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A New Year Custom in South-East Ulster

by *Alan Gailey*, Holywood

I

Two basic components of Ulster's personality are its nodal position amongst the coastal routeways of western Europe and its fragmented, often difficult physiographic make-up. These have given rise to seemingly opposed cultural influences; cultural elements derived from a wide variety of European sources, and survival of aspects of old cultural patterns¹. Since the establishment of the Ulster Folk Museum's research programme in 1961 considerable progress has been made in identifying and describing elements from past and present folk culture, and if the emphasis in such work must remain oriented towards definition and description for a considerable time yet, attempts have been made to analyse some of the underlying cultural dynamics within the local folk culture², and its broader regional connections. This paper deals with a custom localised in south-east Ulster, apparently derived from Scotland in the 16th or 17th century, but not recorded in Scotland within recent times.

Only brief mention has been made in published work of the custom of distributing New Year wisps. E. Estyn Evans, in his classic regional monograph on the mountainous district in south county Down, mentioned that he had discovered it only in that area, and that he believed it to be a variant of Scottish "first-footing"³ observances⁴. Other references are confined to Buchanan's analysis of published material on calendar customs⁵, and a poem by a local north county Down poet in the first half of the 19th century⁶. Details of the custom are now more clearly known, analysis being based on archive material collected at the Ulster Folk Museum in 1963 and on resulting enquiries in the field.

¹ Some aspects of connections with European folk culture generally have been discussed in C. Ó Danachair, *Some Distribution Patterns in Irish Folk Life*. *Béaloides* 25 (1957) 108-123 and *idem.*, *Distribution Patterns in Irish Folk Tradition*. *Béaloides* 33 (1965) 97-113. On the question of survival in the northern part of Ireland generally, it is significant that historically Ulster was the last part of Ireland to be subdued by the English, as late as the 17th century.

² Alan Gailey, *The Ulster Tradition*. *Folk Life* 2 (1964) 27-41.

³ A "first footer" in Scottish New Year tradition is the first person to enter the home after midnight on December 31. Traditionally it is regarded as necessary that a first footer be dark haired, and that he bring gifts of food, drink and fuel.

⁴ E. Estyn Evans, *Mourne Country*. Dundalk 1951, 192.

⁵ R. H. Buchanan, *Calendar Customs*. *Ulster Folklife* 8 (1962) 17.

⁶ Edward L. Sloan, *The Bard's Offering*. Belfast 1854, 53-64. See also *Ulster Folklife* 14 (1968) 53.

Earlier views of the origins of this custom were based largely on the similarity between it and certain aspects of Scottish New Year observances, and the fact that New Year has not been important in most parts of Ireland as a folk festival; a more satisfactory basis for conclusion is provided by the material presented in this paper.

II

On the morning of New Year's Day youths and boys, either singly or in groups, distribute wisps of straw or similar material as gifts to householders. They are normally rewarded nowadays, even insisting on the reward by selling the wisps. In the past reward was not usually sought, although often offered by the householders to whom the wisps were presented. The custom is described by the Conlig, north county Down poet, Edward L. Sloan, who provides the earliest description, dated probably to the second quarter of the 19th century, and published in 1854:

The urchins soon with wisps in hand—
Some single, some in little bands—
Speed hastily on, from door to door,
Their laughing rounds, a merry corps,
Wishing to each a happy year,
With health, and wealth, and hearty cheer.
The wisp thrown in the corner lies—
'A new'r's-day gift!' the urchin cries.
The sought-for gift is soon procured,
And safely is the prize secured—⁷

Almost without exception, reports of the custom relate it to New Year's Day exclusively, and there are indications, for example from Holywood, that wisps were distributed very early on that day⁸. At Ballywalter the distributor of the wisps is referred to as a "first-footer"⁹, a term derived from Scottish New Year tradition with the implication of being a caller very early on New Year's Day. Only in the Ballinderry area of south-west county Antrim was there a shift to the Eve of New Year, and there the observance differed¹⁰.

In most instances the personnel involved were children, generally boys of between 10 and 16 years of age¹¹. Not all children were

⁷ Ibid. lines 23-32.

⁸ Information from Mr. S. Jeffrey, Holywood, January 1971.

⁹ Ulster Folk Museum archives (UFM) 631165.

¹⁰ UFM 631074.

¹¹ Information from Mr. S. Jeffrey, and Mr. M. McCaughan, Donaghadee, January, 1971.

welcomed as bearers of wisps. An informant in Kilkeel, in south Down, suggested that she was unwelcome on account of her fair hair, which accords with Scottish belief that first-footers must be dark-haired; equally, perhaps it was because she was a girl that made her unwelcome¹². Her belief may be supported by the fact that a wisp bearer at Carryduff, south of Belfast, about 1930 was a black-haired man¹³; and there is a small number of reports of adult participants, usually men, but all in the southern part of the distribution of the custom¹⁴. It was not apparently of importance whether wisp bearers were, or were not, recognised by the occupants of houses at which they called. Reports from towns suggest they were generally unknown, but it seems likely that the opposite would have prevailed in many rural districts.

As Sloan hinted in his poem, the wisp was sometimes thrown into the house¹⁵, but usually, especially in later reports of the custom, it was handed to an occupant. Throwing in was sometimes accompanied by the singing of a variant of a well-known rhyme, not confined to New Year, but attached also to some Christmas customs¹⁶. The lines sung in the Ards peninsula were

I wish you and yours a Happy New Year,
With your pockets full of money and your barrel full of beer¹⁷.

Other variants were sung by wisp bearers at Annalong, in south Down¹⁸, at Saintfield¹⁹, and at Ballyculter east of Downpatrick²⁰. In the last district also, at Saul, a rhyme belonging to the local folk drama (mummers' play) was sung by wisp bearers, a confusion in customs that is perhaps understandable, the folk drama performances being related to Christmas²¹. In some places the wisp was only one of three gifts presented on New Year's Day; at Warrenpoint the others were bread and coal²², coal and anything edible in the Castlewella

¹² UFM 631039.

¹³ UFM 631018.

¹⁴ UFM 631165, 631145, 631127.

¹⁵ UFM 631009.

¹⁶ See, for example, a folk drama text from Knockloughrim, county Londonderry, in: Alan Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*. Cork 1969, 51.

¹⁷ UFM 631149.

¹⁸ UFM 631072.

¹⁹ UFM 631118.

²⁰ UFM 631165.

²¹ Information from Mrs. Marshall, Downpatrick, January 1971.

²² UFM 631024.

area²³, and near Crossgar the edible gift was specified as a turnip²⁴. Indeed, one report suggest that in some places the food and fuel had come themselves to be identified as the wisp, the straw emblem having disappeared²⁵.

The only suggestion of any elaboration in the ritual of handing the wisp to a householder is recorded from the Ards peninsula, where in the Ballyhalbert-Portavogie district one informant stated that it was the custom for the lady of the house to place a burning coal or sod or peat in the middle of the kitchen floor, around which the wisp bearers walked in a circle²⁶.

The wisp was generally made of straw, although hay was used occasionally, probably as a substitute. Evans mentions dry grass in his study of the Mourne district of south Down²⁷, and the only other material recorded was, in the Annahilt area on the western periphery of the distribution of the custom, rush tyings from "beets" of flax taken to scutching mills²⁸. The material might simply be tied around the middle (Inch, near Downpatrick²⁹), or the straws twisted around each other, and then tied (especially in the southern part of the distribution of the custom³⁰). In all districts, however, the usual technique was to form the straws into three groups of equal size which were then plaited together, the resultant plaited column being cut to suitable lengths of about 20–35 cms, both ends of which were tied with a straw or with string (Fig. 1). Occasionally wisps were plaited singly in some localities, one end being plaited back upon itself, the straws at the other end being tied; an example from Ballynahinch, now in the Ulster Folk Museum collection was made in this manner. Such wisps accord well with the report from Newtownards that children carried wisps "by the armful" for distribution to houses in the town³¹. Only at Ballinderry, county Antrim was it suggested that the wisps must be made from special straw, namely the last sheaf of the previous harvest³².

Sloan's poem, presumably descriptive of his home area at Conlig in north Down prior to 1850, tells that the wisp bearers sought a gift. This is contradictory, but the choice of words may have been imposed

²³ UFM 631145. ²⁴ UFM 631126. ²⁵ UFM 631030.

²⁶ UFM 631149.

²⁷ E. Estyn Evans (see note 4 above), 192.

²⁸ UFM 631136.

²⁹ UFM 631004.

³⁰ UFM 631039, 631126, 631072, 631080, 631118, 631127.

³¹ UFM 631127.

³² UFM 631074.

on Sloan by the dictates of his poetry. However, an informant from Holywood, only 10 kms west of Conlig, states that reward was not sought by children distributing wisps there about 1914. The usual reward for the wisp was a gift of food, for example bread and butter, cake or fruit, or, if the distributors were grown men, perhaps strong drink³³. Many reports of the custom, relating to recent decades, tell that children were regularly rewarded with money, and perhaps this practice arose, as suggested by one informant in the Mourne area, because at some time householders provided money as a substitute for food which the children were expected to buy for themselves³⁴. Similarly, at Ballyculter food was offered to adult distributors, but money given to children³⁵. In time such practices led to the selling of wisps, little more than an excuse for begging. Similar degeneration in the motivation for continuing other folk customs has been recognised, especially in those with a processional character where formerly the participants were given gifts of food³⁶. Perhaps a memory of an older motive for distributing wisps remains in the practice of some wisp distributors in part of the Ards peninsula, who were rewarded with gifts of flour or meal, which they then distributed amongst the poor of the locality³⁷.

Wisps were usually kept in the houses to which they had been brought on New Year's Day for at least some months, often for a full year, that is, until the next wisp was brought, and occasionally they were kept for much longer periods. The writer has been told of one wisp kept by a publican in Saintfield for some years, and another kept for about ten years by a householder in Downpatrick. In Holywood it was usual to leave the wisp on some suitable ledge, perhaps the top of a picture frame, near to the door into the dwelling³⁸. Reports from south Down consistently indicate that there, and as far north as Ballyculter near Downpatrick, the wisp was thrown on the kitchen fire to burn³⁹, but this practice has not been noted elsewhere. The sole variation from burning, in the Annalong district, was that some people buried the wisp close to the dwelling, immediately after it had been brought by the wisp bearer⁴⁰.

³³ UFM 631127. ³⁴ UFM 631039. ³⁵ UFM 631165.

³⁶ See, for example, Alan Gailey (see note 16 above), chapter 1.

³⁷ UFM 631149.

³⁸ Information from Mr. S. Jeffrey.

³⁹ UFM 631028, 631039, 631072, 631165. S. T. Porter. *Ulster Folklife* 10 (1964) 84.

⁴⁰ UFM 631152.

References to localities above relate to both rural and urban areas. It is to be concluded that the custom was well known throughout the entire area in east county Down, but the latest survivals are all recorded from towns. Wisp distribution seems to have been fairly active until 1930–1940; since then survivals have been noted only in Killinchy (1963), the Mourne areas of south Down (1964), and Donaghadee (1968)⁴¹.

The description of wisp bearing in preceding paragraphs presents a consistent pattern, features of the custom being common to all areas, while variations, for the most part, are confined to the southern extremity of its distribution (for example, burning the wisp immediately it has been received, and adult rather than youthful wisp bearers). Only one substantial variation from the pattern is on record, from the Ballinderry area in southwest county Antrim. Its significance is unknown, but it has been included here because it lies on the periphery of the distribution of the custom under consideration, and it displays some features in common with the wisp ritual; the latter have already been described where appropriate.

The Ballinderry informant relates that the plait of straw, apparently longer than most wisps elsewhere, was made from straw taken from the last sheaf of the preceding harvest. This was done sometime during the last day of the old year, and that evening it was used to chase a black cat three times around the farm kitchen, during which the following rhyme was recited:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, why do you fear
A wisp from the harvest, the corn's ripened ear.
In full and in plenty we made this year din,
And now we will welcome another year in.
Now out you must go, then return to the house
And sit in the nook there, awaiting a mouse,
While we fasten the latch to shut out the cold,
And greet the New Year that replaces the old.⁴²

To judge from the rhyme, this observance belongs firmly with New Year tradition generally, and the black cat represents a kind of substitute for the more usual dark-haired first-footer. Nevertheless, this description stands apart from the remainder of the evidence on wisp bearing, the most serious departure being the absence of the bearing of the wisp to the farm by a member of some other household.

⁴¹ UFM 631162. S. T. Porter (see note 39 above). Information from Mr. McCaughan.

⁴² UFM 631009.

As mentioned at the outset, much of the material presented in this paper was submitted to the Ulster Folk Museum in 1963. It was included with information relating to a variety of seasonal customs associated with the months of January and February. Information came from correspondents and informants in all parts of Ulster, but reports of wisp bearing were confined to the distribution already outlined, in east and south county Down, and summarised on Fig. 2. Information derived from other sources such as published material like Sloan's poem, or field investigation, falls almost entirely within the area defined by the 1963 questionnaire replies. One exception is the information provided by an informant who heard the writer speak about the custom at a lecture delivered in north Down. She is a native of the townland of Tamnafiglassan in north county Armagh, and recalls her father telling of the practice, in his boyhood, of neighbours bringing wisps at New Year to their home, the wisps being then hung in a corner of the kitchen⁴³. This evidence relates to the end of last century, and provides the most westerly known existence of wisp bearing.

It may also be significant that a very few informants resident in other districts in Ulster than the south-east thought they were providing information on this custom in replying to the 1963 questionnaire, but did so in terms descriptive of the last sheaf of the harvest, either confusing the customs in terms of seasons, or relating uses to which the last sheaf was put at New Year. It will, in fact, be argued below that there may have been a connection between the customs in origin, but the available evidence from Ulster is sufficiently precise to allow definition of New Year wisp bearing as an independent custom.

III

The dictionary meanings of the word "wisp" are of little assistance in interpreting the custom of wisp bearing. No reference appears in any of the standard English or dialect dictionaries to the Ulster custom,

⁴³ Information provided by Mrs. Matchett, now resident in Bangor, county Down, born in Tamnafiglassan Townland, north county Armagh. Since her evidence is not verifiable—she states that all trace of the custom has disappeared in Tamnafiglassan, which is now part of the 'new town' of Craigavon—and since it is located at the western extremity of the known distribution of wisp bearing, it has been represented on Fig. 2 only in terms of probable, rather than definite, indication of the custom.

and the sole connection is the general meaning of wisp as “a handful, bunch, or small bundle, of hay, straw, grass, etc.” which is generally descriptive of the appearance of the New Year wisps under consideration⁴⁴. Indeed, in view of the clearly consistent distribution of the custom in east county Down, the omission of the word “wisp” from Patterson’s word list for counties Down and Antrim is strange⁴⁵.

Only two variants of “wisp” are recorded in the information dealing with the custom. “Whisk”, noted in the area north of Killinchy⁴⁶, means a brushing motion, or a small brush consisting of a bunch or tuft of hairs, or feathers fixed to a handle, or, usually, a wire or metal instrument used for beating up eggs. Semantic confusion is therefore understandable, and probably arising from further confusion between “wisp” and “whisk”, the second variant arose; this was the use of “whisp” at Toberdony, near Downpatrick⁴⁷.

Potentially more helpful is the apparent correlation between the distribution of wisp bearing and areas of Scottish settlement in east county Down in the 16th and 17th centuries, and later expansion by settlers and their descendants into the Mourne area and west towards Lough Neagh⁴⁸. If this correlation is valid it might seem reasonable to interpret the variations in the custom specific to the southern part of its distribution as secondary accretions to the wisp-bearing ritual, assuming that an introduction of the custom by Scots settlers in the 16th or 17th century is acceptable. This theory might be supported in two ways, by showing that the custom existed in Scotland, and by indicating other elements of folk culture that were perhaps similarly transplanted into east Down by Scots settlers. Evidence on the latter points is available. Two kinds of digging tool can now be clearly regarded as Scottish introductions, and their Irish appearance has been confined to the Ards peninsula. A pointed-mouthed cultivating spade, known in Galloway, and also in other districts in Britain adjacent to the Irish sea, was used in the 19th century, memory of its use being preserved in the traditions of an Ulster spade-making family⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ William Little et al. (revised and edited by C. T. Onions), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford 1959, see “wisp”.

⁴⁵ William Hugh Patterson, *A Glossary of Words in use in ... Antrim and Down*. London 1880.

⁴⁶ UFM 631009.

⁴⁷ UFM 631049.

⁴⁸ G. B. Adams, *Ulster Folklife 17* (1971) map, *Aspects of Irish and Scots Settlement and Speech in Ulster*.

⁴⁹ Alan Gailey, *The Typology of the Irish Spade*, in: Alan Gailey and Alexander Fenton, eds., *The Spade in Northern and Atlantic Europe*. Belfast 1970, 43, Fig. 6b.

Secondly, a very distinctive peat-cutting spade, with a marked waist between the blade and the socket, has been discovered in use on the Cotton bog in the northern part of the Ards peninsula; it is similar to peat spades used in south-west Scotland⁵⁰. Another folk custom attributable to Scots introduction was the use of naturally-perforated nodules of flint as amulets associated with the safe-keeping of cattle, although they were not confined to east Down, but were used also in parts of Down and Armagh where there was substantial Scottish settlement at various periods⁵¹. Similarly, specifically Scottish rhymes have been recognised incorporated into folk dramas in areas of Ulster where there was Scottish settlement at different times between the 16th and 18th centuries⁵².

Regrettably, however, it is at present impossible to show that wisp bearing, in the form recorded in east county Down, was known in any part of Scotland. Published literature in Scottish folk custom makes no mention of it. The closest parallel is provided by a New Year custom reported in 1896 from Minnigaff, close to Newton Stewart, Kirkcudbright. On New Year's Eve, at midnight, the farm 'foreman' entered his master's bedroom as first footer. He carried with him a sheaf of oats and a bottle of whiskey. The oats he cast on the bed over his master and wife, and then a glass of whiskey was poured and health to the family and prosperity to the farm were toasted⁵³. Similar use of a sheaf of oats or wheat as a first-footing present has been recorded from unspecified rural districts in Scotland, and from the Highlands of Scotland generally⁵⁴. It is likely that these reports represent only one amongst many of the uses to which the last sheaf of harvest was put at New Year. Thus, in Banff, it was fed to the farm animals on New Year's morning⁵⁵. It may be significant in this con-

⁵⁰ The waisted peat spade illustrated in John C. O'Sullivan, *Slanes: Irish Peat Spades*, in: Alan Gailey and Alexander Fenton, eds., *op. cit.* Fig. 4d has now been recognised as probably being from the Cotton Bog, by analogy with three similar peat spades from that bog subsequently measured at the Ulster Folk Museum, but unpublished. Compare with A. Fenton, *Paring and Burning and the Cutting of Turf and Peat in Scotland*, in Alan Gailey and Alexander Fenton, eds., *op. cit.* 186-189, Fig. 14.

⁵¹ J. Geoffrey Dent, *The Holed Stone Amulet and its uses*. *Folk Life* 3 (1965) 68-78; *idem*, *The Witchstone in Ulster and England*. *Ulster Folklife* 10 (1964) 46-48.

⁵² Alan Gailey (see note 16 above), chapters 4 and 5.

⁵³ M. M. Banks, *British Calendar Customs. Scotland*. Vol. 2. London 1939, 92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 88, 92.

⁵⁵ The Scottish evidence on the last sheaf has been summarised by C. I. Maclean, *The Last Sheaf*. *Scottish Studies* 8 (1964) 193-207.

text that an informant who provided information on wisp bearing at Greencastle, at the southern extremity of the distribution of the custom in county Down, also reported that the best cow on the farm got the “Calug” (Irish *cailleach*: literally, an old woman; a name commonly applied to the last sheaf in Ireland and in Gaelic-speaking Scotland) as a special feed on New Year’s Day⁵⁶. The sole suggestion in the information on wisp bearing that the wisp was actually made from, or was part of, the last sheaf is from the Ballinderry, county Antrim informant, and it has already been shown that the observance there differed from those in other areas. Recognising that the significant departures from the norm are concentrated at the periphery of the distribution of wisp bearing, at Ballinderry and in south Down, and in contradiction of the suggestion made earlier that these variations might be later accretions, it is preferable to view them as original elements, arriving in these peripheral places latest, and being thus best preserved there, whereas subsequent degeneration of the custom, especially as it was handed down to children as the participants, led to simplifying of the ritual in the areas wherein the custom was initially established.

In support of the idea of peripheral survival of the most complex elements in the wisp bearing ritual is the fact that both south Down and the Ballinderry area are regarded as areas of cultural survival, whereas the Ards peninsula and north Down have seen substantial changes in rural society in the past century⁵⁷. Peripheral survival of original features implies degeneration of the custom throughout the remainder of its distribution, and such degeneration could be paralleled in other folk customs in Ireland. Thus, female characterisations closest to the British prototypes have survived best in west Ulster versions of the mummers’ plays, for example in county Fermanagh where many aspects of folk culture survive. If these characterisations survive at

⁵⁶ UFM 631127.

⁵⁷ The Mourne area of south county Down has been studied by Evans in his *Mourne Country*. Dundalk 1951. The district in county Antrim from Ballinderry westward to the shores of Lough Neagh remained largely in the hands of Irish people during the 17th century British plantations in Ulster, mainly because the land is of poor quality, often boggy. This survival is still seen in the distribution of family names in south-west county Antrim; Brian S. Turner, *Family Names in the Baronies of Upper and Lower Massereene*. *Ulster Folklife* 14 (1968) 77. It may be significant that the Ards and Lecale peninsulas in east county Down were the first areas totally cleared of woodland, all timber having been removed prior to 1600; Eileen McCracken, *The Woodlands of Ulster on the Early Seventeenth Century*. *Ulster Journal of Archeology*, 3rd series 10 (1947).

all in east Ulster folk dramas, many of which have been found in districts open to innovative influences, they have been rationalised, for example in south-east county Antrim⁵⁸.

Finally, it is worth making the point that the wisp, as most commonly made in the form of a short plait of straw, bears a clear resemblance to the manner in which the last sheaf of harvest was generally treated. Examples in the collections of the Ulster Folk Museum are plaited in the same way, and the writer can recall seeing in a farm kitchen near Ardglass, well within the wisp bearing area, three plaited last sheaves, retained from earlier years, all of which were constructed in a manner identical to the plaiting of the wisps, from which they differed only in consisting of the full length of the straw and in retaining the ears of grain.

On the basis of the total evidence presented in this paper, the writer believes it reasonable to interpret the custom of bearing wisps as New Year gifts as one of the many uses to which the last sheaf of the harvest was put at this season. It is an element of Scottish tradition, where New Year was an important folk festival, unlike most of Ireland, and it seems likely that it would have developed in Scotland, before it was transplanted to east Ulster. As a survival down to the present, wisp bearing is a clear index of the effectiveness of Scottish settlement in past centuries, which is high-lighted by its disappearance from Scotland itself. The custom is only one of a number of elements that identify a folk culture region in north-west Britain and the northern parts of Ireland, underlining the need for the widest possible study of folk culture.

⁵⁸ Alan Gailey (see note 16 above), chapters 4 and 6; *idem.*, *The Rhymers of South-East Antrim*. *Ulster Folklife* 13 (1967) 23–25.

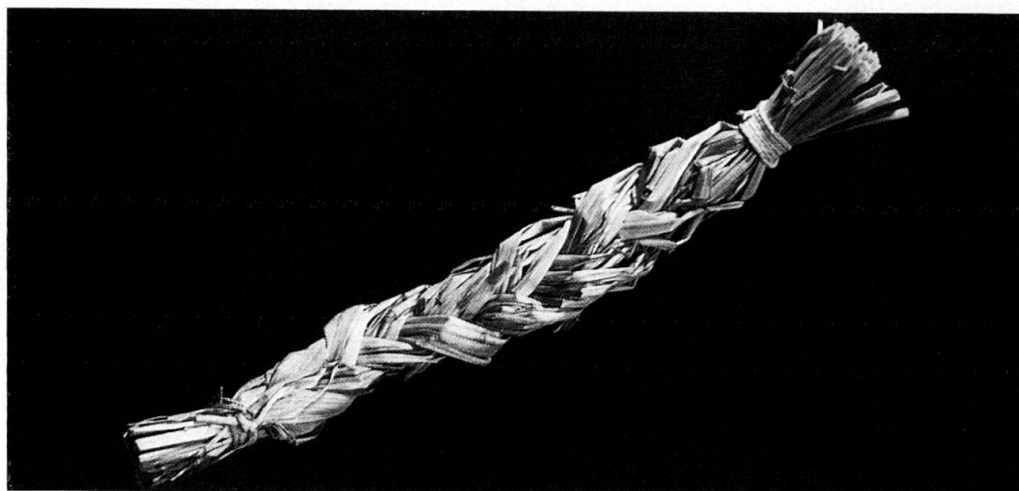


Fig. 1. New Year wisp from Donaghadee, county Down, 1968. Length 26 cms. Ulster Folk Museum L469/12.

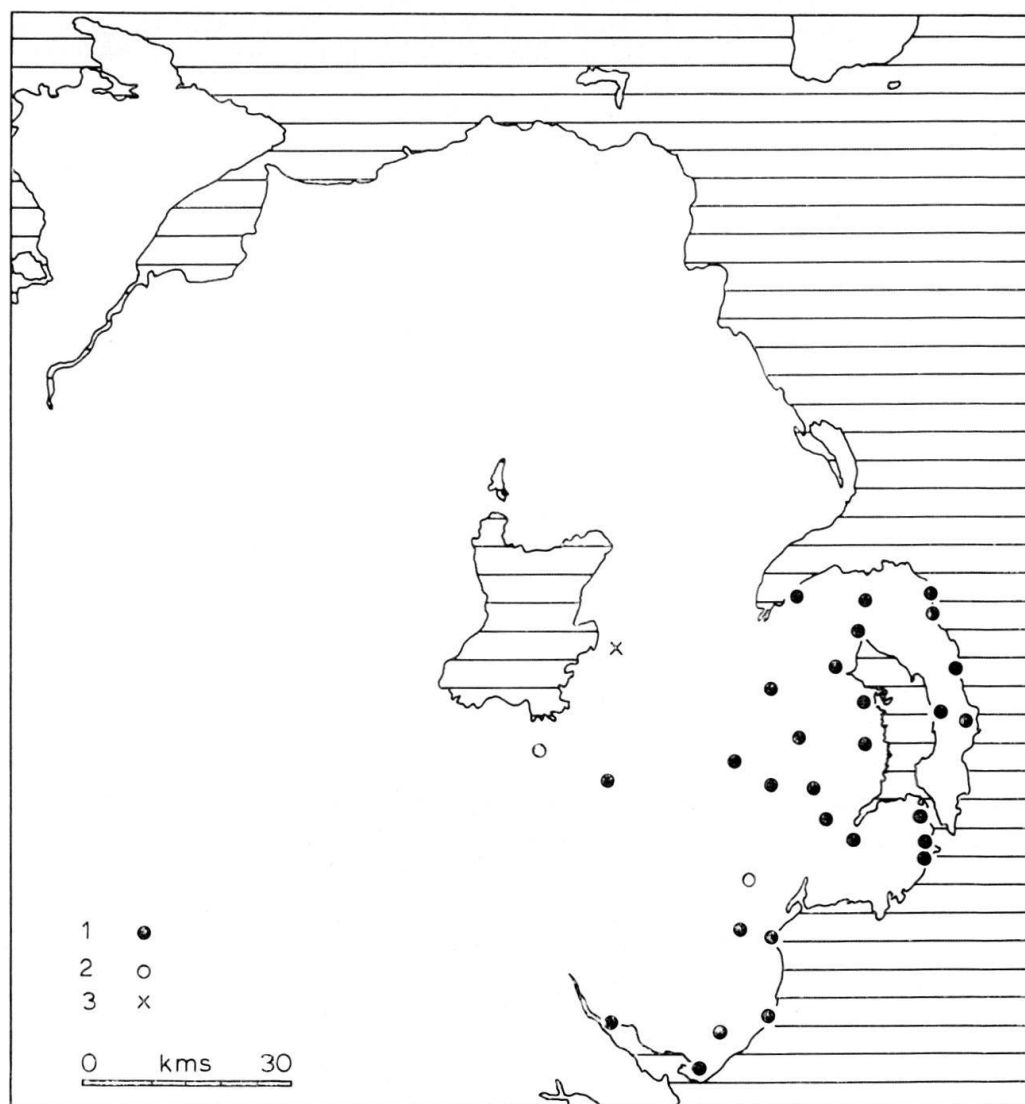


Fig. 2. Distribution of reports of wisps used as New Year gifts in south-east Ulster. 1 = custom confirmed; 2 = custom probable; 3 = alternative use for wisp at New Year.