The Sick Call and the Drama of Extreme Unction in Irish Folklore

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This article examines the priest's sick call in Irish folklore. The sick call normally involved the hearing of the dying person's confession; the administration of extreme unction, the last sacrament that a Roman Catholic was expected to receive; and (if possible) the reception of holy communion, viaticum, *food for the journey. Drawing from the large body of stories in the Schools' Collection (gathered in 1937–8), the article shows how the greatest concern in the popular mindset was ensuring that the priest arrived in time to perform his duties. However, all manner of difficulties awaited him in the exercise of this ministry, from diabolical apparitions to the wiles of other humans, including other priests, who purposefully attempted to thwart his path. In this sense, Irish folk tales dramatize the administration of this sacrament into a rite of passage.*

> It is 'a very grievous sin', says the Catechism of the Council of Trent, 'to defer the holy unction until, all hope of recovery now lost, life begins to ebb, and the sick person is sinking into insensibility'. It is obvious that if administered whilst the mental faculties are yet unimpaired and the sick man 'can bring to its reception sentiments of faith and devotion, this circumstance must contribute very much to enable him to partake more abundantly of the graces of the sacrament'.[1]

This salutary observation appears in the section on extreme unction in *Notes on the Rubrics of the Roman Ritual*, by the Rev. James O'Kane (1825–74), senior dean, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, which was first published in 1867. The work would go on to be highly influential, being revised and updated, and appearing on seminary

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[1] James O'Kane, *Notes on the Rubrics of the Roman Ritual: Regarding the Sacraments in General, Baptism, the Eucharist, and Extreme Unction, with an Appendix on Penance and Matrimony* (New York, 1883), 533.

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curricula up to the 1950s. Despite its title, O'Kane's 'Notes' are, in fact, quite comprehensive, and seek to address all aspects of the administration of the last rites, including even the most unexpected of cases. While speaking of the anointing of the hands of the dying person, for instance, it presents the following scenario: 'Should the person have redundant members, e.g. a third hand, then those are to be anointed that have been most in use, or that are nearest to the natural position'.[2] However, as important as being prepared for such unlikely occurrences might be, the most crucial element in attending to the dying was surely the matter of timing. The excerpt from O'Kane's work with which this article opens clearly underlines this. Extreme unction should not be delayed until the person's mental faculties have begun to slip away; it is always best that the recipient can welcome the last sacrament with full knowledge of its import, and with an appropriately faith-filled response. That said, the element of timing, however crucial it might be, was not the only consideration for the priest administering the sacrament.

Works such as O'Kane's were necessarily detailed in their discussion of what needed to be done once the priest arrived in the room of the dying person. What was paramount for the majority of Roman Catholic men and women in O'Kane's Ireland, and indeed in the decades immediately following his death, was that a priest be present and that the sacrament be administered. In this case, timing was, literally, everything. It is of little surprise, then, that the curse '*Bás gan sagart ort!*' ('May you die without a priest!') was reserved for one's most detested enemies, as the consequences of such a wish might well be eternal punishment, should the individual die in his or her sin. This article examines popular concerns regarding the timely administration of the last rites in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. It does so by exploring stories of the priest's sick call to the dying as recounted in Irish folklore, most specifically in a body of folklore known as the 'Schools' Collection', which was collected in 1937–8. Although these stories were gathered and written down in the 1930s, many of them reflect an earlier period when the priest travelled on horseback to the dying, hastening to their side before death could snatch them away from the grace of the sacrament. Some tales name specific individuals who had only recently died, or whose dates can otherwise be established. What is noteworthy is that,

[2] Ibid. 408.

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contrary to the preoccupations of O'Kane in his *Notes on the Rubrics of the Roman Ritual*, most of the stories are concerned with the drama of the priest's journey to the dying person, rather than what happens once he gets there. Indeed, many accounts simply end once the priest has safely arrived at his destination, the relief in the narrative being almost palpable. By discussing some examples of these tales, this article offers a window, albeit an imperfect one, onto how the importance of this rite of passage *in extremis* was conveyed in the Irish folk tradition, and why the timing of the priest's arrival remained the predominant concern for those who told them. First, however, some words of introduction to the Schools' Collection itself, and its genesis, are warranted.

The Schools' Collection, 1937–8

The schools' scheme of 1937–8 was a project spearheaded by the newly-founded Irish Folklore Commission under the direction of Séamus Ó Duilearga, a native of Antrim and lecturer in Irish at University College Dublin, and Seán Ó Súilleabháin, a national school teacher from County Kerry. It enlisted the assistance of Irish schoolchildren to record local folklore from their parents, grandparents, older relatives and neighbours. School time usually devoted to composition was now reassigned to recording in their copybooks the material that the children had collected. To avoid repetition, some children, or teachers, would then transcribe a selection of this material into the official notebooks provided by the Department of Education, which were subsequently deposited in the Irish Folklore Archives. By the close of the project, more than 50,000 children from 5,000 schools in the Irish Free State had contributed to the scheme, resulting in 1,128 volumes, not counting some 40,000 of the children's original copybooks.[3] In the foreword to the scheme's guidebook, senior pupils were invited to 'participate in the task of rescuing from oblivion the traditions which, in spite of the vicissitudes of the historic Irish nation, have, century in, century out, been preserved

[3] Mícheál Briody, *The Irish Folklore Commission, 1935–1970: History, Ideology, Methodology* (Helsinki, 2007), 261. The Schools' Collection has been digitized in recent years and can be found online at: <www.duchas.ie>. For a comprehensive introduction, see especially Patricia Lysaght, 'Collecting the Folklore of Ireland: The Schoolchildren's Contribution', *Folklore* 132 (2021), 1–33.

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with loving care by their ancestors'.[4] Séamus Ó Duilearga regarded these traditions as no less than 'the State Papers of a forgotten and neglected people'.[5] While the scheme set out a wide variety of themes to explore, religious folk tales are particularly well represented and, within them, the figure of the Roman Catholic priest features prominently.[6]

A word of caution is nonetheless in order. While the Schools' Collection remains a fascinating repository, historians who use it should be aware that the material they encounter has already been significantly mediated in its transmission. To begin with, the scheme covered twenty-six of the thirty-two counties on the island, and its principal focus was on rural Ireland (while some city schools did participate, they were, on the whole, under-represented). Likewise, the schools which featured were predominantly Roman Catholic, although there was some representation from other denominations. Given that the 'collectors' were schoolchildren, and their 'informants' adults, the stories they collected were largely recounted in an age-appropriate fashion (although there are occasional surprises here too). When individual students returned to school with their material, the contents of their copybooks were further filtered, with only a selection of material transferred to the official notebooks, usually transcribed by the students with the neatest handwriting or, as noted, by the teachers themselves. Duplicate material was often omitted from the official notebooks (different versions of stories, songs, and so on). Historians are advised, where possible, to also examine the original copybooks of the children (the rough drafts, as it were), although these were not always returned along with the official notebooks. What we are left with in the official notebooks (which can now be viewed online) does not fully represent all the material that was originally collected; rather, it comprises what individual teachers

[4] Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork, 2000), 134.

[5] S. Ó Duilearga, 'An Untapped Source of Irish History', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 25 (1936), 399–412, at 399. See also Mary E. Daly, '"The State Papers of a Forgotten and Neglected People": The National Folklore Collection and the Writing of Irish History', *Béaloideas* 78 (2010), 61–79.

[6] For a broader discussion of the portrayal of the priest in Irish folklore, see Pádraig Ó Héalaí, 'Cumhacht an tSagairt sa Bhéaloideas', *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 8 (1977), 103–91, and more recently, Salvador Ryan, '"Begorra, Paddy, the Clergy have the Power Yet": Priests of the Province of Armagh and their Portrayal in the Folklore of the Schools Collection (1937–38)', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha* 28 (2020–1), 56–81.

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deemed appropriate, and sufficiently interesting, to include.[7] These considerations present real methodological issues for the historian attempting a detailed analysis of this source, not least the question of the extent to which these stories are a product of a purely oral culture, or whether they have also been influenced by print culture filtering back into 'folklore'. This is a difficult question, but it is not our immediate focus here. Furthermore, invaluable as the digitization of the Schools' Collection has been, there is also another large folklore collection in existence, the very substantial Main Manuscript Collection of the former Irish Folklore Commission, amassed by adult collectors using *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* by Seán Ó Súilleabháin. This collection, which has not yet been digitized, consists of 2,400 bound and paginated volumes, containing approximately 700,000 pages of material.[8] It would be of interest to compare and contrast the content of both collections to obtain further insight into the image of the priest on the sick call, and the drama of extreme unction in Irish folklore. However, again, this must await future study.

The Hunted Priest and the Sick Call

One of the most iconic portrayals in the tales found in the Schools' Collection is that of the priest during the 'penal times', with a price on his head, hunted down and risking his life so that his people could have access to the sacraments.[9] A number of stories concern priests setting out on, or returning from, sick calls in this period.[10] One tale from Ballindaggan, Co. Wexford, relates how:

[7] Lysaght, 'Collecting the Folklore of Ireland', especially 5–10.

[8] See <https://www.duchas.ie/en/info/cbe> for a fuller description of the Main Manuscript Collection.

[9] Strictly speaking, the Penal Laws can be dated to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For a reassessment of their severity, see Thomas Bartlett, 'The Penal Laws against Irish Catholics: Were they too good for them?', in Oliver Rafferty, ed., *Irish Catholic Identities* (Manchester, 2013), 154–70.

[10] When stories from the Schools' Collection are quoted here, I have inserted some basic punctuation for clarity, and have occasionally corrected misspellings. I have also clarified some words or expressions which may be unfamiliar to readers by adding either an equivalent word in square brackets or an explanatory note. I have not otherwise amended the text.

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> Fr. Hickey was killed on the bridge of Killcumney one night when he was coming home from a sick-call. The soldiers knew that Fr. Hickey was out on a call. They put a rope across the bridge and tightened it well. Fr. Hickey was coming quickly, and the horse tripped over the rope and fell, and Father Hickey fell also. The soldiers beheaded him, and they put his head up on a pike for all the people to see it. Ever since that time everyone who goes leaves a stone in the place where the priest was killed.[11]

In contrast to the periodizing tendencies of historians, the 'penal days' was quite an elastic concept in Irish folklore and could be used to refer to a variety of oppressive measures experienced by Roman Catholics, from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth centuries. A tale from Baunreagh, Co. Carlow, relates how priests setting out on sick calls would sometimes disguise themselves to evade capture:

> When Cromwell's soldiers were in Ireland, a poor Franciscan Friar was going to a sick call … He dressed himself in a pedlar's suit, put a bag on his back, and set off across the fields … He met the soldiers and one of them said: 'This is a Popish Friar.' Another said: 'Don't you see he is a pedlar?' 'What have you in your bag?' 'Sure, my pack. Will you buy?' 'No, we buy nothing in this damn country.' The Friar took a piece of lace from his bag. He gave it to one of the soldiers who said: 'This will do my fiancée, she is a dear old pet.' And so they passed away.[12] The Friar went to the sick call.[13]

Meanwhile, assistance to priests in danger often came from seemingly unlikely quarters. A story collected from the Mercy Convent in Kinsale relates how in 1710:

> While a Carmelite was attending a sick call in Cork Street, he was surprised by soldiers known as 'Buffs and Blues'. Escaping from the house, the priest ran through Market Lane … Passing a shop owned by a Protestant named John Heard, he appealed for help. He was invited in, and was directed to lie on the floor under a heap of sacking …
>
> A few hours later, in the darkness of the night, John Heard had the priest conveyed on a car [cart] from his house to a place of refuge in

[11] Dublin, National Folklore Collection, The Schools' Collection [hereafter: NFCS], Ballindaggan, Co. Wexford, vol. 892, 300–1.
[12] That is, 'passed on their way'.
[13] NFCS, Baunreagh, Co. Carlow, vol. 907, 149–51.

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> West Cork. John Heard became very prosperous after this incident. He lived until the year 1742.
>
> The house in which we now live was the one where the priest found shelter.[14]

Other tales relate how the sick call itself was used as a ruse to trap a priest. A tale from Wexford town recounts how a priest was called out on a bogus sick call before being accosted by two men who jumped out from behind a wall with guns. The priest lashed the first with his horsewhip across the face (prompting the storyteller to say 'The mark of the whip is said to be on his descendants'), while the second 'ran his bayonet through the priest's heart and his blood began to drop onto the bridge where, it is claimed, it can still be seen to this day'.[15] A story from Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, meanwhile, related that at the site of a similar decoy where a priest on his way to administer the last rites was shot dead, 'no grass has been known to grow on that spot since'.[16] A tale from Aglish in Co. Tipperary, again set vaguely in 'the Penal Times', relates how a Protestant family called Smith convinced a Roman Catholic man to feign illness and send for the priest in order to capture him. When he arrived, they made him prisoner and hanged him on a tree. Predictably, there were consequences:

> The tree withered, and was there till some years ago. Before he died, the priest cursed the place, saying that the rooks would fly in through the broken windows and grass would grow on the doorstep. Also, that no one of the name Smith would live there afterwards. The man who pretended he was sick was found dead in bed.[17]

A tale of feigned illness from Terryglass, Co. Tipperary, is more graphic in its denouement. When the captured priest is told that the man was not sick, but pretending, the priest challenges the soldiers to 'Come with me to the house and you will see he is sick': 'and when the party arrived at the sick man's house, they found him not alone sick, but dead, with all sorts of beetles continually

[14] NFCS, Mercy Convent, Kinsale, Co. Cork, vol. 319, 377–9.
[15] NFCS, Scoil na mBráthar, Co. Wexford, vol. 880, 434.
[16] NFCS, Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, vol. 1028, 7.
[17] NFCS, Aglish, Co. Tipperary, vol. 532, 20. The implication, of course, is that this Roman Catholic man died without a priest, or the consolation of the last rites.

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coming out of his ears, nose and mouth. The soldiers feared the priest and let him pass.'[18] Cautionary tales regarding those who would feign fatal sickness, either to trap or mock a priest, were not just the stuff of folklore. In the same year in which the schools' scheme was under way, a story appeared in the *Kilkenny People* newspaper under the title 'Letter from Rome' which recounted how 'some days ago, *L'Osservatore Romano* published details about a young man to whose bedside a priest was called to administer the Last Sacraments'. It related that as soon as the priest reached the sick man's room, 'the invalid jumped up and hurled all kinds of insults at the priest'. The story continued:

> A group of companions explained that the sick call was only a joke, but the priest with much indignation told the young man that he had committed the greatest sin that he could commit. And while they were speaking the false invalid breathed his last.[19]

The threat of priest-hunters could be eliminated before a priest was captured, occasionally through the intercession of a local saint. A story from Lombardstown, Co. Cork, tells of how a priest on a sick call was followed, and then overtaken, by a priest-hunter, but was soon released from his predicament when he prayed to St Abbey (Abigail) who arranged that a highwayman in hiding should, at that moment, appear and shoot the priest-hunter dead.[20]

Stories concerning the historic heroism of priests are common in the Schools' Collection. It was important to have such reminders to ensure that future generations would not forget the priest's sacrifice. Such reminders often took the form of impressions on the physical landscape, much as early Irish saints were believed to have left imprints on the rocks where they prayed. But absences could also function as reminders (the erasure of a family name from a locality, for instance). While the most familiar stories concern priests apprehended while celebrating mass, those detailing efforts to thwart a priest from administering the last rites are also common, underlining the significance of this sacrament in the popular mindset.

[18] NFCS, Terryglass, Co. Tipperary, vol. 530, 311.
[19] 'Letter from Rome', *Kilkenny People*, 5 June 1937, 3.
[20] NFCS, Glantane, Lombardstown, Co. Cork, vol. 363, 19–20.

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Diabolical Ruses to delay a Priest from attending a Sick Call

The most common sick call stories recount how diabolical forces attempted to hinder priests on their journey, with the intention that an individual would be found dead (and worse, unshriven, that is, having not confessed their sins) by the time the priest arrived. These demonic interventions could come in various guises. A story from Ahane, Co. Limerick, relates how a priest hired a man with a sidecar to go out on a night call.[21] When they came to a certain place on the road:

> the horse stop[ped] up on the road and would not go any farther. The priest saw a white man on the road, and the man [he was with] could see nothing. The man was beating the horse and the horse wouldn't pass it. They turned back and went another road. The priest got a fright. When they went to the house, the person was dead.[22]

A story from Co. Leitrim concerning a certain Fr Galligan relates how 'when he was going along the road, a black dog came out before him, with flames of fire coming out of his mouth, and the horse would not go on'. The story continues:

> The priest put on the stole on his neck and began to read, and he worked bit by bit until he came to the gate of the house, and there the dog made a bad attack at him.[23] When the priest went into the house, the woman was above in the room with the door bolted, and the man below with a crow-bar trying to break the door to kill the woman. Then the priest put the stole round his neck and began to read, and the man stopped it. The woman came down, and they got the man into the bed, and the priest gave him confession.[24]

In an account from Rahavanig, Co. Kerry, a certain Fr O'Connor 'met a sow which attacked him and tried to stop him, but the priest persevered and after a long struggle passed it, and attended the dying

[21] A sidecar, or jaunting car, was a two-wheeled carriage for a single horse, popular in Ireland from the early nineteenth century. Most commonly, it had seats for two to four people, who were seated back-to-back.

[22] NFCS, Ahane, Co. Limerick, vol. 523, 426.

[23] The placing of the stole around the priest's neck is a significant moment, often leading to the banishment of the diabolical force, or the revelation of the true identity of some demon in disguise. On the significance of the stole in the administration of extreme unction, see O'Kane, *Notes on the Rubrics of the Roman Ritual*, 389.

[24] NFCS, Tullaghan, Co. Leitrim, vol. 190, 180.

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person. About five minutes after the priest leaving, the person died.'[25] A tale from Co. Meath, meanwhile, gives an exact year for the strange occurrence, relating how, in November 1860, the parish priest of Ballivor, Fr Halligan, was called from a dinner at a wealthy farmer's house to go on a sick call (the aside here, which would not have been lost on the story's hearers, is revealing: 'It was a custom at that time for a priest to dine out with his well-to-do parishioners regularly'). The priest mounts his horse and departs on his journey until, at one point, the horse stops suddenly, its eyes transfixed by what was on the road ahead. The priest can see nothing, but after donning his stole and praying:

> he saw a headless turkey-cock walk towards him. He at once knew him for what he was – the Devil. He therefore said prayers to drive him back to Hell again and, as he said them, the turkey cock began to fade away. The priest then knew that the Devil had full possession of the dying man's soul (to whom he had been called to attend), and was trying to prevent him from going to attend him in his last agonies.[26]

However, it was not always something potentially terrifying that delayed a priest on a sick call. In other instances, it was quite the reverse. A story from Co. Limerick relates how:

> One night there was a person dying, and the priest was sent for. When the priest was coming along the road, he heard two people inside the wall singing a song, called 'An Cailin Deas Crudaithe na Mbo'.[27] It was the grandest singing the priest ever heard. So he waited until the song was finished. When it was finished, he went over, and looked in over the wall, and saw it was two dogs that was after singing the song.[28]
>
> The priest journeyed on towards the house, where the sick person was living. When he came to the house, the person was dead. The priest said that the two dogs were two devils, and that they wanted to delay the priest, so that they could get the person's soul. The priest

[25] NFCS, Rahanavig, Co. Kerry, vol. 400, 36–7.
[26] NFCS, Killyon, Co. Meath, vol. 692, 320–1.
[27] A more accurate spelling, in this case, is 'Cailín Deas Crúidhte na mBó' ('The Pretty Girl who milked the Cows').
[28] The implication is that it was two dogs that had been singing the song. The 'after' perfect in Hiberno-English can be used to express the perfect tense, using the word 'after' to indicate that something occurred in the immediate, or very recent, past.

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> cursed the song they were singing, and from that day to this, it is considered wrong to sing it.[29]

Meanwhile, an informant from Drogheda, Co. Louth, related a tale which he claimed to have heard fifty years earlier from the very priest to whom it had happened. In this case, while out on a sick call, the priest was waylaid by two nuns who were inordinately eager to chat with him, and accompanied him home, whereupon they blew their cover by turning into two large dogs. The priest concluded: 'The two Nuns were the Devil; he thought I would delay and stand and talk to them and keep me late from the dying woman. But God was with me.'[30] Moreover, priests were thought to have their own powers which helped them circumvent those who would wish to keep them from administering the sacraments. The following tale from Connagh, Co. Cork, is particularly striking:

> One day a priest was going on a sick call. He was stopped by a Protestant named Gilman. He wanted to know where the priest was going, and he wanted to take the Holy Oils from him.[31] Then the priest came out of the car [cart], and he asked the man to go dancing with him. He did so, and after a while the priest went into his car again, and Gilman remained dancing until the priest returned again. Gilman asked the priest to stop him dancing again, and the priest did so.[32]

But delays might not always be the work of the devil. Sometimes accidents simply happened. The following account from Co. Mayo is fascinating in another respect:

> In the olden times there was an old woman who had charms and cures. The priest who lived in the same place was against her. One day this priest was going on a sick call on horseback. When he was going along a certain place on the road, his horse fell under him and he could not rise. A few men came to him and they mentioned about this old woman who had the charms. At first the priest would not hear tell of her. But, at last, he told them to go for her. So she came and she spat on the horse three times, and then told the priest to strike the horse with

[29] NFCS, Lurga, Patrick's Well, Co. Limerick, vol. 527, 89.
[30] NFCS, St Mary's, Drogheda, Co. Louth, vol. 680, 486.
[31] According to O'Kane (quoting De Herdt), 'The vessel of oil should be fastened around the neck, and carried under the surplice, so as not to appear': O'Kane, *Notes on the Rubrics of the Roman Ritual*, 368.
[32] NFCS, Connagh, Co. Cork, vol. 306, 257–8.

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his gown. So the horse rose up and the priest jumped into the saddle and went off.[33]

Here we have the meeting of two authority figures, one representing the institutional church and (presumably) orthodoxy, the other representing folk belief, heterodoxy and, indeed, female authority. In this case, it is to be inferred that the timely administration of the last rites by the former depended wholly on the latter.

Stories which describe the supernatural obstacles that priests faced in administering the last rites are a reminder that the priest-figure was understood to contend not only with earthly powers bent on obstructing his ministry, but also with diabolical forces which, sometimes, cooperated with human agents and, at other times, intervened directly themselves. Moreover, in a similar vein to some parables in the New Testament, neither hindrance nor help are always found in the places where you might expect them to appear.

When the Priest arrives late through his own Fault

Sometimes priests arrived late, not on account of some malign distraction, but rather owing to their own negligence. Instances such as these were treated with the utmost seriousness. A story from Mullinavat, Co. Kilkenny, recalls how:

> a poor travelling woman was dying, and she sent someone for the priest, but the priest did not answer the call at the time. He came in the morning, but the woman was dead, and there were seven candles lighting [burning] around her corpse and, when the priest went in, all the candles quenched, and when he went out, they all lit again. When the priest heard this, he knew he did wrong by not answering the call sooner.[34]

A similar story was told in Gusserane, Co. Wexford:

> One night in winter a woman named Mrs Doyle was dying, and the priest was sent for. The priest did not come for about three hours after he [was] getting word. He came about one o'clock in the night, and there were twins sitting up in a cradle, and the mother was dead in the bed beside them. The twins had two blessed candles in their hands.

[33] NFCS, Lankill, Co. Mayo, vol. 137F, 32.
[34] NFCS, Mullinavat, Co. Kilkenny, vol. 850, 107.

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> When the priest went in, the two candles went out, and when the priest would go out again, the candles would light.[35]

The importance placed upon the prompt arrival of a priest to a deathbed, and the backlash from a grieving relative that might follow such a dereliction of duty, can be keenly observed in a story from Dunlavin, Co. Wicklow. In this account, a priest arrives late for a man's death and is met in the yard by the man's wife who promptly hits him in the face with a can of buttermilk. Despite the circumstances, to strike a priest was regarded as a serious offence, and the story continues with the priest jibing that 'You might want a priest yet!'. It concludes by noting how 'ever after, a priest was never got in time for one of the family.'[36] Stories such as these may have given voice to Roman Catholics disappointed with the negligence of their parish clergy, but this last tale also sets clear limits on how legitimate grievances against poorly performing priests should be addressed.

The Curse of 'May you die without a Priest!'

Given the significance attached to the priest's sick call, it is little wonder that the curse '*Bás gan sagart ort!*' ('May you die without a priest!') had such potency. The wish might be made in general terms, but those who wished this upon their enemies might also play a more active part in its fulfilment. A story from Killeen, Co. Mayo, is an example of one such case:

> Once upon a time a priest was on a sick call and he did not know the way too good. He went into a house to find the way. The man of the house was not great with the people of the house to which the priest was going.[37] So he told the priest the wrong way. The priest came back again to the house, and he put the man sitting on a chair, and the man tried to get up, but he could not get up. The chair was stuck to him and, wherever the man would go, the chair would be after him.[38] The

[35] NFCS, Gusserane, Co. Wexford, vol. 872, 163.

[36] NFCS, Baile Dáithí, Dunlavin, Co. Wicklow, vol. 914, 467.

[37] For 'not great', read 'not very friendly'.

[38] Allusions to priests having the power to 'stick' people to things, most often to the ground, are plentiful in Irish religious tales. I first heard of this tradition from Maynooth ecclesiastical historian, Mgr Patrick Corish, in a lecture delivered in September 1992. He recounted the tale of how a priest, who was travelling on horseback to a sick call at night, handed the reins of his horse over rather gruffly to a stable boy.

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> priest said to him if he told him the truth he would leave him all right. The man told him the right way, and the priest left him all right again.[39]

But one could also bring the curse of dying without a priest upon oneself by certain loathsome behaviours. One of these was contempt for the poor. The following cautionary tale from Kilruane in Co. Tipperary is a good example:

> Once upon a time, there was a woman who was very 'tight'.[40] She would never help the poor. One day, about a week before Christmas, a poor man came to her door, but she sent him away without giving him anything. The next day he came again, but got nothing. He came again in Christmas Night just as the woman was cutting the cake, and when she saw him she said, 'How dare you come in to a decent respectable house like this, get away for yourself,' and the man went away.
>
> Now the woman's husband was looking on, and when he saw what was done, he got a couple of cuts of bread, buttered them, and went after the man. The poor man said: 'I do not want that bread at all. I am one of God's angels. I was sent down to your wife, but she would not give me anything. On the Twelfth of January your wife will be dead.'
>
> So, on the Twelfth of January, the woman was dying. The priest and doctor were there, and she had a blessed candle in her hand. But she let the candle fall, and the room filled up with smoke. The priest nor people could not see at all, so the woman died without Extreme Unction.[41]

The curse of death without a priest might also be employed by a priest who had been slighted in some way. A tale from Tullogher, Co. Kilkenny, recalls how there was once a 'silenced' priest who was forced to resort to the workhouse in New Ross, Co. Wexford, for sustenance. When one of his fellow inmates, a farmer, complained that the priest was being treated with greater solicitude than the others, he

When the priest barked, 'Hold that horse for me while I go inside!', the stable boy grunted reluctantly, precipitating the priest's sharp and more insistent retort: 'Hold that horse for me, or I'll stick you to the ground!' This prompted the stable boy to quip, 'In that case, why don't you stick your horse to the ground?'

[39] NFCS, Killeen, Co. Mayo, vol. 140, 574–5.

[40] That is, who was mean or lacked generosity.

[41] NFCS, Kilruane, Co. Tipperary, vol. 533, 318–19.

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became angry and vowed that 'this man would be roaring for a priest yet, and that nobody would hear him'. The story went on to relate that, sometime later, the same farmer was killed when he got caught under a reaper and binder machine when the other workmen had gone to dinner. The account concludes with the observation that, 'the strangest thing was that the man was calling loudly for help, and for a priest likely, because people at the far side of the river heard him: they could never forget his roars, they said'.[42] Meanwhile, in the following account from Hospital in Co. Limerick, there can be found a slight, but effective, twist on the malediction of 'May you die without a priest!':

> Long ago there lived a judge named O'Grady. He lived in Baggotstown. One day there was a priest up in court. The judge came and he examined his case, and he put him to prison for six months. When the priest was going into prison he said to the judge, 'That you may never die without a priest!' When the judge got old he got very sick, but he could not die. He was in pain and suffering for a very long time because the priest would not come to him. It was said that the devil appeared to him. Then the priest came to him and he died.[43]

In this case, we find a curse wrapped in what appears to be a blessing; and, indeed, one that was aimed at ensuring the maximum physical suffering for the intended victim before he was finally (presumably) relieved of his punishment. To die without a priest was to risk dying in a state of sin, and without the saving grace of penance, *viaticum* and the administration of the holy oils of extreme unction; in short, it was to risk eternal damnation. This is what gave the curse of 'May you die without a priest!' its potency. It is also what gave tales recounting a priest's race to get to a deathbed on time such dramatic effect.

A Messenger brings a Priest to a Dying Person

By contrast, to die having been attended to by a priest was regarded as a great blessing, and many stories survive of heavenly messengers sent to ensure a priest was notified of the impending death of those

[42] NFCS, Tullogher, Co. Kilkenny, vol. 846, 442–3.
[43] NFCS, Scoil na mBráthar, Hospital, Co. Limerick, vol. 514, 393.

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considered deserving of his presence. A tale from Ballymahon, Co. Longford, which closely resembles a medieval *exemplum*, relates how a boy who had promised his mother that he would never go to bed without saying a 'Hail Mary', went to America for eight years and then returned home in 1921, only to die three years later. Just before his death:

> The priest was out on [another] sick call when he was stopped by a masked man and brought along a road to the dying man's house. The road was never seen since or before. The priest was five miles away when he was stopped; so the man had not died without the priest because he had kept his promise to his mother.[44]

The account goes on to relate how the priest in question was a Fr McCabe, who 'is at present Canon of the Parish of Ardagh'.[45] Meanwhile, a tale from Co. Wexford relates how, one night:

> a priest was coming home from a sick call when he met a woman on the road. She told him that her son was dying in the quarry in Ballygarven, and she told him to go to the quarry and anoint him. When he reached the quarry, this James O'Connor was lying unconscious. James asked the priest who [had] sent him to that quarry, and he told him that his mother [had] told him. The boy told the priest that the woman [was] dead twenty year before that.[46]

Stories of individuals returning from the dead to perform such works of mercy were relatively common in Irish folklore. A further example from Camross in Co. Laois recounts how:

> One night a priest got a sick call. He was to go to a man who was dying. He got out his horse and started from the house. When he went to the house there was no one inside, only the sick man. When he went into the room, he saw a picture of a man on the wall. It was the man who went for him, and he had been dead for a great many years.[47]

In other instances, it is St Joseph himself, patron of the dying, who acts as the heavenly messenger. A story from the Presentation

[44] NFCS, Ballymahon, Co. Longford, vol. 751, 266.
[45] Ibid.
[46] NFCS, Gusserane, Co. Wexford, vol. 872, 162–3.
[47] NFCS, Camross, Mountrath, Co. Laois, vol. 826, 436.

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Convent, Lucan, Co. Dublin, which has more than a little confessional edge to it, relates how:

> In one of the Crescent Houses, there lived a man in No. 4. He was Protestant, and lived a very bad life. He had a girl attending on him. She was a Catholic. Now he was Mr. O'Toole and he hated Christianity and priests, and would not let one inside his door.[48]
>
> One day the girl became very ill, and she wished to have a priest. One night a man with a long beard knocked at the priest's door, and asked him to come to the girl as she was very ill. He led the way to the girl's room. They passed through a room where there were men playing cards and drinking. The priest passed through, and the old man with him, and no one saw them (they were made invisible). When they reached the door, the old man disappeared, and when the priest entered the room the girl asked him who told him she had been ill, because no one knew that she was ill.
>
> The priest then asked her if she had ever said any special prayer to any saint, and she said that she had promised her mother to say the little prayer, 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' no matter what happened. Then she made a good Confession, and received Holy Communion. The priest said that it must have been St. Joseph who brought him to the girl.[49]

Other tales of obstacles encountered by those wishing to receive the sacrament played on memories of proselytism in the nineteenth century. The following story from Moyard in Co. Galway is a particularly good example:

> There was an old hedge school in Cleggan about [a] hundred years ago; it was called the Jumper school.[50] Many poor people went to it, to be educated. All the people that went got a cup of soup at noon daily. The

[48] It is noteworthy that, in this tale, 'Christianity' appears to be solely equated with Roman Catholicism.

[49] NFCS, Presentation Convent, Lucan, Co. Dublin, vol. 794, 20–1. The Schools' Collection contains many prayers to St Joseph as patron of the dying.

[50] The term 'Jumper' was used to describe Irish Roman Catholics who, in the period of the Great Hunger (the Irish Famine), were prepared to accept religious instruction from Protestant societies in return for material relief. This might come in the form of the provision of soup, from which the related term 'Souper' derives. Accusations against individuals and families who had 'taken the soup' would be long-lasting in the cultural memory of Irish Catholicism. See also Deirdre Nuttall, *Different and the Same: A Folk History of Protestants in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2020).

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first day they went, they got a flannel coat. One man, whose name was Tommy Heaney, went two days; as soon as he got a flannel coat, he never went to it again.

There was a girl named Sally Tierney [who] was a Jumper for part of her life. She was very ill one day. The minister that was in Moyard went to the Jumper school, and brought her over to the school house in Moyard. She was crying for the priest. Mrs Nee was passing the road; she heard her crying [for] the priest. Mrs Nee ran to Letterfrack to tell the priest. The priest came at once; he went to the school house. The minister was inside the door, but the priest said he would break the door. The minister opened the door at once. The priest gave her the sacrament of Extreme Unction.

The priest got a man, and ass and cart, and they brought her up to Moyard, and she died there.[51]

A priest at one's deathbed might be regarded as a blessing for any Roman Catholic, but there were some individuals who were rewarded in even greater abundance, such as a certain man who defended a priest at a mass rock during the penal times,[52] as recounted in another Co. Wexford story. Upon commending him for his bravery, the priest enquired as to what the man would like him to ask God for in return. The man simply answered, 'To have a priest beside me at the hour of my death', to which the priest replied, 'You will not only have a priest … but you will have seven priests with you.' When the time eventually came for the man to take ill and draw near to death:

No priest could be got for him in this parish … Someone said there was a great dinner going on at Lamberts of Cornagh and there would surely be priests there. A messenger was sent. Seven priests were at the dinner. When the sick call was announced, each priest sprang to his feet, and so the seven priests went to the dying man.[53]

[51] NFCS, Moyard, Co. Galway, vol. 6, 121. For the wider historical context, see Miriam Moffitt, *Soupers and Jumpers: The Protestant Missions in Connemara, 1848–1937* (Dublin, 2008).

[52] A rock, usually located in a remote area, which was used as an altar for the clandestine celebration of mass during the period of the Penal Laws in the seventeenth century.

[53] NFCS, San Leonard, Ballycullane, Co. Wexford, Volume 871, 76. Of course, the throwaway lines in such stories are often more interesting than the main plot lines themselves. The subversive subtext here might be that you will never find priests too far from a dinner table! Such subtle references, encompassing a gently critical jibe at the lifestyle of

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In other instances, the desire of some to receive the last sacrament could summon a priest from beyond the grave. A tale from Querrin in Co. Clare relates how an old woman on an island off Loop Head was dying and called for a priest. As there were no priests on the island, one had to be found on the mainland. As the priest was making his way to the woman, he was drowned at sea; nevertheless, his ghost proceeded to visit the woman and give her the last rites. Next day the priest's body was 'washed in on the shore'.[54]

The significance placed on the presence of a priest at one's deathbed made this the *sine qua non* of a happy death in many of the stories found in the Schools' Collection. Those who prayed fervently for such a favour might be rewarded by the intercession of a heavenly figure, such as St Joseph, patron saint of the dying. Alternatively, the prayers of a deceased loved one could be instrumental in summoning a priest just in time. What is evident in these tales is that for those who sufficiently desired the sacrament, and were suitably disposed, the necessary assistance would be provided, even from beyond the grave.

Performing one's Sacramental Duties with Due Care

Although most of the tales examined here do not concern themselves with the types of questions that the Rev. James O'Kane dealt with in his *Notes on the Rubrics of the Roman Ritual*, that is not to say that the Schools' Collection does not exhibit any interest in procedural propriety. The following story, from Borris in Co. Carlow, is a good example of the scruples of a conscientious priest:

> One night a priest was on a sick call. When he heard her confession, the priest forgot to bless her. He went home and went to bed. He could not sleep. He woke up about a quarter to three, and then he thought that he did not bless the girl. He went over to a drawer and took out a prayer book, and he gave the blessing.

the clergy, were not uncommon in Irish folklore, acting as release valves of sorts for the laity. These instances deserve further scholarly attention, and I hope to explore the topic further in a future article.

[54] NFCS, Querrin, Co. Clare, vol. 632, 78–9.

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> He slept soundly that night, and the next morning when he woke up he went back to the dying girl's house. The people of the house told him that she died about three o'clock. The priest remembered that it was three o'clock when he jumped into bed. They told him that she saw a priest standing next to her and he blessed her. Then she saw the priest no more. She asked the people where did he go. They said they saw no priest.[55]

By contrast, there are also stories of priests who, for various reasons, chose to cut corners in their ministry to the dying. One colourful example from Carniska, Co. Roscommon, concerns a 'very tasty' priest called Fr Kane who 'hated to see any dirty house'. It relates how, 'when he used to come to anoint any old person, he would not go near them, only stand at the room door and say "Shout them [their sins] out to me, old warrior!"'[56]

There were many other elements that a priest needed to remember when administering the last rites to those who were sick in order that the proper understanding and use of the sacrament were preserved. This often involved reminding people that extreme unction could only be administered once for each grave illness. Nonetheless, that did not stop some individuals from receiving the sacrament multiple times. In the case of an example from Ardfield in Co. Cork, it is not clear whether the marvel is that the man in question received extreme unction so many times, or that he had so many distinct grave illnesses. The reference concerns a certain Michael Footman, who owned a shop in Dunowen. It was said of him that 'He was married and had seven children. He received the Sacrament of extreme unction twenty-five times before he died.'[57]

Conclusion

Tales of the priest's sick call are plentiful in Irish folklore. The examples from the Schools' Collection surveyed here do not concern themselves so much with the mechanics of administering the sacrament, and therefore are not preoccupied with correct procedure in the way a publication such as the Rev. James O'Kane's was. Nor should

[55] NFCS, Borris, Co. Carlow, vol. 904, 328.
[56] NFCS, Carniska, Co. Roscommon, vol. 253, 118–19.
[57] NFCS, Ardfield, Co. Cork, vol. 317, 8.

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they have been, given that O'Kane's work was designed for consultation by clergy in the practice of their profession, whereas the stories we have been examining were predominantly told by lay people, most often in informal, casual settings, even if preachers might have also occasionally peppered their sermons with such stories as salutary reminders of what was, ultimately, essential: that the priest arrive to the bed of the dying person on time, and that the person receiving the priest be properly disposed. While this article has introduced, in broad brushstrokes, some of the most prominent categories of tales relating to the sick call, many elements within these stories merit much closer examination, not least the occasional hints of clerical critique. The dramatic tension that accompanies these tales, which so often involve a race against time (and malign forces), underlines the significance of this last sacrament. In this respect, then, what we have been examining are not so much tales about a rite of passage, but about (safe) passage to a rite. After all, extreme unction was often simply considered as a matter of eternal life, or eternal torment. For many, the relief of the sacrament was worth hanging onto life for. There can surely be no better example of this than the following account from Co. Tipperary:

> There is a story told about a place called Tubberdoney where the huntsmen saw a fox run in through the briars; they cut away the briars and found a hole, they looked in and saw inside with the fox two old women.
>
> There was a priest in the hunt, who said he would find out for himself. What did he find but a cosy little kitchen and a nice turf fire and a kettle hanging over it and the two women and they chatting about a sermon they had heard preached last Sunday.
>
> He asked what the priest said at Mass and they told him. When he went home he found that the priest they told him of was dead with [for] three hundred years. He then went back to the hole and anointed the two old women and they died off. They had waited all that time for a priest.[58]

Despite the prominence of clergy in the cultural memory of Irish Roman Catholicism, it is surprising, perhaps, that Irish

[58] NFCS, Curraghcloney, Co. Tipperary, vol. 572, 31.

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historiography still awaits a comprehensive study of the depiction of the Roman Catholic priest in Irish folklore. The above account, concerned with one aspect of priestly ministry, the sick call, hints at the richness of the material available, and the possibilities for future historians.

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