

IRISH CRADLES: AN INTRODUCTORY LOOK

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The cradle is a familiar item of vernacular furniture and it is only within the last hundred years that it has become obsolescent. A cradle is a small bed for an infant and it generally takes the form of an open wooden box fitted with rockers at either end and provided with a hood. A less common form of cradle was the freestanding cot or bassinet suspended between two uprights united by a stretcher. By the end of the eighteenth century suspended or swinging cradles were primarily fashionable items of nursery furniture which reflected contemporary taste. Because they were raised from the ground their use often permitted a lavish display of drapery. This article is principally concerned with the traditional, hooded cradle or low cradles which once formed part of the ordinary furniture of Irish homes.

Cradles have been in use since time immemorial. In Ireland, as elsewhere, it may be safely assumed that early cradles took the form of a dugout section of tree trunk or simply a shaped, hooded basket. Also in distant centuries, it is probable that cradles were frequently suspended from the ceiling and rocked from below. This custom survived in several North European countries into the nineteenth century¹ but it was unknown in Ireland within recent centuries.² It is worthwhile to note that the word for a cradle in the Irish language is 'cliabhán' or a little basket. Basket or wickerwork cradles were fitted with wooden rockers. Smaller versions of such cradles which lacked rockers served as beds and carrycots for small babies. Wickerwork cradles were light, inexpensive, easy to obtain and it is not surprising that they have remained popular well into the twentieth century. In many localities in Ireland the use of wickerwork cradles was preferred due to the lack of timber resources for furniture manufacture.³ In the past straw was used in rural areas of Ireland to make a variety of household and farm items.⁴ However, to date no examples of coiled or bound straw work cradles have been discovered.⁵ These cradles are likely to have been home-made and so valued only on account of their cheapness and immediate usefulness. In addition, they were very perishable, inflammable and vulnerable to damp and vermin infestation.

The majority of surviving Irish cradles are wooden, mostly made from pine, and they can be dated to the turn of the century. Most examples are to be found in museum collections or as individual items in private collections. To my present knowledge, the largest collection of cradles in Ireland is to be found in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, Co. Down.⁶ The UFTM collection has, in total, twenty-nine wooden cradles and three wickerwork cradles. The collection also contains several dolls' cradles and examples of standard, late Victorian and Edwardian cots and cribs. The majority of the cradles have a Belfast, Co. Down and Co. Antrim provenance and a number of them lack any background information. Excluding a few exceptions, what is striking about this collection of cradles is its plainness and homogeneity. There is little variation within the basic cradle shape and in appearance these Ulster cradles are similar to cradles to be found elsewhere in Ireland and indeed in Britain and North America, although a greater variety in shape is to be found in cradles from the South of Ireland.

Nevertheless, a number of features common to these Ulster cradles deserve further examination. Decoration is invariably restricted to the shaped outline of hood arch and sides, the finials on the corner, rocking posts and an infrequent, slight shaping of the rockers (Fig. 1). The boarded foot end of the cradle is rarely shaped. The cradles have a painted or varnished finish of an overall dull colour, such as green, red, cream or brown. The interior of the cradle is rarely completely painted and in one example it is noticeable that only the upper half of the cradle sides have been painted.⁷ Presumably, this is because the lower, unpainted, half would have been covered with bedding. All the cradles are hooded and most have gable-sided, flat-topped hoods or rounded hoods. (Three examples have rounded hoods.) Among this group of pine cradles there are no examples of cradles with high headboards, domed hoods, or markedly canted arched hoods. Neither are there any examples of simple, hoodless, open box-type cradles (Fig. 2) or the 'Irish' semi-hooded cradles, as illustrated in H. Pain's authoritative survey of Upper Canadian furniture.⁸

The majority of the cradles have four corner rocking posts or occasionally only two posts at the cradle's foot end. Two cradles lack corner posts entirely. The corner-post finials have a worn rounded shape, an ovoid or knob form or they terminate in a chamfered multifaceted knob (Figs 3–6). In general terms, this group can be described as 'carpenter made' and their construction is straightforward. Single or double pine boards are used for the sides of the cradle; they are nailed together and the rockers and corner posts are secured by lapped joints. Dovetailed jointing is found on only four examples. The gable hoods are made from three pieces of wood nailed together, while the rounded hoods are made from single or two or three sections of wood. The short pointed rockers are low and semi-circular in shape and their front sides are flush with the side ends of the cradles. In the few instances, when the rockers are set slightly back from the ends of the cradle, they are attached to a cross batten. Several of the cradle rockers have glued-on protective strips of rubber on their bases to prevent excessive wear (Fig. 7).

The sides of the cradle vary from 27 cm to 40 cm in depth and a few have noticeably sloping sides. The base of the cradle is invariably made from a single, full-length board which has either been nailed to the inner top edge of the rockers or left loose for easy removal and cleaning. The base board does not always fit closely to the sides of the cradle and in several instances it has been replaced.

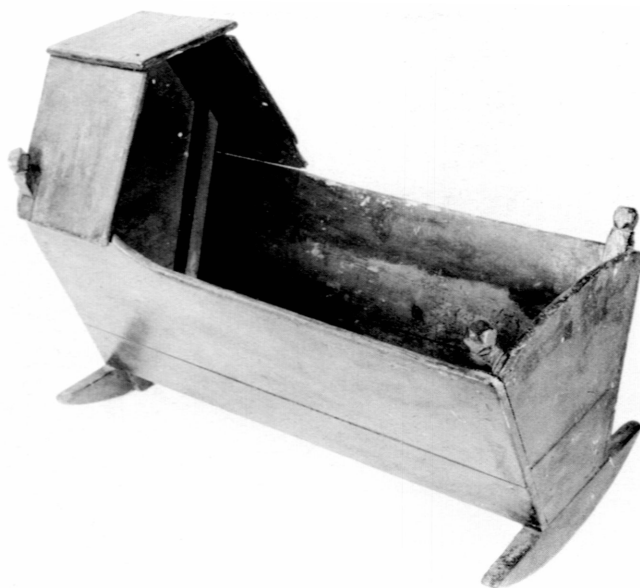
None of the pine cradles have carrying handle holes in their sides. Also absent are any threading holes or fastening side knobs for securing a cover tie to the cradle; these features have been noted on some English and Scottish cradles.⁹ At present, the only Irish example I know of with such a provision is on a wheelwright-made cradle recorded by C. Kinmonth in south-west Co. Cork in 1988.¹⁰ In this example, the cradle has the remnants of a leather restraining strap on the inside of its hood. A single cradle has the extra refinement of a small drawer fitted in its hood.¹¹ Also in the collection are three comparable vernacular-styled cradles; two are made from mahogany and one from walnut. They can be described as cabinet-maker made and they all have rounded hoods and shaped rockers. The walnut cradle has panelled sides and hood, and pine base board; its interior is painted a cobalt blue colour. It is an interesting cradle because it is dated by its donor to 1864 and it is reputed to have been made by his great-grandfather, who was a chairmaker in Newtownards, Co. Down (Fig. 8).¹²



1. Cradle, pine with a brown painted finish. Acquired from the Ballymoney district, Co. Antrim
UFTM collection 302.1984



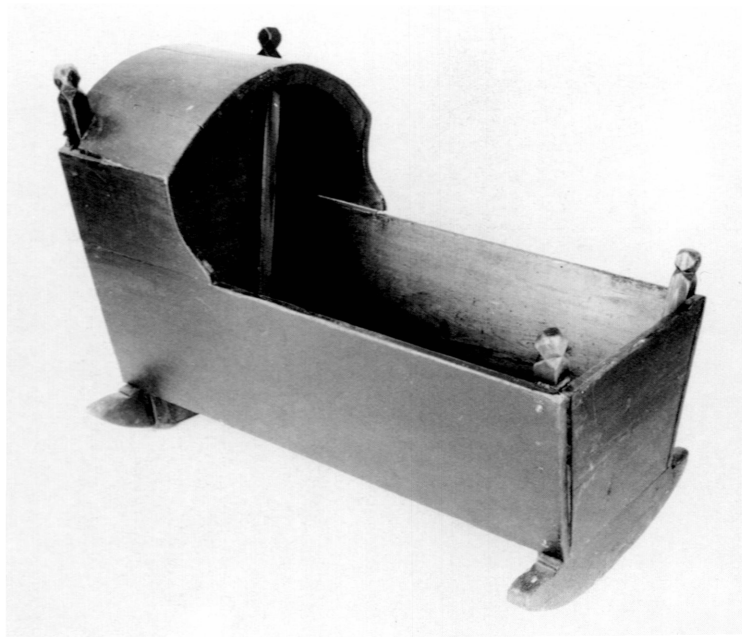
2. Woman and child by a peat fire, Caragh Townland, Co. Tyrone,
c. 1915
UFTM photographic archive, Rose Shaw Collection



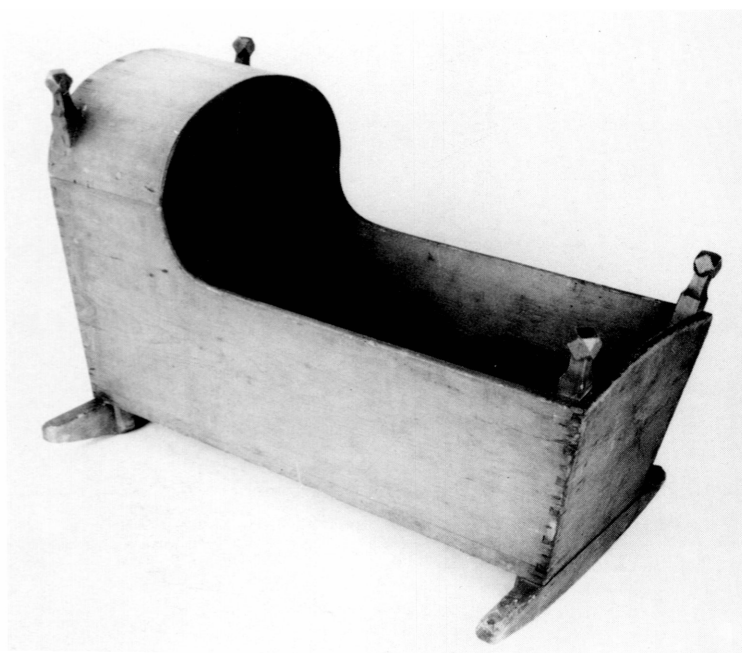
3. Cradle, pine, stained a reddish-brown colour. Acquired from
Ballinamallard, Co. Fermanagh
UFTM collection 301.1984



4. Farmhouse cradle, pine, stained a dark reddish-brown colour.
Dovetailed jointing used at the corners, from Ballycrochan, Bangor,
Co. Down
UFTM collection 1494.1970



5. Farmhouse cradle, pine, painted a dark brown colour. From Ballyhenry Townland, Comber, Co. Down
UFTM collection 143.1984



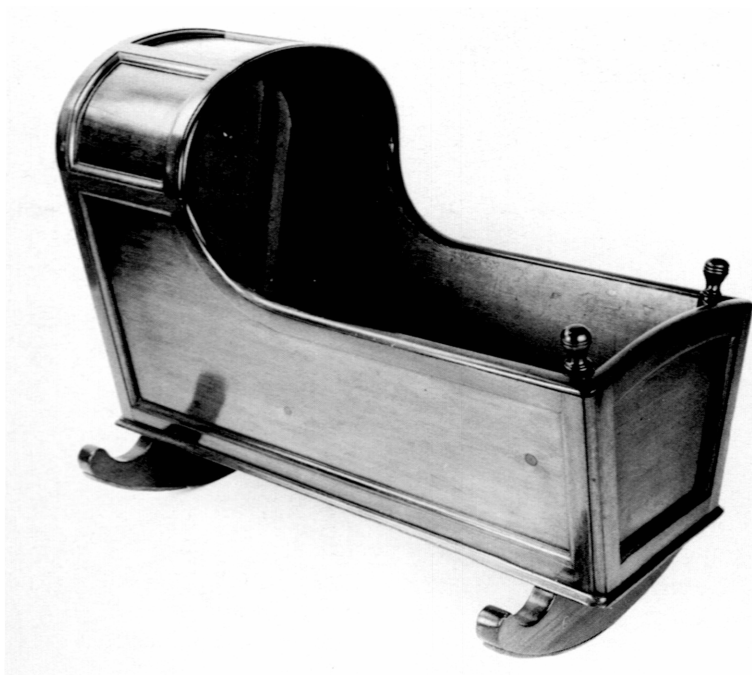
6. Farmhouse cradle, pine, unpainted. Dovetailed jointing used at the corners. Acquired from Downpatrick, Co. Down
UFTM collection 164.1974



7. Cradle, pine, the interior is painted white. Acquired from
Dervock, Co. Antrim
UFTM collection 1708.197



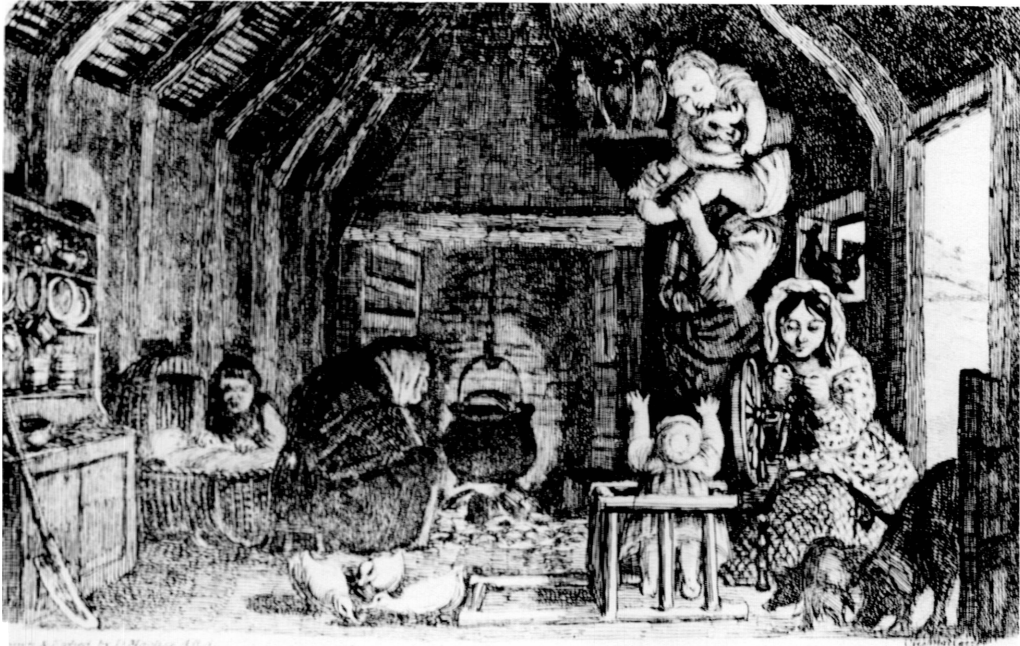
8. Scottish-made cradle, pine, beech and ash. Varnished exterior,
cream painted interior. The cradle has a single side knob.
Provenance, Belfast
UFTM collection 1250.1988



9. Walnut cradle, polished exterior with a blue painted interior.
Provenance, Newtownards and Bangor, Co. Down
UFTM collection 955.1965



10. Wickerwork cradle with a half canopy. Early twentieth-century
provenance, Castlefin, Co. Donegal
UFTM collection 260.1977



INTERIOR OF ONE OF THE BETTER KIND OF IRISH COTTAGES.

11. 'Interior of one of the better kinds of Irish cottages', drawn and sketched by D. Maclise ARA. From John Barrow, Esq. 'A tour round Ireland, through the sea-coast counties, in the Autumn of 1835'

UFTM library

Two cradles have Scottish associations and they are recognisably distinct from the Ulster cradles, due to their thin bentwood hoods, narrow bases, sloping sides and especially their high, open shaped and pointed rockers. One of these cradles is known to have been made by the donor's great-grandfather, a 'Scottish cabinetmaker', for his daughter who settled in Belfast about 125 years ago. The donor, an only child, eventually inherited it from his mother (Fig. 9).¹³

The three wickerwork cradles are similar in appearance. They have wooden rockers, wide oval bases, deep sides and shallow, semi-circular hoods. They are early twentieth century in date and one has a known Co. Donegal provenance.¹⁴ These examples apart, Irish wickerwork cradles were also made with high hoods — both rounded and squarish in shape (Figs 10 and 11).¹⁵

One final cradle in the UFTM's collection deserves a brief mention. It is a conventional, late seventeenth-century, oak-panelled cradle with a high shallow, domed hood and two tall, end corner posts. It was acquired by the museum in 1965 and has been restored but little is known of its background except that it was donated by a Dublin family.¹⁶

Because of their associations, both nostalgic and utilitarian, with infancy and child rearing; cradles are one of few items of Irish vernacular furniture which have been deemed

important and pleasing enough to become family hand-me-downs or even heirlooms. But more often than not, their very universality has resulted in a marked degree of historical anonymity. Of course, a typical comment on any given cradle is that it has been well used over several generations and it was probably made by a family member. The truth or otherwise of such claims is often difficult to ascertain with any clarity. Nevertheless, the frequent assertion that cradles were often made by men (with some woodworking experience) for their own (immediate and extended) family use is in many cases undoubtedly true and a welcome guide to dating.¹⁷

Moreover, how cradles were used in everyday domestic life has been poorly studied, so a few general comments must suffice. Cradles were to be found in the poorest, the modestly well-to-do and wealthy family homes. They were present in town, as well as rural, homes and where poverty or other necessity determined makeshift cradles and beds were substituted — for example, a horse collar, a box or the drawer from a chest of drawers. It was also customary for young babies and infants to sleep beside their mother. Newborn babies were especially kept by the mother's side, as this custom ensured that they were kept warm and they could be easily fed during the night. (A disadvantage of this custom was the danger of 'overlying' and smothering the baby.) During the day the baby would have been laid to rest or sleep in a cradle or bassinet. The size of surviving cradles does suggest that they could have held a baby from its birth until it was at least two years old. The bedding would have consisted of a mattress or bolster with cut-down blankets and bed covers.¹⁸ There was no fixed place for the cradle to be kept in the home and it could be moved from room to room as required, but during the day it was most likely to be kept in the kitchen.

Not surprisingly, throughout the centuries a number of beliefs were concentrated on the protection of the baby and its mother, in order to avert any ill luck. Until recent decades in rural Ireland, a well known belief was the conviction that it was lucky to obtain a secondhand cradle for a first born baby — either from a relation or a neighbour. Equally, it was deemed more appropriate to give a cradle away than to sell it.¹⁹ The presumption of obtaining a new cradle for a new baby may have been seen as tempting fate, but it does suggest that many old cradles frequently belonged to different families. Changeling stories are to be found throughout Ireland, and one recommended method for protecting the baby in the cradle was to place a set of iron hearth tongs across the cradle — especially when the mother was out of the room.²⁰ Traditionally, lullabies were used to soothe and sing a baby to sleep. The baby was either rocked in the nurse's lap or in the cradle. In Ireland, many traditional lullabies are known from Irish-speaking districts the melodies of which are often very ancient. These lullabies express the mother's love for the child and it is likely that they originated as a charm sung to protect the child from the *Sí* or fairies.²¹

Strange as it may seem, one reason given by some nineteenth-century home economists for the replacement of the rocking cradle by freestanding cots and cribs was their disapproval of 'over-rocking', whereby the monthly nursery nurse was often tempted merely to rock the baby in the cradle instead of tending to it. Alarming, an excess of rocking was also believed to be detrimental to the baby's health.²²

Nowadays, wheeling a baby to and fro in a pram serves the purpose of soothing the baby to sleep and the use of a cradle is no longer required. In conclusion, as this commentary indicates, the subject of cradles is poorly documented and future research is desirable. The

complete range of Irish cradle styles is not yet determined or regional variations clearly identified. The social history of such useful items of furniture also deserves further attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the relevant museum curators for answering my queries concerning their collections: namely, Anne O'Dowd of the National Museum of Ireland, Phillip Mavot of the Ulster American Folk Park, Catherine McCullough of the Armagh County Museum, Lesley Simpson of the Down County Museum, Helen Lanigan-Wood of the Fermanagh County Museum and Eithne Verling of the Donegal Museum.

REFERENCES

1. Constance King, *Country Pine Furniture* (The Apple Press, 1989), p. 106.
2. E. Eslyn Evans, *Irish Folkways* (Routledge & Kegan, 1957, 7th impression 1979), p. 93. Ake Campbell, 'Irish Fields and Houses, a Study of Rural Culture', *Béalóideas*, Vol. v (1935), p. 20. Both Evans and Campbell state that this practice once existed but no references are cited.
3. For example, on the almost treeless, occupied islands off the coast of Ireland. For a general account of Irish disafforestation and later forestry policy see Eoin Nesson, *A History of Irish Forestry* (Dublin, 1991).
4. One thorough account of Ulster straw-work is given in an article by Katherine M. Harris, 'Plaited Straw-work', *Ulster Folklife*, Vol. 9 (1963), pp. 53–60. Also Claudia Kinmonth, 'The Last Straw?', *Carloviana, Journal of the Old Carlow Society*, No. 39 (1991/92), pp. 2–9.
5. E. Evans, *ibid.*, p. 93 states that cradles were made from straw. There is an example of an English straw 'lipwork' cradle in the Museum of English Rural Life, Reading. It is illustrated in Majorie Filbee, *The Dictionary of Country Furniture* (London, 1977), p. 27.
6. For example, The National Museum of Ireland has six cradles in its collection, including three wickerwork ones from the Aran Islands. The Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh, Co. Tyrone has five wooden cradles. The Armagh County Museum, Armagh has three cradles in its collection, one hooded cradle and two swinging cradles. The Down County Museum, Downpatrick and the Fermanagh County Museum, Enniskillen have two examples of cradles in their respective collections. The Donegal Museum has one hooded cradle in its collection.
7. Accession No. 304.1984.
8. Howard Pain, *The Heritage of Upper Canadian Furniture 1780–1900* (Toronto, 1978), p. 282. Fig. 739. A cradle of this type is illustrated in a twentieth-century photograph in Daphne D. C. Pachin-Mould, *The Aran Islands* (David & Charles, 1977), p. 54. The Folk village at Glencolumkille, Co. Donegal has a simple, hoodless cradle in its pre-famine exhibition house. The well-known Rose-Shaw photograph of a Co. Tyrone mother seated on a stool and looking on her baby shows a hoodless cradle, dated c. 1915 (Fig. 2). UFTM photographic collection.
9. Ralph Edwards, *The Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture* (London, 1977), pp. 151–52, Fig. 6, and p. 152.
10. I. F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (Routledge & Kegan, 1961), p. 176, Fig. 176.
11. Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Vernacular Furniture, 1840–1940, a Neglected Aspect of the History of Design*, MA Thesis, 1987–8, RAC/V&A, pp. 165–66, 204. This cradle was made by Con Corkley, a local wheelwright and furniture maker. It is made from pine with elm rockers — re-used wheelfelloes. The cradle hood is arched but with a sloping back. It was painted blue and white about ten years ago and has been used by various local families over several generations.
12. Accession No. 303.1984. This cradle has a gable-sided, flat-topped hood and it was acquired by the Museum in 1965 from a Belfast auction house.
13. Accession No. 955.1965. The donor's name is a Mr Duff but this name is not listed in the street directories for Newtownards at this period. Newtownards was a prosperous market and textile town and it supported a couple of cabinet makers throughout the nineteenth century.
14. Accession No. 303.1984.
15. Accession No. 260.1977. From the Castlefin area.
16. For example the wickerwork cradles from the Aran Islands which have rectangular boxes and high squarish hoods. Cradles of this type were in use on the islands during the early decades of this century (Fig. 10).
17. Accession No. 1020.1963. Illustrated in D. Shaw-Smith, *Ireland's Traditional Crafts*, 1986, p. 77.
18. For example, wooden hooded cradles in the Co. Armagh museum were made in 1889 by an uncle for his nephew, Richard Harvey of Tandragee for his nephew, Robert Harvey.
19. The UFTM has eleven examples of cot or cradle covers which have been cut down from patchwork bedcovers.

19. This was a widespread belief ex: one reference. Brid. Mahon, 'Beliefs and customs associated with dress in Ireland', *Folklore Studies in the 20th Century*, Proceedings of the Centenary Conference of the Folklore Society, ed. V. S. Newell (1978-80), p. 285. In the north-west of the country, it was the custom for the bride to borrow her wedding dress — and indeed in many places it was common to borrow the christening robe and a cradle for the first born. This belief is also referred by C. Kinmonth (*ibid.*, p. 165) in relation to Co. Cork.
20. This belief was not exclusive to Ireland, it was also known in Scotland and the Isle of Man.
21. I am indebted to Professor B. Ó Madagáin for this information. Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Gaelic lullaby: a Charm to Protect the Baby', *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989), pp. 29-38.
22. Thomas Webster and Mrs Parkes, *An Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy* (London, 1861), pp. 1189-90: 'Excess of rocking or swinging is on another ground objected to; it is supposed to induce in infants water on the brain; whether this superstition is well founded or not, the other objection previously observed will be sufficient to keep in disuse all rocking-cots and cradles.'