

## THOMAS LYNCH NT – FOLKLORIST

Introduction by Sheila Fitzgerald, Retired NT

**O**n April 1st, 1965, I first walked up the steps to Grange National School. I had been appointed assistant principal teacher there. Canon Condon, the parish priest then, had informed me in his letter of appointment to me that Mr Thomas Lynch was the principal teacher.

He came to the school door to greet me, and I got a *Céad Mile Fáilte* from him. We chatted for a while before classes began. He accompanied me to the other end of the building to my classroom which had its own external door with key. This separate access proved very useful as it enabled me to remain at the school, after the pupils went home at 3.00 pm, in order to correct pupils' work and to prepare for the next day.

Mr Lynch explained my teaching duties to me whereby I would teach Infants, First Class and Second Class. I would also teach singing to Mr Lynch's classes and knitting and sewing to the girls in the senior classes also.

Life in Grange NS in 1965 was very simple. We didn't have electricity, running water or flush toilets. The dry toilets were situated up from the back of the school, one for girls and another for boys. Each morning one of the senior boys went to the well, situated across the main road from the school, and brought a bucket of water for any thirsty pupil who had been running around the playground at lunch time.

The only piece of modern technology that I possessed in those early years was a battery operated tape recorder, which I purchased myself from my meagre earnings. I found it to be a wonderful help as children could listen to their own voices including taped singing.

Our school was chosen for a new pilot scheme in the Irish language – "*Buntus na Gaeilge*". Mr Lynch was very proud of the fact that Grange NS was selected to participate in the scheme, which began in my classes. The tape recorder was very helpful with "*Buntus*" as children could listen to one another asking questions "*as Gaeilge*", and this helped with improving the standard of Irish, which was already excellent at the time, owing to Mr Lynch's love of the language, he being a native speaker.

Then one day around March, 1967, Canon Condon visited us at school with the news of a letter received from the Department of Education stating that Grange NS would close in July of that year following the retirement of Mr Lynch, who

would not be replaced. This reflected new national policy at the time, whereby two-teacher schools would be closed upon the retirement of a principal teacher.

Pupils of the closed Grange School were sent to school in Bruff. A free bus service was provided. Infant pupils were allowed to remain in their classrooms until the bus arrived at 3.00 pm when the other classes finished. I was given the choice of a position in either the FCJ School for girls or in the school for boys, run by the De La Salle Brothers – I chose the latter.

I enjoyed two very happy years in Grange NS, working with Mr Lynch. He was always willing to help and advise the “*Muinteoir Óg*”, as he called me! I now realise that I was not aware of his wealth of knowledge and interest in the folklore and legends of Lough Gur and Grange. He did tell me some stories, but I think that I should have listened more attentively!



John Madden, Tim O'Donnell, Tom Lynch NT, Mrs Lynch, Aidan Lynch, Breda Clancy, Tony Clancy, Canon Condon, Tommy Bulfin at the presentation to Tom Lynch upon his retirement from Grange School in 1967.

No doubt, like me, many local people were not aware at the time and are probably still unaware of Mr Lynch's interest in folklore. He was probably best known in the Grange locality as the principal teacher at Grange National School for many years. He taught there from the very early 1930s until his retirement when the school closed. However, I am glad to have this opportunity now to set the record straight and to introduce the most illuminating account of Mr Lynch's important contribution to the researching and recording of local folklore.

In addition to being a teacher, Mr Lynch was also a folklore collector and chronicler of some repute. In her chapter titled “A Map of Lough Gur” contained in the book *Sean, nua agus síoraíocht – Feilscribhinn in ómós do Dháithí Ó hÓgáin*, Bairbre Ní Fhloinn (Lecturer in Irish Folklore at UCD) concluded “... Thomas

Lynch shares with Dáithí Ó hÓgáin the distinction of adding valuable layers to the intricate map of Lough Gur and its history.” Praise indeed! The fact that a whole chapter in a book, written to honour and commemorate the wonderful academic and creative life of Dáithí (deceased), is dedicated to the work of Mr Tom Lynch is notable testament to the importance of Tom Lynch’s writings, which are preserved in the National Folklore Collection in UCD.

Elsewhere in this book is to be found an article on the contributions of children from Grange National School in 1937-1938 to the *National Schools’ Folklore Collection*. Tom Lynch mentored the Grange children who participated in this national project.

The following is the text of the chapter written by Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, excluding the footnotes that form part of this chapter in the said book. For the purpose of this article, Bairbre has, in lieu of detailed footnotes, inserted critical references throughout her ‘chapter’. Mr Lynch’s map is reproduced in black and white in this article and in full colour in a colour section of this book.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

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*A Map of Lough Gur by Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, UCD*

Much has been written about the *Schools’ Manuscripts* of the *National Folklore Collection*, and the scheme which gave rise to them, from the point of view of their origins, history and textual content. Not a great deal of attention has been paid to the visual content of the manuscripts, however, despite the fact that a significant number of them contain photographs, drawings, maps and other illustrations which invariably enhance the material concerned. In many cases, visual content of this kind has an aesthetic quality and value of its own, which deserves a recognition that may be difficult to incorporate into a purely academic assessment of the collection. This could probably be said of the contribution to the Schools’ Collection from Grange National School in Co Limerick, situated near the shores of that ‘very picturesquely situated piece of water’ known as Lough Gur, to use a quote from the archaeologist Bertram Windle (see below). The collection, which is bound in *Schools’ Manuscript 516, pp.200-465*, of the *National Folklore Collection (NFC)*, and which appears to have been largely compiled and written by the principal teacher in the school, Mr Thomas Lynch, is accompanied by a *coloured map* detailing many of the places mentioned in the school’s contribution, thus providing an illustrative dimension to the material which greatly adds to its interest. The lake and its environs are given physical reality, and the reader finds him/herself constantly referring to the map in order to see where the different narratives and events described in the manuscript took place.

Thomas Lynch appears to have based his map on an earlier one first published by Windle, professor of archaeology in University College Cork, in the early part of

the twentieth century. Windle was among those who spearheaded the scientific and scholarly investigation of the prehistoric riches of Lough Gur, publishing an article on his findings in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* in 1912-13. The article was generously illustrated with photographs, drawings and a map of the area, complete with lettered identification of the various archaeological monuments. Windle's research was used and developed in subsequent studies and maps of Lough Gur. By similar token, Windle's map was put to good use, albeit in another area of enquiry, by Thomas Lynch, as a basis for his documentation of the oral tradition of this historic part of the school's catchment area.

Lynch adapted the map for his own purposes, making some adjustments and amendments, such as the addition of Grange School and Church, and extending Windle's lettering system somewhat, as detailed below. It could well be argued that Lynch's hand-drawn version of the map has a character which is lacking in Windle's document, as the subtle colours used by Lynch give his map a visual quality which is absent in the original. Indeed, an awareness of the value of the map in this respect is indicated by a protective sheet of paper secured across the top of the drawing in the manuscript in which it is bound. On the subject of aesthetics, the copperplate handwriting and decorative embellishments used by Thomas Lynch in his introduction to the collection are also worthy of mention, representing, as they do, a vanished era in their motifs and in their execution. In short, Lynch succeeds in making his own of the map and giving it relevance on a level other than, although not unrelated to, the purely archaeological. In his adaptation of the map, another layer is added to the narrative of Lough Gur, and the landscape is imbued with further meaning, linking prehistoric monument with twentieth-century tradition. In this regard, we might even say that Lynch brings the map to life.

The collection is prefixed by a detailed *Clár an Leabhair*, complete with more fancy curlicues of shamrock, and with pagination. All of the elements generally associated with Lough Gur are represented here, as written about in such an accessible manner in many publications by Dáithí [Ó hÓgáin]. It would be impossible to have a compilation of Lough Gur folklore without mention of Gearóid Iarla, Earl of Desmond, and his lonely vigil with his companions in the heart of Knockadoon Hill, waiting for the day when the silver shoes of his mount will finally wear away and he can return to mortal existence, while making occasional calls to various local people in the meantime, according to tradition; or Áine, otherworld sovereign and sometime harbinger of death, who appeared to the unfortunate James Cleary, a local man, about fifty years before Lynch wrote his account, and who subsequently paid the price with his life in the waters of Lough Gur (*NFCS 516:213-14*). Like Gearóid Iarla, Áine was believed to frequent the hill of Knockadoon, her haunt on its western slope consisting of a mound of earth known locally by the

surprisingly prosaic name of ‘Suíochán Bhean an Tí, translated by Lynch as ‘The Housekeeper’s Seat’ (*NFCS 516:213-16*). According to Lynch’s account, attributed by him to John Punch, a local farmer, this was the location of an episode whereby a herdsman on Garrett Island, in Lough Gur, managed to steal the supernatural woman’s comb, to his own misfortune but to the delight of folklorists such as Patricia Lysaght and Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, who were thus enabled to use the motif of the stolen comb to adduce further proof of continuity between this figure from early Irish literature and one of her latter-day manifestations in the form of the bean sí, the well-known supernatural death-messenger of Irish popular belief, still active today.

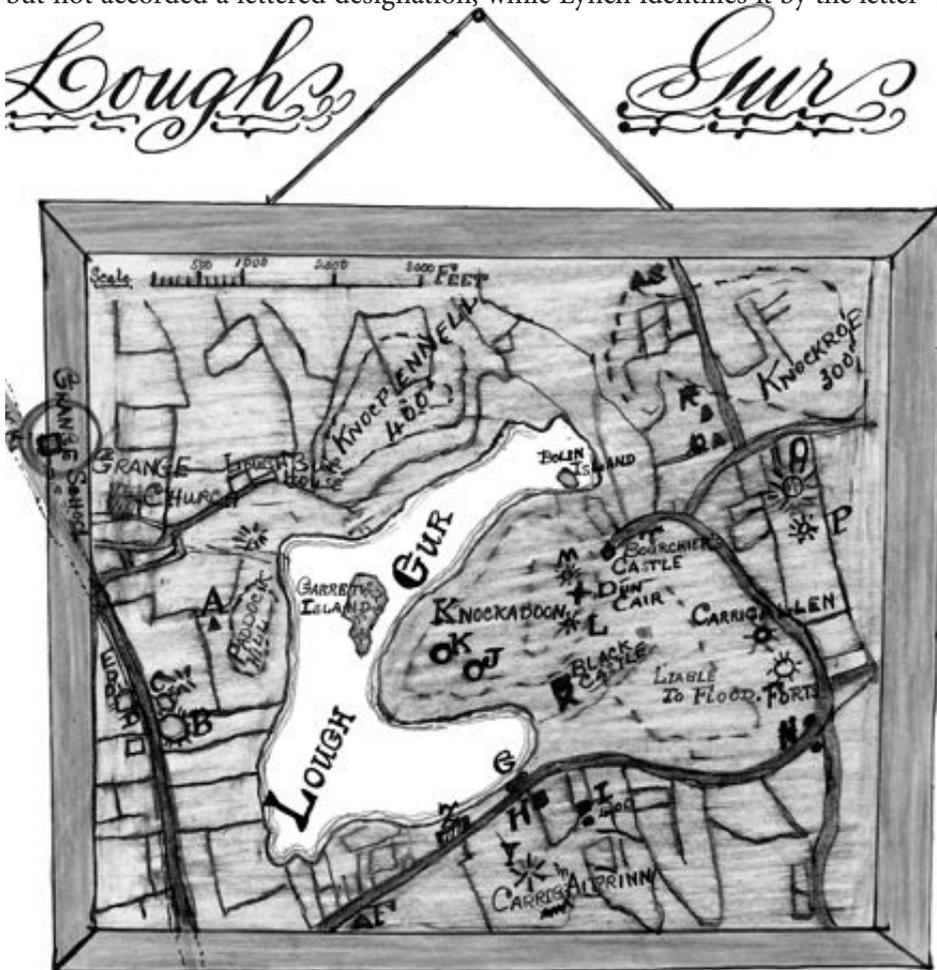
Other mythological personae and supernatural phenomena are also described in the Grange collection. Donn Fírinne, for example, the great god of the underworld, is mentioned in connection with ‘an immense boulder’ which lies on the hill-top overlooking a rock known as Carraig an Éithigh (presumably ‘the Rock of Falsehood’ or ‘the Rock of Lying’), a short distance to the east of the megaliths the location of which is indicated on the map by the letter ‘H’, and which were known as ‘the Giants’ Graves’ (*NFCS 516:227*). The great boulder was, according to tradition, thrown by the god from his place of residence at Knockfeerina, some twelve miles distant. Carraig an Éithigh, whose name stands in apparent juxtaposition to Cnoc Fírinne, ‘is in the shape of a pulpit on the road-side’ and was, we are told, a place with a reputation for preternatural activity, being not only a favourite resort of the “*daoine maithe*”, or “good people”, but also having associations with an otherworldly woman dressed in white who was often seen there. Her appearances gave rise to another name for the rock, Cloch na Spride (‘the Stone of the Spirit’). Still in the vicinity of the Giants’ Graves, one hundred yards east of Carraig an Éithigh, the ‘good people’ are mentioned again by Lynch in connection with an old roadway with the local name of Bóithrín na gCapall. He writes as follows:

Bóithrín na gCapall is about one hundred yards east of Carraig an Éithigh. This ‘Little Road of the Horses’ once led from Rusheen to Killalough Cemetery, and along this road went funerals from the old Catholic Church at Ballingirlough – now in ruins since the Penal Days, to a cemetery at Killalough which is now barely discernible. This cemetery was near Mr Bob Ryan’s (*TD*) house. The old people assert that ‘processions’ or funerals of the *daoine maithe* are still often to be seen at midnight passing over Bóithrín na gCapall. (*NFCS 516:228*)

Still on matters metaphysical, Lynch recounts the story of the famous Black Pig which was believed to frequent the spot known as ‘Leaba na Muice’ (‘The Bed of the Pig’), identified on the map by the letter ‘F’. Citing a Mr John Clancy, carpenter in

Grange, as his source, Lynch describes the expulsion of the mythical creature and her four bonhams from her place of rest at Leaba na Muice, and their subsequent peregrinations to various other parts of the country, including the journey of the Black Pig herself from Limerick to Sligo (*NFCS 516:257-61*).

As noted, Windle's lettering system is continued by Lynch on his version of the map, in order to make it more relevant to the material he recounts. The spot identified by Lynch as 'Carraig Aifrinn' is marked on Windle's map as 'Carriganaffrinn' but not accorded a lettered designation, while Lynch identifies it by the letter 'Y'.



Map adapted by Tom Lynch and included in documents provided by him to the National Folklore Collection

The site was believed to have been used as a location for the celebration of Mass in Penal Times. Lynch quotes the nineteenth-century writer and folklore collector, Crofton Croker, as stating that a cave in the Mass Rock 'was supposed to be the entrance to a beautiful church concealed in its interior'. Lynch also mentions Crofton Croker's reference to a tradition that Seathrún Céitinn, the seventeenth-century priest historian, said Mass here, the Grange teacher claiming that the priest in question was,

in fact, a namesake of the famous historian, the former serving as a curate in Bruff sometime in the eighteenth century and later becoming parish priest of Croom ([NFCS 516:224-26](#)).

Other topics addressed by Lynch include the history, background and associated burials of Teampall Nua (New Church), on the shores of Lough Gur (denoted by the letter 'G' on the map), made famous in song by local composer Owen Bresnan ([NFCS 516:229-31](#), [234-35](#), [238-46](#), [248-50](#)). Lynch also devotes several pages of the Grange collection to the exploits and reputations of several local landlords, including Count de Salis and his wife, and Captain Bailey, famous for his duels and for giving rise to the local expression, 'he was the last to blow the whistle', used in reference to the last person left standing after a night of drinking, and allegedly arising from the said Captain's prowess in that regard ([NFCS 516:233-37](#), [248-55](#)). In his description of local landowners, Lynch identifies two castles, Black Castle and Bouchier's Castle, by the letters 'X' and 'T' on his map, thereby once more adding to Windle's original 1912-13 designations.

On the north side of the lake, Lynch makes reference to Knockfennel Hill and its fort, and to Carraigín Hill at the foot of Knockfennel. He writes that a stream flows from Lough Gur into Carraigín Hill through a large cave which was said to have connections with the otherworld of the fairies ([NFCS 516:279-80](#)). On a more prosaic level, and as a snippet of the details of social history in which the Schools' Collection is so rich, Lynch describes the former existence of a large eel weir where the stream from Lough Gur enters Carraigín Hill. He continues:

An old woman named 'Meggy the Eel' used to come from Bruff and buy the eels at six pence or eight pence per dozen and sell the eels in Bruff and in Limerick. ([NFCS 516:280](#))

Thomas Lynch's contribution contains a great deal of other material relating to the social history of the immediate Lough Gur district, and the greater hinterland of Grange National School. Topics documented include marriage customs, traditional calendar observance, practices associated with wakes, including a number of wake games, folk cures, narratives and usages relating to holy wells in the vicinity of the school, Travelling families who visited Grange and camped there from time to time, local people of note for a variety of accomplishments, sporting and otherwise, as well as information on the building of Grange Church in the early nineteenth century, and early schools and schoolmasters in Grange. Verbal tradition is also covered by Lynch in his writing, with many examples of riddles, proverbs and local sayings.

Finally, the following text is reproduced as one example of a narrative from the Grange School's collection. It deals with the subject of hidden treasure, which

is the theme of several other accounts as given by Lynch in connection with the Lough Gur area, and one or two places beyond. Indeed, there is almost a small corpus of legends relating to buried treasure in the area of Lough Gur, very possibly reflecting a popular awareness of the long history of settlement in the region, as well as reinforcing – and finding reinforcement in – the wealth of local tradition regarding Gearóid Iarla and his entourage. Indeed, legends of the Great Earl and his guardianship of the lake might also be seen as indicating a recognition at popular level of the hidden riches of Lough Gur, as yet to be revealed. Beliefs about towns submerged beneath the waters of the lake, as well as the plethora of other supernatural phenomena associated with Lough Gur and its many monuments, have enhanced its status. Sites of archaeological importance often attract such narratives, and the aristocratic nature of some of the inhabitants – both mythical and historical – of the Lough Gur area could only have strengthened belief in the possible existence of buried hoards. As Barry O'Reilly has pointed out in his article on stories of buried treasure in *Béaloides* 62-63 (1994-95), 'Now you see it, now you don't: Irish legends of buried treasure', belief in the veracity of such accounts has been borne out on occasions by actual finds of valuable objects, in the area of Lough Gur and in other places. Furthermore, and as also commented on by O'Reilly, the comparative poverty of many people in Ireland in the past must have acted as a significant force to ensure the survival of such legends as part of a 'widespread... yearning for improved conditions' (*op.cit.*, p.207).

According to the statements of the oldest inhabitants of Lough Gur, the Knockadoon Money Hole is located a short distance above the Black Castle on the southern slope of Knockadoon Hill. It is somewhat concealed now as there is a grove around it. It is situated in the centre of this so-called grove. The grove consists of bushes and briars. This Money Hole has been the rendezvous of many exciting efforts to discover the much coveted but hitherto unobtainable crock of gold, which is believed to have been buried there long ago under the guardianship of an enchanted bull. A Geraldine chieftain, who lived in the Black Castle, buried his treasures in the Money Hole before going to battle. He then compelled one of his soldiers to swear he would guard the treasure, dead or alive, until he – the Chieftain – returned from the war. The soldier swore, as he was compelled to do so, that he would guard it. The chieftain then shot him and placed his body over the hidden treasure, and hence this soldier's spirit in the form of a bull still guards the treasure.

For years past, anyone who dreamt of this treasure for three nights in succession used to organise a select party of his most courageous friends, and at the weird hour of midnight, when well supplied with holy water and *uisce beatha*, they

would approach the Money Hole to the current conclusions (*sic*) with its enchanted guardian.

Yet though the courage and determination of those midnight adventurers was almost equal to any emergency that might arise, and though they freely poured the spirits down to nerve themselves for the dangerous ordeal, and kept the holy water sprayed around them in concentric circles through which the dreadful spirit of the bull dare not penetrate, as he was always compelled to remain outside those protecting circles, yet his thunderous bellowing could be heard from miles around, and at times was deafening, and besides he could be seen emitting tongues of flame from his eyes and mouth, so that the treasure seekers were always diverted from their original intentions; and often even though they struggled on through the night till the golden glimmer of the dawn illuminated the eastern horizon, they were finally compelled to struggle to their homes thoroughly exhausted both mentally and physically.

The *seanachies* of Lough Gur also relate that often when those men went around on the appointed night to collect their party, they were very often prevented from carrying out their plans by the unexpected death of one of the party, or else of some near relative of one of the party. The last attempt made to discover this treasure was about sixty years ago, but the death of the master of the local public house prevented them going further with their work, for on their way to the Money Hole, they called into the public house to rouse their spirits, when to their amazement, they found the master just after dying.

Previous to this attempt, three men decided to seek this treasure and, having imbibed freely to rouse their spirits, they arrived at the Money Hole, but before commencing operations then made many large rings [*of holy water*] on the ground around the Money Hole. Then they began to dig, but the night got very cold, and rain began to fall. One of the men, when rushing for his coat which he left some distance away, broke the power and charm of the holy water rings by going across them.

When the ring was broken, a big black bull, with fiery eyes and horns like flaming daggers, charged the men through the broken rings. The men fled in terror, but the hole they made is still to be seen at the Money Hole. ([NFCS 516:208-12](#))

This legend has a number of stock, buried-treasure legend motifs, including that of dreaming of the treasure and its whereabouts for three nights in succession, the presence of a supernatural guardian of the treasure, the use of holy water as a defence

against the malign protector, the idea of a historical person depositing the treasure, and the rationale for this action being related to the exigencies of war. All of these elements, among others, are referred to by O'Reilly in his study of legends of buried treasure. The legend also bears out his conclusion that bulls are particularly prevalent as guardians of buried treasure in Munster.

The narrative also conforms to type in its description of the unsuccessful outcome of the search. As O'Reilly writes:

The treasure is almost always impossible to get at, the searchers may become afraid or be chased off by a ferocious animal which guards it ... A strong moralistic undertone is evident in the legends. All is not gold that glitters – what you never had you never miss, ill-gotten gains and greed bring misfortune ... (O'Reilly *op. cit.*, p.207)

The same moralistic attitude is further illustrated in the Grange legend by the idea of misfortune attending the various attempts to find the treasure. The story might thus be seen as the collective expression and externalisation of a community's internal concerns, values, anxieties and dreams, signposting 'the fears and hopes of the people who tell ... [such legends] and listen to them', as Bo Almqvist has observed in his article, *Irish migratory legends of the supernatural. Sources, studies and problems*, published in *Béaloides* 59, 1991 (pp.1-2). The narrative might also be read, as noted, as a collective acknowledgement of the hidden riches of Lough Gur and its ancient past.

In conclusion, it can be said that maps may exist at many levels of experience and that popular tradition can often be read as a cultural map in its own right, as further proof of the deep-rooted ties that bind landscape, placenames and folklore. In his work as folklore collector and chronicler, Thomas Lynch shares with Dáithí Ó hÓgáin the distinction of adding valuable layers to the intricate map of Lough Gur and its history.

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