Folklore: A Great Leap of Faith:

Down on the Beara peninsula in West Cork, if you look hard you’ll find this beautiful spot called ‘The Priest’s Leap’ (although you’ll have to try hard as it’s poorly signposted). According to local tradition, a priest on horseback was being chased across these mountain by English soldiers and, from this particular rock, his horse made a gigantic leap that carried him all the way to another rock outside the town of Bantry. Given that this second rock isn’t visible in the photo, you’ll have worked out this is quite a long way.

Some locals claim that the priest involved in this incident was a Fr Dominick Collins who was later killed by the English forces during a siege at the (relatively) local Castle Dún Baoi, stronghold of the O’Sullivan-Beara clan. Others claim it was a different priest called Fr James Archer who also has associations with Dún Baoi. The truth, in fact, is that the tale (or rather its associated tradition) predates both of these religious men and, indeed, the entire Christian religion.

Down in the Beara peninsula with its impressive mountains, valleys and formidable topographical features, it was not unusual for our early ancestors to tell stories about the landmarks that they saw every morning on rising and before they went to bed at night. This region – and, indeed, many other parts of Ireland – abounds with tales of individuals or creatures that carried out gigantic leaps across vast precipices, valleys and wide bays.
Linking such heroic-scale acts of endeavours to the land that surrounded them was a means for our ancestors to explain – but also to come to terms with – the great natural forces that surrounded them. These stories were a means of ‘taming’ the land, making it more familiar and comfortable to interact with. Back in the day, a person’s survival depended on his/her ability to interact with the natural world. Closeted as we are today with such a significantly larger human population, technology and increased knowledge, it is difficult for us to comprehend that relationship.

Initially, therefore, our ancestors’ stories concerned mythological creatures and heroes (such as the Hag of Beara and Fionn mac Cumhal). Later, as the land became more settle and ‘civilised’, those great feats were assigned to more local, more human figures (such as the two priests in the story above).

Today, however, we no longer need such close interaction with our local topography. Many of us now live in artificially constructed environment or change the area or country that we live in at least once in our lives, further diluting that connection. Despite this, the stories that go with the land still exist in our social and cultural subconscious which is why, in later years, those of us who’ve left home (and our own descendants) find ourselves longing for something we don’t quite understand. Fortunately, although we all know you can’t return to your past or reclaim your childhood, you can go back and access the stories that filled it.

And sometimes, that is enough.

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