

## STORYTELLING AND A SENSE OF PLACE

All stories happen somewhere: deep dark woods, icy tundra, mean streets, emotional wasteland, hotbed of passion. The skilful storyteller can give us just enough information to illuminate the images of locations that we hold in our own heads. That's one of the secrets of great storytelling, the ability to enter into and shine a light on each listener's secret places.

There's another kind of relationship between story and place – a much more physical one, where a particular story has become attached to a particular location. This kind of story fascinates because it promotes a kind of “understanding” which doesn't necessarily have anything to do with historical fact (in any case an area for contentious discussion), but nevertheless creates a psychic topography which can be lived in just as vividly as the physical landscape. Stories of place can have major social functions. They can both help to unite communities and set them against each other; they can be the focus of religious devotion and the fomenters of religious wars. More recently and mundanely they have been used for all kinds of purposes, for walks, school projects, to promote tourist activity and so on (see below for more detailed possibilities).

These stories of place could be said to fall into two main categories: legends, and stories which have some historical basis. At one end of the spectrum, for example, is the story of the piper who enters a particular cave in search of treasure, never to be seen again (though his dog emerges, several weeks later and from an entirely different cave, with no hair, and hardly any skin left on its body). Versions of this tale are so widespread (and by no means confined to Scotland – Richmond in North Yorkshire

has its lost Drummer Boy) that a search for a “true” version would be both fruitless and pointless. At the other extreme, the first Lord of Reay in Northern Sutherland is a real enough historical character – born Donald Mackay in 1590, supporter of the Protestant cause after the Reformation, and so on. But somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, legend and history can blur. The story that a show-down in Smoo Cave with the Lord of Darkness was narrowly avoided by Mackay’s sending his dog into the cave first – it of course emerged hairless and virtually skinless – may owe as much or more to legend as it does to history.

Where would the storyteller find stories of place? In order of effort (or lack of it), a good starting point is **the internet** (if, of course, you have access). Try typing in the name of a region or place, followed by “legend”, “folk tale” or whatever, and see what comes up. The results aren’t likely to be very detailed, or even reliable – you’ll probably end up on a tourism-related site - but they may well set you off in the right direction.

The next port of call (and both more fun, and potentially more rewarding) is the **library**. Go to the “local” section and, with luck, you’ll find a treasure trove of information (just don’t send your dog in first). There may, for example, be a volume of stories compiled by an enthusiast, and published by a local newspaper some time in the last century. Or you might be lucky enough to find a book like Hugh Miller’s “Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland”, which gives tales from Ross and Cromarty, and particularly from the fishing village of Cromarty itself, which Miller heard from people who would have been born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

If you have time to do some real research, the local paper may well have run a series on local legends which you can track down in the archives. Another good source is the **guide book**. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when railway and steamer tourism were at their peak, it seemed that every stopping place produced its own guide book (again, newspapers were largely responsible). Along with details of accommodation, local history, prominent topographical features, flora and fauna, geology and archaeology, these little books often contain a selection of local legends. Seek them out. And for the ultimate library source, the **School of Scottish Studies** in Edinburgh has a collection of books, journals and archived sound files that could keep you busy for several lifetimes. Call the library on **0131 650 3060** or consult their website:

[www.sss.ed.ac.uk](http://www.sss.ed.ac.uk).

After all that book work, why not go out and **ask people**? Try the bakery, the butcher, the library again – “I’m looking for someone who knows local stories...” You have to follow your nose, but you will generally find that people are keen to help you, and you will often be directed to folk who have a fund of knowledge that they are more than happy to share (be responsible – keep them informed about what’s going to happen to their information, and make sure they’re happy about it). Residential homes and drop-in centres for retired people can also be very helpful. Check with the warden/manager first to see what kind of arrangements will best suit.

If you have the opportunity, work with the **local school** (see below for **uses**). The children have all kinds of links with the community, through both family and neighbours. Give them some examples of the kind of thing you’re interested in - ghosts, tragedies, awful deaths are perennially appealing - but use stories about the

place that you've already gleaned from the guidebooks etc. in the library. They'll come back with some amazing stuff, and will also give you links, if you want them, to other people in the community.

If your community is lucky enough to have a **Traveller** population, and you have contacts among them, they will be a wonderful source of local stories. These are people who, a generation or two ago, were the storehouses, the guardians of tradition, and they will probably know more than anyone else you encounter about the legends and tales of your chosen place. Treat them, and everyone else you meet in your quest, with respect.

As a last resort, if you can't find any stories belonging to your appointed place, make some up. Look at the landscape features - explore the woodlands, walk the hills, comb the beaches, think about what place-names mean - then take tales you already know, and make them fit these places. You'll just be taking part in an ancient tradition of story-making.

You can use the stories you have gathered in many ways. Here are a couple of examples:

**Storywalks** – a hill, a beach, some community woodland, part of a town which has strong traditions (shipbuilding, weaving, smelting, fabrication), can be suitable for a storywalk. Link up with community groups, health organisations etc. Do the walk yourself first, and look out for places you know have a story, but also for places you might be able to attach a story to. Basic principal: **introduction** (what the walk is about, where you're coming from, and getting other folk on the walk to introduce

themselves). Judge your pace, so that you don't leave folk behind or have them chafing to get on. Some people may just be there for the walk, which is fine. Find out who's interested in the stories and circulate among them. It can be useful to have a few **riddles** for people to ponder as they walk. Make sure you've decided on some attractive and interesting stopping places beforehand. Any local stories you've gathered may well be attached to specific locations (the Devil's Bridge, the Piper's Cave, the Grave of the Harper). Otherwise, as suggested above, make up new stories or attach ones you already know. A big tree could be the Tree of Knowledge, a hillock a Fairy Mound, that rock on the shore the place you met the mermaid. Lastly it's probably best not to try telling stories on the move - and don't tell too many long ones, unless there are comfortable resting places for your audience.

**School projects** (many of these ideas will work just as well, or better, for general community projects): if you're a teacher or a librarian, or a storyteller who has been asked to do some school work, a project centred around local stories can offer lots of possibilities. One starting point is to make a **story-map**. First, get the children used to the idea of mapping. Look at OS maps of the area and discuss symbols and place-names (it's worth finding out about these – the Highlands, for example, has a healthy mix of Gaelic, Norse, Pictish, English and Unknown. Find out what they mean – they may suggest a story). Then take several big sheets of blank paper, stick them together on the wall, and get the children draw their own landmarks of the place where they live – the river, the church (where mysterious lights are seen), the giant's grave etc, telling the stories of those places as they go (they've immediately started storytelling). Many of the stories will probably be about spooky things, but that's OK. You may also get some half-remembered “My granny told me...” Tell them to ask granny next

time they see her and, with luck, you may have started to link the project with other generations.

Back to the map. The children (or grown-ups, if this is a community project) can then make an image from their story (maybe you can afford to hire an artist to work with them), go out and take a photograph of the place where their story happened, draw a cartoon strip, write the story down, and any combination of these things, perhaps limited in size to a sheet of A4. The sheets can then be pinned in the space around the map and linked to their locations on the map using pins and coloured wool (the colours could be coded according to type of story).

Whether or not you start your story gathering with a map, once you have material it can be used in any number of ways: straightforward telling (perhaps at a special evening, along with some of those grannies); story and cartoon books; a website; song-writing; a drama or a sequence of short plays with music and song; a Flash animation on CD-ROM (which can be done very cheaply and quite quickly if you have the Macromedia software and someone who knows how it works – investigate).

These ideas for finding and using stories of place are just a beginning. Once you get started, more will occur to you, and you'll be able to tailor them to suit your own needs and those of your community.

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