



A TALE OF HOME

I left Ireland in the early 80's and ended up teaching in South Africa and later running an e-learning business. Distance crystallized my sense of the many good things there had been in my upbringing. There was a connection with previous generations and with the land that was both subtle and deep-rooted. I remembered stories being told in the kitchen at home. I knew of the magic that resided in the nearby rath, fairy bushes, standing stones, and other 'field monuments' that would be invisible to the casual eye. But even more than any of that, in the layers of language and the subtle ways that people talk, the past is all still there. In some senses, the country was only ever colonized in the most superficial way. Scratch the surface of the religious and 'modern' overlays, and you realize that the connections with ancient ways are stubbornly resilient.

I wanted to be able to share a small sense of that with my own children. Sadly I found that most of the existing books of folk tales did not reach my kids. In fact, most only reach me when I waded through looking for the nuggets. I began to form the view that their magic got locked away in the exercise of transcribing from the oral medium.

I started making up my own stories involving the main characters of the Fenian cycle and a few extras. I should say straight off that I know and love the Fenian cycle mythology as well as the folklore collected by the Irish Folklore Commission. I've been very careful with my writing not to dabble in any interpretations of that. My intention was to see if I could 'entrance' in the way the mythological stories originally entranced our ancestors sitting around firesides back through time. The stories attempt to entertain too, in the way that any story teller worth his salt has to do.

These were kernel stories were tested both at bedtime and in the car journeys to school. I jotted down the ones that worked best. After settling back into a farming community near Kilkenny I was encouraged by my family to make more of the stories. I eventually went at it. My objective: to share the magic that I am ever more convinced still lives and breathes in the Irish countryside. I found a great publisher who understood exactly what I was trying to do. The result is, 'Old Friends: The Lost Tales of Fionn Mac Cumhaill'.

In it, a Playstation generation city boy called Arthur 'The Dark' McLean finds himself landed in a remote farmhouse with an apparently eccentric uncle. His story threads through the book, making it a whole. Arthur could be a lad from any modern city, trying to settle into any rural Irish setting and a small town school. As Arthur's everyday world comes under pressure, he starts making secret nocturnal visits to the forbidden place – the fairy fort or rath. There he meets the 'Old Man' who takes him travelling on his story voice back into escapades that are scary, funny, tense, and sometimes happy. It's worked out well. I'm not supposed to say it, but I love the book myself. I had great entertainment from writing it. There are lots of hidden layers and jokes that adults get a great kick out of. It is a great satisfaction hearing that people are gripped by it and entertained to the end. If you get a chance to read it, do let me know how it finds you. You can write comments, see reviews, or contact me via www.IrishFables.com

Best wishes to you and yours, Tom O'Neill