



## Fee-Fo-Lais (Will-o'-wisp)

The will-o'-the-wisp or ignis fatuus (modern Latin, from ignis ("fire") + fatuus ("foolish"), plural ignes fatui) refers to the ghostly lights sometimes seen at night or twilight — often over bogs. It looks like a flickering lamp, and is sometimes said to recede if approached. Much folklore surrounds the legend, but science has offered several potential explanations.

### Terminology

The term will-o'-the-wisp comes from wisp, a bundle of hay or straw sometimes used as a torch, and will-o' ("Will of").

The folklore phenomenon will-o'-the-wisp (will of the wisp) is sometimes referred to as Jack o' lantern (Jack of the lantern), and indeed the two terms were originally synonymous. In fact the names "Jacky Lantern" and "Jack the Lantern" are still present in the oral tradition of Newfoundland. These lights are also sometimes referred to as "corpse candles" or "hobby lanterns", two monikers found in the Denham Tracts. They are often called spooklights or ghost lights by folklorists and paranormal enthusiasts in the United States. Sometimes the phenomenon is classified by the observer as a ghost, fairy, or elemental, and a different name is used. Briggs' "A Dictionary of Fairies" provides an extensive list of other names for the same phenomenon.

### Folklore

The names will-o'-the-wisp and jack-o'-lantern refer to an old folktale, retold in different forms across Ireland, Scotland, England, Wales, Appalachia and Newfoundland.

One version, from Shropshire, recounted by K. M. Briggs in her book *A Dictionary of Fairies*, refers to Will the Smith. Will is a wicked blacksmith who is given a second chance by Saint Peter at the gates to Heaven, but leads such a bad life that he ends up being doomed to wander the Earth. The Devil provides him with a single burning coal with which to warm himself, which he then used to lure foolish travelers into the marshes (compare Wayland Smith).

An Irish version of the tale has a ne'er-do-well named Drunk Jack or Stingy Jack who makes a deal with the Devil; offering up his soul in exchange for payment of his pub tab. When the Devil comes to collect his due, Jack tricks him by making him climb a tree and then carving a cross underneath, preventing him from climbing down. In exchange for removing the cross, the Devil

forgives Jack's debt. However, as no one as bad as Jack would ever be allowed into Heaven, Jack is forced upon his death to travel to Hell and ask for a place there. The Devil denies him entrance in revenge, but, as a boon, grants Jack an ember from the fires of Hell to light his way through the twilight world to which lost souls are forever condemned. Jack places it in a carved turnip to serve as a lantern. Another version of the tale, "Willy the Whisp", is related in Irish Folktales by Henry Glassie.

#### Other traditions

Among European rural people, especially in Gaelic and Slavic folk cultures, the will-o'-the-wisps are held to be mischievous spirits of the dead or other supernatural beings attempting to lead travelers astray (compare Puck). Sometimes they are believed to be the spirits of unbaptized or stillborn children, flitting between heaven and hell (compare Wilis). Modern occultist elaborations bracket them with the salamander, a type of spirit wholly independent from humans (unlike ghosts, which are presumed to have been humans at some point in the past).

Danes, Finns, Estonians and Latvians amongst some other groups believed that a will-o'-the-wisp marked the location of a treasure deep in ground or water, which could be taken only when the fire was there. Sometimes magical tricks were required as well, to uncover the treasure. In Finland and other northern countries it was believed that midsummer was the best time to search for will-o'-the-wisps and treasures below them. It was believed that when someone hid treasure in the ground, (s)he made the treasure available only at the midsummer, and set will-o'-the-wisp to mark the exact place and time so that (s)he could come to take the treasure back. Finns also believed that the creature guarding the treasure used fire to clean precious metals bright again.

The will-o'-the-wisp can be found in numerous folk tales around the British Isles, and is often a malicious character in the stories. Wirt Sikes in his book *British Goblins* mentions a Welsh tale about a will-o'-the-wisp (Pwca). A peasant traveling home at dusk spots a bright light traveling along ahead of him. Looking closer, he sees that the light is a lantern held by a "dusky little figure", which he follows for several miles. All of a sudden he finds himself standing on the edge of a vast chasm with a roaring torrent of water rushing below him. At that precise moment the lantern-carrier leaps across the gap, lifts the light high over its head, lets out a malicious laugh and blows out the light, leaving the poor peasant a long way from home, standing in pitch darkness at the edge of a precipice. This is a fairly common cautionary tale concerning the phenomenon; however, the Ignis Fatuus was not always considered dangerous. There are some tales told about the will-o'-the-wisp being guardians of treasure, much like the Irish leprechaun leading those brave enough to follow them to sure riches. Other stories tell of travelers getting lost in the woodland and coming upon a will-o'-the-wisp, and depending on how they treated the will-o'-the-wisp, the spirit would either get them lost further in the woods or guide them out.

In Indonesia, especially Central Java, the light is known as Gandaspati, a wicked spirit in flame that can take the form a dragon. Supposedly the spirit causes the death of whomever touches it.

In Guernsey, the light is known as the faeu boulanger (rolling fire), and is believed to be a lost soul. On being confronted with the spectre, tradition prescribes two remedies. The first is to turn one's cap or coat inside out. This has the effect of stopping the faeu boulanger in its tracks. The other solution is to stick a knife into the ground, blade up. The faeu, in an attempt to kill itself, will attack the blade.

One Asian theologian ponders the relation of will-o'-the-wisp to that of the foxfire produced by kitsune, an interesting way of combining mythology of the West with that of the East.

In addition to Kitsunebi (aka Foxfire) described above, additional similar phenomena are described in Japanese folklore, including Hitodama (literally "Human ball" as in ball of energy), Hi no Tama (Ball of Flame), Aburagae, Koemonbi, Ushionibi, etc. All these phenomena are described as balls of flame or light, at times associated with graveyards, but occurring across Japan as a whole in a wide variety of situations and locations. These phenomena are described in Shigeru Mizuki's 1985 book *Graphic World of Japanese Phantoms*

#### Theories of origin

One possible naturalistic and scientific explanation for such phenomena is that the oxidation of hydrogen phosphide and methane gases produced by the decay of organic material may cause glowing lights to appear in the air. Experiments, for example, done by the Italian chemists Luigi Garlaschelli and Paolo Boschetti, have replicated the lights by adding chemicals to the gases formed by rotting compounds. Critics claim that this theory does not easily account for reported cases which claim lights bob, swoop, soar upwards or downwards, or move against the wind.

Others believe bioluminescent effects (e.g. honey fungus) cause the light. Other explanations include causes similar to ball lightning.

More recently, under the broader banner of "Earth Lights," pseudoscientific theories as to how they are produced have been put forward by Professors Derr & Persinger, and Paul Devereux (who, in some circles, is considered the 'authority' on earth lights of various kinds, including ball lightning, St. Elmo's Fire and lights associated with earthquakes). Derr & Persinger put forward the theory that earth lights may be generated by tectonic strain. (These are faults in the earth's crust, including earthquake faults.) The theory goes that the strain causes heat in the rocks, vaporizing the water in them. Piezoelectric rocks such as quartz then produce electricity, which is channeled up through this column of vaporized water, until it reaches the surface—somehow displaying itself in the form of earth lights. This theory would assert that the majority of earth lights are seen over places of tectonic strain. If it is correct, it would explain why such lights often behave in an erratic and even seemingly intelligent manner, often defying the laws of gravity. Paul Devereux's explanation, however, is much broader. He thinks that the link between the lights and the landscape is more tenuous. He says that they are probably related to many things: tectonic strain, weather conditions, local geography, 'ley lines', terrain, water table depth and so forth. This explanation, however, is rejected by most experts as highly unscientific.

Another theory was put forward claiming these lights are barn owls with luminescent plumage. Hence the possibility of them floating around, reacting to other lights, etc. See *A Review of accounts of luminosity in Barn Owls Tyto alba*.

#### Other names

Unexplained lights have been reported under a variety of names, such as:

- Arbyrd/Senath Ghost Light of Missouri
- Bragg Road ghost light ( Light of Saratoga ) of Texas
- Brown Mountain Lights of North Carolina
- Cohoke light of Virginia
- Corpse Fire – this name comes from lights appearing specifically within graveyards where it was believed the lights were an omen of death or coming tragedy and would mark the route or Corpse road of a future funeral, from the victim's house to the graveyard.
- Corpse Light or Corpse Candle (in Scotland and late 19th and early 20th century Newfoundland)
- Crossett Light of Arkansas

- Dwaallicht, meaning "wandering light" in Dutch, luring people deep into peat bogs for no apparent reason.
- Feux Follets, literally "Merry Fires," in French and French-Canadian folklore. Despite the cheerful-sounding name, in French-Canadian folklore Feux Follets were believed to be the damned spirits of criminals or bad Catholics who served Satan and sometimes worked in concert with the Loup Garou, or Werewolf, in pursuit of wayward souls.
- Foxfire
- Friar's Lantern
- Fireship of Baie des Chaleurs in Canada
- Hinkypunk in the West Country (probably derived from the Welsh Pwca (Puck))
- Hobby lantern - used in Hertfordshire, East Anglia, and in Warwickshire & Gloucestershire as Hobbedy's Lantern
- Hornet ghost light of Missouri-Oklahoma stateline (also known just as the spooklight).
- Irrlicht, German expression which derives from "irre(n)" with several meanings such as crazy, foolish, to get lost or to err and "Licht" equal to light. It is a malicious ghost in German medieval fairy tales appearing as a glowing sphere of light in the dark woods, seducing people to leave the roads and pass into the woods.
- Irrbloss, Swedish word that is a contraction of the words "irra" (wander randomly) and "bloss" (torch).
- Fuegos fatuos (in Spain)
- Fuochi Fatui (in Italy)
- Gurdon light of Arkansas
- El Jacho : (Spanish: 'The Torch) A similar phenomenon in Puerto Rico, mainly sighted in the vicinities of Aibonito, Orocovis and other areas of the central mountain zone. It mainly serves as a boogiemán-like figure to scare children and is described as a ghostly humanoid figure of a man engulfed in flames. According to folklore, he is the ghost of a man who was cursed to wander the land searching for the ashes of a cross he burned.
- Hessdalen light in Norway
- Jack-o'-lantern, Jacky Lantern or Jack the Lantern (in Newfoundland)
- Kitty-with-a-Wick in Cornish folklore.
- Kolli vai pisaasu - a Tamil term used to describe a ghost (pisaasu) with burning embers (kolli) in its mouth (vai). There is a contention whether both will-o'-the-wisp and kolli vai pisaasu are the same.
- Lidérc, a demon of Hungarian folklore that flies at night in the form of fiery light, scattering flames.
- Luz Mala, meaning "evil light" in Argentina and some parts of South America. They are believed to be wandering, malevolent ghosts.
- Lyktemenn (Norwegian) or lyktgubbar (Swedish) , meaning "men with torches". The traditions are similar to the other North-Western European traditions
- Maco light of North Carolina
- Marfa lights of Texas
- Martebo lights in Sweden
- Min-min: a term used by some Australian Aborigine societies to describe atmospheric phenomena similar to ball lightning or Will o'the Wisps; at one time believed to be the spirits of lost (or stillborn) children. As in many other cultures, the Min-min were believed to be dangerous to human beings, especially young children.
- Moody's light of Indiana
- Mekong lights (Nekha lights) in Thailand.
- Ozark spooklight of Missouri
- Paasselkä devil in Finland
- The Paulding Light of Michigan's Upper Peninsula

- Peg-a-Lantern in Lancashire, or Jenny-with-the-lantern in Northumbria and Yorkshire incorrectly identified Saint Elmo's Fire
- St. Louis Light in Canada
- Skinwalker Ranch lights of Utah.
- Spunkie – a Scots name used in the Scottish Lowlands.
- Surrency Spooklight of Georgia
- Vettelys is another name given to Will o'the Wisp in Norway, having the literal meaning of "Vette's Candle," the Vette being a kind of goblin of dwarfish stature, believed to dwell in mounds.
- Virvatuli "flickering fire" and aarnivalkea "treasure fire" are amongst the many Finnish names for this phenomenon. It is also called liekkiö ("flamey") when it is believed to be a ghost of a murdered child.