The cult of pilgrimage in early nineteenth-century Ireland as illustrated through folklore.

Abstract:
Pre-Famine religious practice in Ireland is an under-developed area of historical research. Popular rural Catholicism in the early nineteenth century has long been viewed as superstition or pagan folk customs by both contemporary antiquarians and modern commentators. This study examines the cult of pilgrimage as perceived through the folkloric record and contemporary observers’ accounts. Practices such as rounding rituals, holy wells and demanding excursions were integral to the Irish Catholic experience. The essay draws on anthropological tools and methods to decode meaning in these religious and cultural traditions. Durkheim and Collins provide a theoretical framework through which to gain a deeper understanding of the pilgrims’ motives, from the penitential to the mercenary, as well as the notion of suffering as worship. These approaches reveal that the popularity of folk customs and ritualised worship in the early decades of the nineteenth century was due to a number of various factors. Pre-Celtic inherited rites and traditions may have played a considerable role, but the post-‘Devotional Revolution’ view of Catholic Ireland should not be allowed to colour our perspective on the highly localised and mystical nature of worship among rural society at that time.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, popular belief, superstition, folklore, rituals

The vagaries of historical pilgrimage of any sort are generally difficult to trace. Croagh Patrick, for instance, almost certainly did not operate a visitor centre that recorded the details of its pilgrims in the 1820s. Nor did most of the people who partook of the holy well cults around Ireland document something that was for the most part a highly localised and private affair. It is therefore nearly impossible to uncover the personal motives and rationale that spurred large numbers of Irish Catholics to undergo the (often punishing) experience of pilgrimage in the early nineteenth century. Partly the reason for this lies in the assumption that the rituals of popular Catholicism at this time consisted of no more than superstition and pagan-influenced folk customs. It is true to some extent that Church elites did not explicitly encourage devotion at holy wells and stone cairns, preferring to bring all religious observance into line with official doctrine. This meant, however, that much of what we can learn about pilgrimage today comes through alternative histories, in particular the medium of folklore. Often recorded by antiquarians such as Mr and Mrs Hall on their travels through the Irish countryside, accounts of ‘peasant’ rituals in the nineteenth century are numerous and largely neglected by scholars of traditional religion and the Church. Instead they point to a large and diverse body of rural pilgrimage practises that had as their
basis the elements of rounding rituals, patterns, penance and the significance of the journey. This essay will examine the importance of such worship as embodied in folk culture, and demonstrate how the penitential practices of rural Catholics highlight the preoccupations of life in their society.

The phenomenon of pilgrimage has attracted some insightful studies into its sociological and anthropological value. These spiritual journeys were not an easy form of worship in nineteenth-century Ireland, at least not compared to the largely passive practise of church membership, so to explain their prevalence in the folklore of the time requires a somewhat theoretical approach. Emile Durkheim’s concept of religion as predominantly a social experience with a strong collective consciousness is now widely used as the basis for interpreting devout practices such as pilgrimage. In this reading, departing on such a journey of faith is more a reinforcement of social identity and its belief systems than an assertion of personal religious piety. Central to this is the performance of rituals and other cult practices pertaining to the supernatural. It is important also not to underestimate the significance of sacred symbols as a key part of the pilgrimage experience – what Durkheim would term ‘totemic beliefs’. ¹ Closely associated is the notion of primitive religion as a collective form of magic and ceremonial worship. Randall Collins has expanded on this in his work on the four Ms of religion; namely, magic, morality, mysticism and membership.² Pilgrimage is perhaps best understood in relation to mysticism (denoting an ‘express elevator to the top’ in every sense), particularly when assessing its popularity. Not only does it hold the promise of divine intervention in return for penitential exercises, it also involves the pilgrim in a kind of community of active faith. In this sense, then, it is perhaps possible to connect the form of Irish folklore - that of an oral community tradition with its origins shrouded in mystery – with one of its major subjects: pilgrimage practice.

If one is to use this theoretical framework in regards to the various aspects of devotional pilgrimage, ‘rounding’ rituals provide a useful prism for decoding meaning in these folk customs. Holy wells were without doubt the most common type of pilgrimage in rural Ireland of the early nineteenth century. Various estimates have put their number at

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between two and four thousand and almost every parish in the country seems to lay claim to one.\(^3\) Despite the presence of water (which is not always mentioned in accounts), however, the most crucial feature of pilgrimage to these sites seems to have been the practice of rounds. The usual system of devotion involved the pilgrim circling the well a prescribed number of times while reciting rosary prayers, and frequently making other gestures such as throwing stones or passing an object around the body. As the folkloric records tend to highlight the element of superstition in this sort of custom, it is not hard to connect it to a kind of ritualistic magic-based ceremony. The incantation, for instance, of the obligatory seven Paters and seven Hail Marys at St Nicholas’s well carries with it a distinct impression of spell-making, even though it is in worship of the sacred figure of the saint.\(^4\) But like many of the holy wells themselves, the provenance of rounding rituals is a contested area. Carroll has correctly pointed out that the rather romantic idea of the ‘Celtic origins’ is most likely a post-Reformation invented tradition.\(^5\) But while it may be the case that an over-reliance on oral folk tales and a dearth of written evidence can make it hard to verify exact dates, there is probably some truth in claiming that early Irish Christianity was influenced by Celtic traditions. One critic, by way of example, has noted that the nineteenth-century rounds invariably rotated in a clockwise direction – mirroring the old Celtic idea of the movement of the seasons in the same sunwise direction known as the ‘deiseal turn’.\(^6\) This favouring of a right-handed, clockwise direction occurs frequently throughout folk traditions, as the ritual of St. Patrick’s Bell demonstrates.\(^7\)

There was, of course, more significance to the pilgrims’ rounds than mere superstition. One of the main incentives behind pilgrimage in any culture is its attendant penitential benefits, something that is echoed strongly by the folk literature of this period. People undertook physically demanding excursions in attempt to purge the soul, and frequently seemed to equate bodily punishment with future spiritual indulgence. A good example of this is perhaps Ireland’s most famous mountain pilgrimage of Croagh Patrick. The tradition of climbing it barefoot was well established by the nineteenth century, as the

\(^5\) Carroll, *Irish Pilgrimage*, p. 101
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 138
contemporary reports by Ceaser Otway and Thackeray suggest. Moreover, the three stations along the route were often acknowledged by performing rounds on one’s knees – most strikingly at the very top where custom demanded that the summit be circled fifteen times on bare knees. Unsurprisingly, these practises alarmed the Protestant antiquarians who visited such pilgrimage routes. Samuel Carter Hall and his wife, on their grand tour around Ireland, remarked on seeing an old woman, ‘strong in the deceit of self-righteousness, the poor creature followed her companion’s example and proceeded to move round the well on her bare knees’. William Carleton also wrote about his experience on the island pilgrimage of Lough Derg, stating that ‘I was absolutely stupid and dizzy with the pains, the praying and the jostling … and the uncomfortable penitential whining of the whole crowd’. While undoubtedly coloured by strong religious bias, their attitude is nevertheless understandable. The factors that pushed people to physically lacerate themselves for a religious belief may be unrecoverable, but a fascination with the most visible of pilgrimage customs behaviour persisted throughout the century. This can be seen in the actions of the archbishop of Tuam Dr McEvilly, who in 1883 tried to standardise the penitential exercises by transferring them all to a chapel at the base of Croagh Patrick. The phenomenon of bodily castigation was not just evident on Mayo’s holy mountain, however. Station Island at Lough Derg was a major retreat destination at the time P.D. Hardy wrote his work *The Holy Wells of Ireland*. In it he describes how the pilgrims, when ‘within sight of the holy island, they pull off their shoes and stockings and uncover their heads’. This act of removing clothes or coverings was thus seen as an integral part of earning penance on pilgrimage. Its significance may lie in the potential for immediate contact with the divine or sacred place, though across many religions it is also a sign of deference and humility in the presence of a higher power. The concept of suffering as worship deserves more thorough

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9 Mr and Mrs S.C. Hall, *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character and History*, Vol 6 (Boston, 1911), p. 48

10 As quoted in P.D. Hardy, *The Holy Wells of Ireland: containing an authentic account of those various places of pilgrimage and penance which are still annually visited by thousands of the Roman Catholic peasantry* (Dublin, 1840), p. 21


12 Hardy, *Holy Wells of Ireland*
study in an Irish context, where in the nineteenth century it was evidently central to the act of atonement for one’s sins.

But it was not purely the act of bodily discipline and self-punishment that the cult of pilgrimage sought to deify. The figurative and literal journey of redemption stands as the defining hallmark of all Christian pilgrimage. For rural Catholics in the nineteenth century, local options were largely limited to holy wells where the emphasis lay on penitential rituals on-site. For those seeking a mystical experience, travelling over long distances no doubt held a more exotic appeal and promise of a more intense religious gratification. In folk legend this belief is borne out by the story of St Kevin bringing Roman earth back to Glendalough, where the idea grew that seven pilgrimages to the Irish monastery were the equivalent of one to Rome.\textsuperscript{13} While it may be disingenuous to claim that the status of all pilgrimage sites was in direct proportion to their inaccessibility, folkloric accounts nevertheless hint at some such relationship. Station Island at Lough Derg, for example, has remained one of the most popular destinations for Irish pilgrims for some centuries. The accounts told of it by pilgrims in Carleton’s and Hardy’s books suggest that the physical ordeal of reaching the sacred place – not forgetting the obligatory journey over water – was at least as important as the destination itself, no matter how sacred.\textsuperscript{14} The same is true of Croagh Patrick, which appears to occupy a special place in the folk culture of pilgrimage. All religious belief and mysticism involve an emphasis on allegory and symbolism, perhaps no more so than the kind of ascent – both spiritual and literal – involved in climbing a mountain. These conspicuous features of the landscape have held a fascination as sacred symbols for since prehistoric times, as the cairns and standing stones around Croagh Patrick can illustrate.\textsuperscript{15} But such places of worship could also be seen to survive in the cultural memory for other reasons. As Victorian ideals of scientific and geographical demarcation took hold during the ‘improving’ nineteenth century, antiquarians and map-makers like John O’Donovan played a considerable role in preserving the details of rural religious sites and

\textsuperscript{13} Mould, \textit{Irish Pilgrimage}, p. 85
\textsuperscript{15} Chris Corlett, ‘Prehistoric Pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick’ in \textit{Archaeology Ireland} 11.2 (Summer, 1997), p8
traditions. This included much of the indigenous folklore of the countryside relating to the cult of pilgrimage. Lawrence J. Taylor has gone further, asserting that similar in nature to O’Donovan’s Ordnance Survey maps, ‘the stories preserve the enchanted landscape; the well and other places like it literally hold the stories’. It is indeed the case that geographical features venerated for their holiness manage to be encapsulated by narratives in ways no other religious practise could. Henry Inglis weaved a beguiling narrative as he documented his experience at pattern celebrations at Tober Phádraig, held up in the ‘picturesque’ Maamturk mountains in 1834.

So who were these pilgrims of the nineteenth century and what was their contribution to this cult of divine worship? As previously stated, it proves notoriously difficult to ascertain exact numbers, although Lough Derg does provide some insight into average amounts of visitors. Henry Inglis estimates the number of pilgrims in the season of 1834 to be roughly 19,000, while later commentators have rounded it down to some 12,000 by the middle of the century. Notwithstanding the discrepancy, it seems that established centres of pilgrimage continued to attract significant quantities of devotees throughout this period. It is left to folk customs and descriptions of them to provide an indication of the popularity of other, less sacred destinations. Hardy hints darkly at the ubiquity of holy wells when he declaims them the ‘sources of much IRRELIGION, IMMORALITY and VICE, which at present prevail to such an awful extent in our countryside’.

Patterns – days of celebration at holy sites – in particular attracted large crowds and highlighted the deeply social experience of pilgrimage. Carleton vividly depicts the scene on St Patrick’s Purgatory during the height of its season by telling how ‘the eye could rest on nothing more, except a living mass of human beings crawling slowly about, like worms on a dead dog’. It seems to have been a largely universal phenomenon, with ‘the young and

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16 Anna Rackard, Fishstonewater: holy wells of Ireland (Cork, 2001), p. 8
17 Lawrence J. Taylor, Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholics (Dublin, 1995), p. 61
18 Henry D. Inglis, A Journey throughout Ireland, during the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 1834 (London, 1838) p. 225-227
20 Hardy, Holy Wells of Ireland, iii
21 Carleton, ‘The Lough Derg Pilgrim’, p. 805
old, men and women, hale and sickly’ all in evidence.\textsuperscript{22} The community spirit, however, was distasteful to some Protestant commentators who saw the dancing, shouting and stalls on pattern days as a ‘dismal and half-savage sight’.\textsuperscript{23} Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque can be helpful here in interpreting the role of such festivities. Feasting and revelry traditionally followed a period of pious behaviour and pilgrimage, represented perhaps most famously in Chaucer’s \textit{Canterbury Tales}, and which serves explain the appeal of patterns at the foot of Croagh Patrick on the traditional ‘Reek’ Sunday in July. But from the viewpoint of those travelling nineteenth-century commentators, such customs were not only archaic but carried with them the implicit distinction of ‘other’. Even when striving for scientific objectivity, the cataloguing of Irish folk practises frequently took on a somewhat superior tone:

\begin{quote}
Man looks with veneration upon every spot that has been hallowed by sincere religion, be it ever so deluded, and feels anxious (when possessed by true learning) to preserve every trace by which the \textit{turas} of the pilgrim and the progress of the human mind in art, religion, or enthusiasm can be followed.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Such sentiments contain strong echoes of the belief, that as Jane Nadel-Klein puts it, ‘rural life is [seen as] modernity’s evolutionary precedent, surviving as an anachronism that shows us how far we have progressed’.\textsuperscript{25}

This ties neatly in with the idea of pilgrimage as an example of a cultural ‘survival’; namely, a practise that has persisted from one stage in the social evolution of a society to the next, even when it nominally is no longer needed.\textsuperscript{26} But even this does not fully explain the persistence of popular pilgrimage in nineteenth-century Ireland. Catholics undertook the role of pilgrim for a variety of different reasons, and while penitential rites were no doubt important more pressing material needs often acted as similar impetuses. Holy wells were predominantly sought for all kinds of cures, which curiously did not always involve the

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Thackeray, \textit{The Irish sketch book}), p. 237
\item \textsuperscript{24} John O’Donovan, Ordnance Survey Letter for Donegal (1838), as quoted in Taylor, \textit{Occasions of Faith}, p. 60
\item \textsuperscript{26} Carroll, \textit{Irish Pilgrimage}, p. 68
\end{footnotes}
water. Instead the notion of exchange lay at the core of the pilgrim’s ceremony, where a cure was effected through contact with the powerful place following the proper ritualised forms of rounds.27 This exchange was symbolised in the pilgrim leaving after them some personal affect or ornamentation. Legends surrounding Abby’s well in Kilgobnet, Co Cork claim healing qualities for sore ears and eyes in return for one decade of the Rosary being said during rounds. The popular belief in the power of a saint’s blessing is suggested by the stone inscription reading ‘In memory of St Abigail expelling the plague, 1872’.28 The healing requested at these sites was not confined to humans either. As soon as the water from the Tobar Phádraig in Maumeen, Co Galway was sent for, the animal in danger apparently began to show signs of recovery.29 Cures sometimes involved more than just petty ailments—certain rites at Croagh Patrick’s Leaba Phádraig were supposed to be performed only by those ‘who were barren and desired children’.30 And on occasion pilgrimage sought to influence even the weather: ‘one old man heard [St Gobnet] came on a white horse and that she blessed the district against thunder and lightning’.31 This, however, is not as ridiculous as it may sound – at a time when prolonged hard weather could mean practical starvation for an entire community, such pilgrimage requests were hardly made in jest.

More mercenary motives are also to be discerned among the records of pilgrimages at this time. Various personages had a vested interest in keeping folk legends and the cult of pilgrimage rituals alive, like the Geraghty family near Croagh Patrick in Co Mayo. These were the designated keepers of St Patrick’s bell, a sacred relic that was supposed to bring luck to pilgrims who passed it three times around the body for a small fee. According to the Ordnance Survey letters from 1838, Tom Geraghty might make £10 from the practise ‘when the weather is favourable and the Christians peninent’.32 These enterprising profiteers were not only attracted to the major sites, however; one nineteenth-century traveller remarks on the local ‘superstition, which is not a little kept up by the gain it brings to the proprietor of

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27 Taylor, Occasions of Faith, p. 53
28 MS 314 (Scoileanna, Co Chorcaighe): Coimisiún Béaloideasa Éireann
29 Mould, Irish Pilgrimage, p. 85
31 D. Ó’hEaluighthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyjourney’ in Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, 57 (1952), p. 52
32 As quoted in Mould, Irish Pilgrimage, p. 136
this [St Gobnet’s] image, who, as I hear, farms it at a considerable rent to the person who exposes it to view’. In many ways then, pilgrimage was a flourishing industry that fed the needs of people in through various mean, both spiritual and temporal.

Folk stories and local traditions such as these can easily be passed off as superstition, as they often were by dismissive antiquarians. But taken as a whole, they can alternatively be seen to represent the interests and concerns of a society fascinated with the cult of pilgrimage. As the so-called ‘devotional revolution’ took hold in post-Famine Ireland, practices of religious observance were directed into a more general Church orthodoxy and therefore easier to trace. But the rituals of visiting holy wells and embarking on expeditions of faith to Croagh Patrick or Lough Derg never properly died out. Preserved within the oral culture of rural society – and to an extent within the testimonies of Protestant travellers – they symbolised the deeply localised and mystical nature of worship in the early nineteenth century. Central to this was an emphasis on the ceremonial practice of rounds, combined with a desire for supernatural intervention in everyday life. Health, family and prosperity seemed to factor as the key reasons for pursuing these spiritual tests of endurance, a fact of universal nature that perhaps passed Thackeray by when he captured the dominant Protestant feeling that ‘high up the invisible mountain, the people were dragging their bleeding knees from alter to alter, flinging stones, and muttering some endless litanies, with the priests standing by’.

**Word Count:** 3,447

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33 D. Ó’hEaluighthe, ‘St Gobnet of Ballyourney’, p. 56
34 Thackeray, *The Irish sketch book*, p. 238
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