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The Nine Irons

by *Caoimhín Ó Danachair*, Dublin

One evening in the year 1839 a worthy shopkeeper in the village of Oughterard, County Galway, was deeply worried. The birth of his fourth child was hourly expected; his wife was weak and the three former children had all died at birth. Now the midwives were shaking their heads again and predicting the worst, and the father, torn by anxiety and ready to grasp at any hope, sent a mounted messenger to the blacksmith at Gleann, down on the lake shore, with the request that he should forge the Nine Irons and send them back at once to the troubled household. It was dark night when the messenger arrived at the forge, but the blacksmith arose, kindled his fire and duly made the charm, and the messenger was back in Oughterard by dawn, to find the child born and alive. At once the Nine Irons were pinned to the infant's clothes, next to the skin.

The infant was named John Joyce, and grew up strong and healthy. As a young man he went to America, not driven by poverty as was the case with so many at the time, but from love of adventure and a desire to see the world. His people did not wish him to go, as he was due to inherit his father's modest but thriving business; his mother's parting injunctions, in addition to the usual—be a good boy and come back soon—included the exaction of a promise never to part with the Nine Irons and always to wear them next his skin. He found plenty of adventures in America. He nearly died from eating infected butter fed to him by a rascally landlady in West Virginia. While firing a Mississippi river boat at New Orleans his instep was severely cut by an axe and the captain's rude surgery with twine and a packing needle left life-long scars "like the lacing of a shoe" on his foot. He prospected for gold in the Rocky Mountains and was given up for dead with fever, but his sound constitution pulled him through.

Returned to Oughterard while still a young man, he married a young lady named Conroy—aunt of the notable Gaelic writer Páraic Ó Conaire. He became prosperous and popular, and took a large part in local affairs. He worked for the Land League and supported Parnell to the end; he stood (unsuccessfully) for Parliament on the Parnellite ticket.

His strength and agility were remarkable. He could, for instance, grasp a hundredweight (50.9 Kg.) in each hand and raise them simultaneously over his head. A favourite feat was to take a "fifty-six" (an

iron weight of fifty-six pounds) in each hand, a total weight of 50.9 Kg., and leap from a standing position into a porter barrel and then out again. Tradition says that the prior emptying of the barrel by himself and convivial colleagues was a necessary preliminary to the feat. On one occasion, in the second-storey dining room of the old Royal Hotel in Galway, he took a “fifty-six” in each hand and leaped on to the high sideboard, but on leaping off again he descended through the floor in a shower of plaster and broken wood to alight upon the reception desk in the front hall of the hotel. For many years the marks of repair on the ceiling were pointed out to visitors in memory of the exploit.

Because of his generous nature and strength of character, as well as his physical strength and stature, he is still remembered in local tradition as “Seán Mór Seoighe”—“Big John Joyce”, and tradition insists that success in all his adventures, enterprises and feats came from his wearing of the Nine Irons throughout his life. When he died in 1912 the Irons were taken from his body and are now a treasured possession of one of his grandsons.

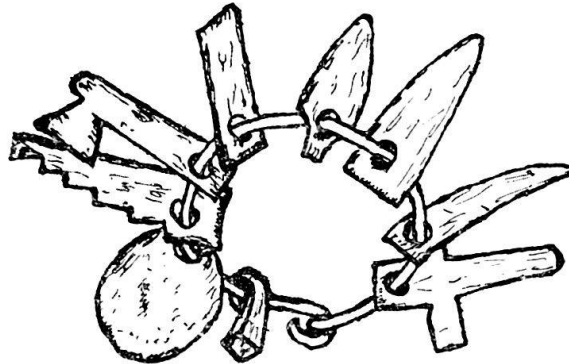
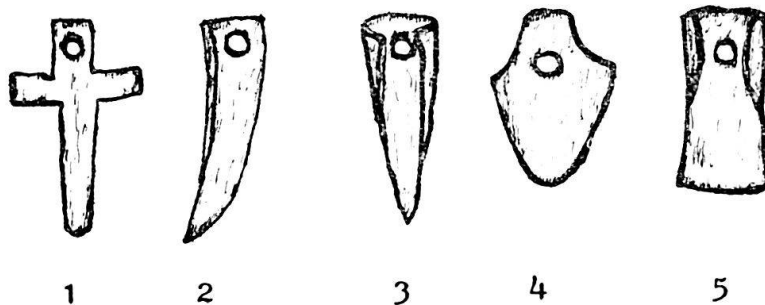
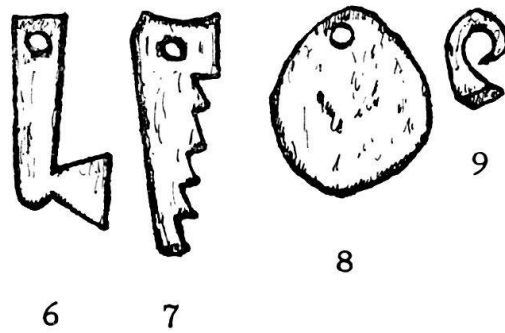


Fig. 1

At first sight the Nine Irons (fig. 1) look just like a bunch of small keys on a ring. On closer examination they are seen to be nine small objects cut and shaped from thin iron plate, six of which are immediately recognisable as miniatures of common tools or implements. The irons, in order, are:





1. a cross (total length 28 mm.)
2. a plough coulter (30 mm.)
3. a plough share (27 mm.)
4. a shovel blade (23 mm.)
5. a spade blade, of the loy type used in the locality (24 mm.)
6. a hatchet
7. a saw
8. a flat iron disc, said to be a miniature of a baking griddle
9. a small shoe-nail, probably from the shoe of a donkey or small pony.

The efficacy of iron as an antidote to evil is well known in Irish folk tradition. Iron or steel produced by an Irish blacksmith were held to be especially potent¹. All over Ireland there were traditions of the power of iron in bringing good luck, in averting and healing sickness, in countering charms and spells and in warding off mischievous or malignant spirits and influences.

Although the "Nine Irons" described above seem to be the only surviving example of this amulet, the custom of hanging iron miniatures around the neck for protection and healing appears to have been widespread. Writing in the 1850s, Sir William Wilde notes that "the lucky horse-shoe fastened on the threshold or the door-post, and the 'seven blessed irons' formerly hung around children's necks, are familiar examples of such objects in Ireland"². An early 19th century copy of an earlier medical treatise apparently compiled partly from medieval learned works and partly from popular tradition³ gives the following remedy for epilepsy: "*Agus dul gus mac mic gabha agus suc agus coltar dfágail déanta uaidh, a ccur fá na bhrághaid...* etc." ("And go to the son of a son of a blacksmith and have made a ploughshare and

¹ J. Curtin, *Tales of the Irish Fairies*. 1895, 141.

² W. Wilde, *Catalogue of the Antiquities in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy*. 1857-62, 126.

³ An Seabhac, "Sean-Oideasáí Leighis". *Béaloidas* 9 (1939).

a coulter, and hang these about his neck... etc.)⁴. And again, to cure a child who is afflicted by fits or starts in his sleep: “*agus suc is colltar dfághail déanta do ó mhac mic gobha agus a gcuir fé n-a bhrághaid*” (“and have made for him by the son of a son of a blacksmith a ploughshare and a coulter, and hang them about his neck.”)⁵. A recent tradition in County Tipperary prescribes the same remedy for whooping cough⁶.

The power of nine separate pieces of iron in defeating the spells of a butter-stealing hag is the theme of a little story from County Leitrim, which tells of a housewife whose cream invariably went bad instead of turning to butter. An old tramp works the counter-charm in return for a night's lodging:

“After sunset the traveller barred every door and window in the place, and made a great fire of turf, and in the fire he placed *nine* irons. Now, as the irons got hot, a loud roaring was heard without, and an old woman who dwelt near was seen beating at the door and windows and shouting to be let in. ‘Take the irons from the fire, they have me burnt!’ she said.”⁷ Other instances of the use of heated iron against evil influences are given below; versions of these were known all over Ireland. The prescription of nine different iron objects is not common, but it is still remembered in the same general area from which the little tale above comes⁸.

Much virtue is attributed in folk tradition to the coulter and share of the plough—that is to say, the actual implements used in agriculture. Together or separately they could be used to avert evil. Crofton Croker tells us: “In churning, should not the milk readily become butter, the machinations of some witch are suspected. As a test, the iron coulter of the plough is heated in the fire, and the witch's name solemnly pronounced, with the following charm, on whom this spell is supposed to inflict the most excruciating tortures:

Come, butter, come,
Come, butter, come.
Peter stands at the gate
Waited for a buttered cake,
Come, butter, come.

⁴ Ibid. 165.

⁵ Ibid. 171.

⁶ University College Dublin, Folklore Department (UCDF) MS. 7, 225.

⁷ L. Duncan Leland, *Folklore Gleanings from County Leitrim*. Folk-Lore 4 (1893) 181.

⁸ UCDF, MS. 815, 240–1.

And if the milk has lost its good qualities by means of incantations, it immediately turns to excellent butter.”⁹

A slightly more elaborate version of this charm is given from County Wexford¹⁰: “They twisted the twigs of the mountain ash round their cows’ necks; they made a big fire, and thrust into it the sock and coulter of the plough; they fastened the ash twigs round the churn and connected them to the chain of the plough-irons; shut door and windows, so that they could not be opened from without; and merrily began the churning.”¹⁰

Either of the plough irons could be used to banish a changeling left by the fairies in stead of the real child whom they had stolen away. Thus, a wise woman advises a young man whose sister has been abducted: “Go now to the next plough, and take the *coulter* from it; go home then, and put down a very large fire, and when it is sufficiently kindled, put the *coulter* into it. The imp will redouble her outcries when she sees you doing this, but do not be alarmed, but look at her fiercely, and tell her that you will run the red-hot iron down her mouth if she does not make off. Perhaps she would speak to you, but let her say what she will, don’t be frightened, as she cannot injure you, while you have that charm in your possession.”¹¹ The young man acts accordingly and his sister is rescued from her captors. Instances of this tale are widely known in Ireland, as are the uses of the plough irons in fending off evil spirits and in folk medicine.

The spade and the shovel can be used similarly. A red-hot spade iron could charm back the stolen butter, while a red-hot shovel might frighten away the fairy changeling. When a grave was dug, the spade and shovel used in the digging were laid over it in the form of a cross; this sanctified and protected it until the corpse was laid in it and the grave filled.

The axe and the saw share with other edged tools and weapons of iron or steel the power to ward off ghosts, fairies and malignant spirits and influences, while the griddle, made red-hot, was used to frighten away a changeling.

The nail from the shoe of a horse or a donkey, especially if taken from a cast shoe, brought luck to him who carried it in his pocket. Held between the teeth it soothed toothache. Shot from a gun it

⁹ T. Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland*. 1824, 94.

¹⁰ Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of The Irish Celts*. 1866, 246.

¹¹ Anon., *Legends and Tales of the Queen’s County Peasantry*. *Dublin University Magazine* (Nov. 1839) 584.

might kill the witch unhurt by ordinary bullets. Driven into the bottom of the churn it protected the butter from spells.

The Nine Irons combined all the powers of these various implements and objects and, in the folk mind, added to them the virtue of the Christian cross. To the ordinary people there was no conflict or contradiction in this; indeed a trait which characterised Irish Christianity since its first introduction in the fifth century was its sympathy with the native spirit and culture, and its easy tolerance of beliefs and customs which were not directly opposed to faith or morals. However, in the nineteenth century a different feeling was in evidence; the clergy were less tolerant, less sympathetic, and often more moved by the fashionable "respectability" of the time than by Christian charity and understanding. The ways of the common people, the peasantry, became suspect and many relatively harmless practices were condemned. Amulets of this kind were taken from the people and destroyed; hence their scarcity to-day; the specimen of the Nine Irons here described is the only one known to have survived. Hence, too, the reluctance of the father of Big John Joyce to obtain the forbidden charm for his infant son¹².

¹² This dilemma formed the theme of a short story, "Solo and the Nine Irons" by the late Walter Macken.

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