

## Síd̄h (fairies)

*Síd̄h* [modern spelling: *sí*], fairies, or a fairy rath (or fort) where they are said to live. They are also known as *aos sí* (fairy folk); *slua sí* (fairy host [army]); *daoine maithe* (good people, so called for fear of offending them, hence the \*Hiberno-English ‘gentry’, also used of them); and *bunadh na gcnoc* (hill people). According to a life of St \*Patrick in the ninth century \**Book of Armagh* the *síd̄h* were the pagan gods of the earth [*‘síd̄e aut deorum terrenorum’*] over whom Christianity has triumphed, but according to Gaelic tradition they were the Tuatha Dé Danann, the ancient gods of Ireland residing in the fairy mounds all over the country [see \*mythology]. In \**Leabhar Gabhála Eireann*, it is recounted that the sons of Míl, from whom the Gaels descend, defeated the Tuatha Dé Danann at Tailtiu, but because the Tuatha Dé Danann had magical powers which they used against the sons of Míl the two peoples agreed to share Ireland between them, the Milesians taking the upper, visible world and the Tuatha Dé Danann taking the otherworld (or underworld), to which access is gained through the raths or mounds. The chief figures of the Tuatha Dé Danann became the deities of Irish \*mythology and therefore play a significant role in the various \*tale-types, as well as legendary history such as *Leabhar Gabhála Eireann* itself, and much literature in Irish, English, and even Latin [e.g. \**Navigatio Brendani*]. They feature most prominently in the \*mythological cycle in tales such as \**Cath Maige Tuired* or \**Tochmarc Eataine*; in the \*Ulster cycle in \**Táin Bó Cuailnge*, \**Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, and many other tales; and throughout the \*Fionn cycle, where Fionn’s own \*genealogy involves otherworld beings. Amongst the chief deities of the *síd̄h* are the overgod, called the Dagda, who with his son Oengus, also called Mac ind Og (the Young Lad) resides at Brug na Bóinne [see \*New Grange]; Boann (the Boyne) mother of Oengus; Lug, whose feast was Lúgnasa, and who was \*Cú Chulainn’s fairy father; and Mannanán mac Lir, a sea-god associated with the Isle of Man, but also with magical islands such as Tír na nOg [orig. nOc] (Land of Youth), Tír Tairngire (Land of Prophecy, where he fostered Lug), Hy Brasil, and the otherworld version of \*Emain Macha known as Emain Ablach (Emain of the Apples). Other sites associated with the *síd̄h* include Síd̄h ar Femun (Slievenamon), Criag Liath [see \**Cúirt an Mhéan-Oíche*], and The Paps (of Danu). In mythology and \*folklore deriving from it the fairies are represented as immortal and ever-youthful, although they also conduct battles amongst themselves, sometimes enlisting the help of warriors from the upper world, such as Cú Chulainn in \**Serglige Con Chulaiun*. Occasionally mortals, and kings especially, are given access to a vision in the otherworld which allows them to perceive the sovereignty of Ireland (flaitheas Eireann), the guiding principle for

all just and steadfast rule [see *\*Baile in Scáil*]. Other cross-overs to or from the otherworld are more capricious or inscrutable, as in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, but all inter-traffic between this world and the otherworld in Old and Middle Irish literature is marked by the double sense of power and danger which anthropologists have shown attach to all boundaries and thresholds in primitive cultural systems. *\*Samhain* (Hallowe'en) and *\*Bealtaine* (May Day), old Irish *\*festivals*, were times when fairies were thought to be especially active, a notion surviving into twentieth century folklore.

A number of Anglo-Irish writers in the second half of the nineteenth century began collecting the folklore traditions of Ireland, notably T. C. *\*Croker* and Lady *\*Wilde*. These were joined by others more in tune with the native culture such as J. J. *\*Callanan*, Patrick *\*Kennedy*, and Canon John *\*O'Hanlon*, who corrected the *\*stage-Irish* bias in representations of peasant 'superstitions' in contemporary *\*Anglo-Irish* literature. The *\*literary* revival gave rise to a renewed interest in the fairy-lore of Ireland, which came to be seen as a unique body of almost sacred literature of Celtic (and ultimately Aryan) origin encapsulating truths and realities occluded or destroyed by the advance of a materialistic civilization. Such a view made possible the synthesis of fairy and theosophical researches, and W. B. *\*Yeats*, the chief exponent of this new harmony, made an intensive study of traditions about the Irish fairies, classifying them into those who moved as a 'host of the air' (from *slua sí*), and those who appeared on their own. His classification remains valid in the face of later folklore researches. The *slua sí* carry off mortals, most often children, if they are beautiful or otherwise exceptional, leaving a changeling (*síofra* or *síobhra*) behind, who grows old and wizened while the mortal remains young and joyous in fairy land. They also appear on wild coastlines, as mermaids (*muirchán*, *\*Hiberno-English* merrow), betokening gales and disaster. Solitary fairies are known variously as the *lepracán*, represented as a cobbler in keeping with a fanciful etymology derived from *leath-bhróg* (one shoe); the *clúracán*, or drunken fairy; the *fear dearg* (red man, the otherworld colour), or trickster, an earlier form of whom appears in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*; the *fear gorta* (hunger-man) a phantom appearing at times of famine; the *dallachán*, a headless sprite who rides on the death-coach (*cóiste bodhar*, silent coach); the *leannán sí*, a fairy lover, who drives his or her mortal lover to distraction; and the *bean sí* (*\*banshee*) who appears combing her red hair at the deaths of members of certain families such as the Lynches, the O'Connors, and the O'Donovans, and issues a piercing howl of lament. The *púca* (anglice *pooka*) is the Irish form of the sprite familiar in English folklore as the night-mare. The fairies could inflict illness, destroy crops, send some one astray (*seachrán sí*), create a magical mist (*ceo sí*). If a mortal indulged in extreme emotion or grew obsessed with anything, this provided the fairies with an opportunity to affect him or her

by means of the fairy touch (hence \*Hiberno-English ‘touched’). They also had a benign aspect, and the early nineteenth-century healer Bidy \*Early was said to derive her powers from them. They sometimes bestowed the gift of music, and \*Carolan is reputed to have heard the fairies’ music (ceol sí); but they were often said to abduct a talented singer, dancer, or musician. The fairies were rarely diminutive in authentic folklore, and \*Allingham’s ‘wee folk’ trooping all together in hunting-cap and feather is a sentimentalization influenced by English traditions of imps and elves.

The world of the sídh in Irish tradition represents the idea of an alternative reality the proximity of which provides Irish literature, mythology, and folklore with a context where time and space are relativized and transformed. Many writers such as \*Yeats, George \*Moore, James \*Stephens, James \*Joyce, J. M. \*Synge, Mairtín \*Ó Cadhain, Brian \*Friel, Thomas \*Kinsella, Seamus \*Heaney, and Nuala \*Ní Dhomhnaill have exploited this subtle world-view to create dramas of the self in relation to the unconscious, while others such as Padraic \*Colum, Sinead de Valera (d.1975), and Patricia \*Lynch have used the fairy-lore of Ireland as a pleasant and popular vehicle for escapism. See John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origins and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (1886); Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (1970); and Robert Welch, ed., *W.B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend, and Myth* (1993).