

millions" and to the newspaper-readers of the Indian cities. The alternatives facing India today are at least as important as the choice five years ago between British rule and self-rule: either something along the lines of this Report, which spells well-being for all within five or ten years, or conflict, misery and chaos. Implementation of the Planning Commission's Report may well be more important for India and the world than the outcome of the coming general election. Ten thousand missionaries of true democracy are needed to carry its message of hope through all the land from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, from Manipur to Cutch.

Beware of the Thing

By BRIAN INGLIS

Dublin

IN case you missed the tale, let me repeat it, briefly. At Ballynanty Beg, County Limerick, stands a prehistoric burial-mound, of the kind whose erection is commonly credited to the fairies, and which therefore is left alone. It has recently been spared, in spite of the fact that it lies on a building-site, and consequently deprives the authorities of rent. Somehow journalists got wind of the story, and fastened upon it. One British newspaper even sent an aircraft across with a photographer to take pictures of the mound and, if possible, its residents. Local inhabitants naturally plied the visitors with all the legend they could remember, adding some inventions of their own. When a house was started too close to the mound, the reporters were told, the fairies made a sortie and knocked it down. Workmen, doubtless over a pint of porter, insisted that they had seen leprechauns in the vicinity, and the City Manager, entering into the spirit of the game, announced that if necessary he would take a shotgun to the fairies' defence. The journalists, in fact, got what they asked for. But the mound remains. Just as hundreds of fairy possessions, mounds, forts and thorn bushes remain throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Do not, though, be too quick to snigger at the superstitions of the poor, deluded Irish. You must know that the word fairy does not mean the same here as it does in England, except in one rude colloquial sense. I am not thinking of the mind's eye distinction—though that exists, too. A fairy to an Englishman is by Barrie out of pantomime—a girl of indeterminate size, usually small enough to perch on a toadstool, diaphanous wings, ballet frock, a wand tipped with a star. There are variations, but that is the norm, is it not? In Ireland—though again there are variations—the fairy is generally accounted a little old man, akin to the British gnome, by profession a shoemaker and a hoarder of gold. This distinction of sexes is unimportant: the real difference is that, whereas to the English fairies are a pleasant piece of whimsy, to the Irish countryman they are a symbol of the supernatural. They represent the forces that lie outside his understanding—sometimes beneficent, more often evil. Poltergeists are perhaps the nearest English equivalent. But has anybody given form to a poltergeist? The whole tribe of fairies, leprechauns, banshees and the rest are no more than a rationalisation made originally for the benefit of children who, being unable to comprehend such forces in the abstract, had to be given an anthropomorphic substitute—as in pantomime. The forces themselves can be presumed to remain unaffected by our feeble attempts to translate them into human form.

The Irish fairy tradition has two significant aspects. The first is that fairies do not have direct powers: they capture a human and act through him or her. They have to procure a medium. The second arises out of the first: fairies cannot survive (*vide* Barrie) unless men believe in them. Sufficient mediums must be available. In other words, the forces of the supernatural are roughly proportionate to the strength of the belief in them. Is this not a perfectly tenable proposition? If we accept the reality of faith healing, can we not also assume the reality of faith harming? May we not recognise the immense strength of the

forces that can be generated by human belief, even if we dismiss the anthropomorphic rationalisations as ridiculous?

The Englishman is inclined to be pig-headed on this subject. He is often prepared to believe in the existence of, say, a "curse" laid upon somebody, provided it is far enough away in time (Tutankhamen) or space (Voodoo). He will accept the feasibility of such stories as Somerset Maugham's *P. and O.* and others of the same kind in which white men die, in spite of Harley Street's assiduous attentions, because they have antagonised the witch-doctor of some primitive tribe or stolen the green eye of the little yellow god. But he dismisses the notion that such things could happen on his own doorstep—or next door in Ireland—as truckling to superstition. This in spite of the fact that he probably harbours quite a few of what Logan Pearsall Smith called the "little spiders of the mind"—the spilt-salt, broken-mirror, Friday-the-13th worries which still hold their place in the English home.

The Irish countryman's attitude, on the other hand, is practical, even if it is not logical. He cannot make a cult of the supernatural because he is forbidden to do so by his Church. His Catholicism is not the less genuine because, while it may sometimes occur to him to commit a mortal sin, he would never dream of uprooting a fairy thorn. If we accept the truth of the formula that the strength of the unknown forces is proportionate to the belief in them, it must be admitted that he would be a fool if he did. There can hardly be a countryman in Ireland who has not had first-hand experience of the power of these forces. Second-hand, of course, that power is multiplied a thousandfold.

You can argue that this proves the Irish countryman to be primitive, uncivilised. I would counter (though not here) by speculation on how the possession of these forces, if we could understand them sufficiently to harness them to our purposes (they are only forces for evil when they are annoyed or thwarted), might be of immense benefit to humanity. I propose to do a modest experiment along these lines myself next summer. The County Council are toying with the idea of running a road through the field under my window. The construction of a mound, the planting of a thorn bush, should be easy enough: and if there are not now fairies at the bottom of my garden, there soon will be. Alas, though, the Dublin County Council is largely recruited from the descendants of the Irish who lived within the Pale. They are Anglicised: probably they were brought up on Peter Pan rather than the immeasurably finer "Crock of Gold." They will certainly be less accommodating than the Limerick City Manager, and, what is worse, the fairies will certainly find no medium among their number in the City Hall, through which to wreak their—and my—vengeance.

War Memorial, 1951

THIS is a memorial, not only
To men who died, giving
Life. It is a monument
To the unburied living;

To Man, who has hated,
And will hate, his brother;
To unknowing you and me,
Who betrayed each other;

To Hope, dry and cold
As thin grains of sand;
To Peace, now grown small
As a still-born child's hand;

To those of us who take all,
And fail in giving.
This is a monument
To the fallen living.

ISOBEL CUMMING.