

John Boyne



A visit to a white witch

Reference: 11202

Dimensions:

Height: 16.20 cm / 6³/₈ in

Width: 21.20 cm / 8³/₈ in

Signed with initials and dated l.r.: J.B. April 7 18.., pen and grey ink and grey wash

16.2 x 21.2 cm.; 6 3/8 x 8 3/8 inches

Literature

Dr A. Sneddon, 'Representing Magic in Modern Ireland, Belief, History and Culture,' CUP, 2022, ill. fig. 1

In Britain and Ireland amongst ordinary people popular belief in witches remained strong up until the twentieth century. This drawing appears to depict a consultation with a cunning person or white witch. A stock part of 18th and 19th

KAREN TAYLOR

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century country life, these commercial, multifarious magical practitioners provided local communities with a range of services for a small fee, such as un-witching, fortune-telling, and divination. They could gain quite serious reputations and some prospered. The position gave them status in their local communities. The 'witch' seems to have a good-natured face and her bonnet is not peaked, and a cat is perched benignly on it. The old woman is seated, a horse skull above her chair and consulting a magical book or grimoire: the ownership of such expensive objects often added to the allure and kudos of cunning-folk. The family are approaching her in a deferential way (the man holds his hat, his wife looks expectant) to ask her help. The girl looks frightened, is she seeing the real witch, the cause of their maladies? After all, cunning-folk were often brought in to counter black or harmful magic.

Boyne left Co. Down for London at the age of nine with his father and was apprenticed to the engraver William Byrne. He joined a company of strolling players until 1781 and thereafter established a drawing school.

Boyne's caricatures which provide an amusing insight into British contemporary life can be found in many public collections including the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, The Fitzwilliam Museum and the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.

With thanks for Dr Andrew Sneddon for his comments on this drawing.