just the Kellys!

The house at Kelly's Cross was subsequently destroyed by an accidental fire and afterwards demolished, having stood for many years as a sinister ruin.

On the south side of Kelly's Cross, according to the late Jim Peters, stood a stone on which, according to tradition, St. Patrick is believed to have knelt, leaving the imprint of his knee in the sandstone boulder. Tradition about St. Patrick having left the imprint of his knee on stones or rocks is common throughout large parts of Ireland. According to St. Patrick's seventh century biography, Muirchu, the Angel Victoricus, Patrick's Guardian Angel, is believed to have left the imprint of his foot on a mountain beside Sliabh Mis (Slemish) in Co. Antrim, where Patrick fasted and prayed while minding sheep. Eddie Dalton of Golden informs me that St. Patrick is supposed to have knelt on a rock in the Multeen River in South Tipperary, while there is also believed to be a rock in the vicinity of Holycross, where Patrick is supposed to have prayed.

Still another account reverberating from the mouth of the late Jim Peters and which he related to Tom Kennedy concerns a little house which stood on the western side of Kelly's Cross where leprechauns could be seen making boots late into the evening. The noise of the instruments involved in the boot making could be heard as one approached Kelly's Cross from the south.

According to the late Mr. Peters, an old O'Kennedy castle or tower house stood close to this spot, on the west side of Kelly's Cross. This is a particularly interesting piece of tradition, as no ancient castle or monument of any type is located on the first edition (1840) of the Ordnance Survey for North Tipperary nor are there, to the best of my knowledge, any references to the ruins of such a castle or tower house in the Ordnance Survey Letters. Neither does such an O'Kennedy castle feature at this location in either the Civil Survey or Down Survey rendering its putative existence suspect. However, it is not impossible that a fifteenth or sixteenth century tower house had, in fact, once existed here, that it had vanished some time before the mid seventeenth century, but that its heretofore existence continued to survive in local folk tradition.

The late Mr. Tom Kennedy also related to this writer a tradition concerning the murder of a priest in the lodge of nearby Killoshane Castle. According to this account, the priest, whose name now escapes me, was stabbed with a knife while playing poker in the lodge some time during the nineteenth century. For some time afterwards, it was impossible to remove recurring bloodstains from the lodge floor. However, Killoshane Castle itself, a multi-period building incorporating a Butler tower house, was reputed to have a happy atmosphere, in spite of the fact that Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector, is reputed to have spent a night in what is to this day known as Cromwell's Room. This in turn contains what is known as 'Cromwell's Bed', a construct, however, of likely nineteenth century date, or later.

Finally, Mr. Kennedy informed me about two sites of prehistoric interest, in the area. The first of these is known as 'Fairyhill', a burial mound, traditionally protected by the fairies and which would bring certain bad luck to anyone with the temerity to interfere with it. Part of the mound, located in the townland of Barnane, has been removed in relatively recent times, leaving the archaeologist, Dr. Geraldine Stout, to speculate in her *The Archaeological Survey of the Barony of Ikerrin* that it may in fact be a Linkardstown type cist, conventionally dated by scholars to the mid to late Neolithic period (c. 2800 to 2000 BC).

The second site mentioned by Mr. Kennedy, of possible interest to pre-historians, is what appears to be either a portal tomb or boulder burial in the townland of Killowardy, which had been known in the area as a 'Giant's Grave'. This was first drawn to the attention of archaeologist Geraldine Stout by the late Johnny Feehily and it stands on land today owned by his sister Ms. Peggy Davy. According to the tradition passed on to Tom Kennedy by Jim Peters and others, the Killowardy Tomb which features in Geraldine Stout's *The Archaeological Survey of the Barony of Ikerrin* marked the burial spot of a great number of people who had been killed in a battle in ancient times. The river nearby was supposed to have ran red with their blood for three days afterwards. Also in Killowardy townland was reputed to be buried a cartload of gold from Cromwellian times while the recently deceased Joe Egan of Park, Killea, informed this writer that a chalice which had once been the property of apostate priest Paul Higgins, who is buried in Killea, also lay buried somewhere in Killowardy townland.

Folklore is not history per se. It belongs, rather, in the realm of popular tradition and belief and concerns how stories of a popular nature, sometimes containing a germ of truth were passed down from one generation to the next. The foregoing accounts hope to record, in some small way, the traditions of one area and of how these have been preserved across the generations.