

Faith and Begorra

"Begorra" (sometimes spelled "begorrah") means "by God" in Irish slang. Properly named, it's called a "minced oath," and this one dates back to at least 1839, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary. "Faith" is a similar near-cuss word. It doesn't use God anywhere in the wording, but refers to the whole belief system of religion as an interjection: "*Faith, and I'm sure he won't make it to the game today*" is a very mild form of saying, "*He's not gonna make it to the darn / dang / game!*"

"Begorra" and "Top o' the morning" are authentically Irish, if long-abandoned, phrases. By the 20th century, "Begorra" had become the language of stage Irish, sometimes in the phrase "faith and begorra," but perhaps most notoriously as a description of the difference between the decidedly outré Gate theater, and the more staid, rural, naturalistic Abbey theater: They were called Sodom and Begorra.

But if the phrase fell into disuse in Ireland, Americans, who like their Irish antiquated and twee, aren't going to let it go anytime soon. There was, as an example, the tale of an Irishman to be executed during the Mexican-American War, published in the Daily Ohio Statesman on October 7, 1852. The soldier is visited in prison by his father, and the soldier pleads with his father to arrange a meeting with the General, so that the soldier can state his case for innocence. "*Begorrah, Teddy, an' I know this; but the Ginerall don't*" the father says, "*Oh, he will hang yez, I know he will!*" And he does.

Pulp novelist Edward S. Ellis, whose 1882 novel "The Huge Hunter, Or the Steam Man of the Prairies" had an Irish character named Mickey who, at one point, cries out, "*Begorrah, but it's the ould divil, hitched to his throttin' waging, wid his ould wife howldin' the reins!*" This is not the sort of dialogue we typically associate with the Old West, but, apparently, even on the frontier, Irish gonna Irish.

Tramp in the 1955 Disney film "Lady and the Tramp," a film that really loved its stereotypical ethnic characters, goes on a bit of a tear, speaking in a cod Irish accent. "*Now, O'Brien's here is where little Mike – sure'n that's me again, Pidge – comes of a Tuesday,*" he says. "*Begorra, that's when they're after havin' the darlin' corned beef.*"