

ONCE UPON A TIME...



A JOURNEY WITH STORY IN CO. CLARE

by Ruth Marshall

When I handed Network over to the new editor in 2011, the lock on my office door got stuck closed. For me it was a clear message that a door was closed on that part of my life. I took a 'transition year' to learn some new ukulele tunes, rediscover Fair Isle knitting, and do essential work on my house and garden.

At the year's end I heard from a storyteller friend about a new series of books from The History Press. They wanted storytellers from each county to write books of local folk tales. She said, "I thought of you." An ex-partner had just died and I could feel his presence around me when this message arrived. My inner "YES!" was loud and clear. The prospect of working on this new book seemed a gift from him.

One of the key things in developing a sustainable community is to have a sense of place. Over the years I have facilitated a process of Goethean art



Ruth Marshall is a storyteller, poet, facilitator, life coach based in Co. Clare. She is the author of 'Clare Folk Tales', and her previous books include 'Celebrating Irish Festivals'. Ruth was editor of Network from 1995 to 2011. She can be contacted at ruthmarshallarts.weebly.com

and science, to help groups encounter the spirit of place. This empowers them to develop land/project in a co-creative way along with this intelligence. Creative artwork, stories, poetry and inspired action emerge, as we lend the elementals and spirits of place our voices and our hands as a means of expression.

During my time of personal transition, I had found myself a little adrift, uncertain who I was or where I wanted to be - my soul all at sea. Immersing myself in the folk stories of Co. Clare served as another way of reconnecting with the spirit of the place where I live and helped me to relocate myself again. Beginning with an empty page can be terrifying - or an invitation to

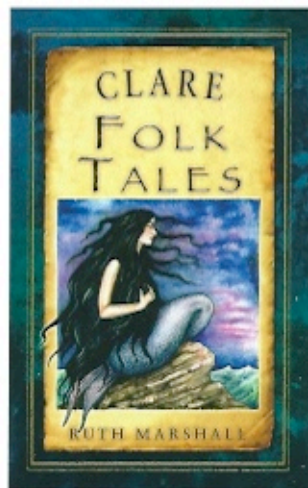
adventure. That's what I tell those new to creative writing. I dived in and dredged my memory to see what stories I could bring up from the depths.

When I arrived in East Clare as a naive blow-in in 1986 I couldn't drive and if I wanted to get anywhere I used to hitch. When you are hitching people tell you stories and ask for your story, because that's how we 'shorten the road.' I once hitched from West Cork to Killarney with a family so large they needed two cars to go anywhere together. I was in the car in front with the dad and three children. All the way through the mountains he told tales of gods and heroes. My soul was enriched by his storytelling in this

new landscape. Back then I wasn't too sure what my story was. Now I know that wherever we are there is a story to hear, whether in a small pub that doubles as a front room, or from a stranger walking the same stretch of otherwise deserted shore. Stories seep into our cells and become part of us.

I remembered stories I had heard about Biddy Early, the wise woman of Clare. She had a blue bottle through which she could tell the future. She was a red-headed woman who had at least four husbands, the last of them a man of 30 when she was in her seventies. With her cottage door always open, Biddy was loved by the people - and yet resented by certain priests. Biddy Early's cottage was only a few miles from my first home in East Clare. A young man told me that he was greeted at the gate of the cottage by a sudden clap of thunder and bolt of lightning, and ran off in fright! So it was with trepidation that I walked up the track to the tumbledown cottage that first time. Would I be welcome? I stopped nervously at the doorway to ask permission to enter. Just then a little wren flew in through the ruined window and crossed the room towards me. That was greeting enough. I felt amply welcomed by Biddy and that little brown bird. It felt blessed. So Biddy Early was the obvious starting point. I thought of all the other strong Clare women I'd heard tales about, and the outline of the first chapter was complete.

When my memories ran out, I went to the archives. One snippet I found there concerned an old woman called Biddy Collins who lived in a cabin on a bog. She had regular visits from the fairies who told her stories in the night. That is how I felt as I worked on this book. Each day I got on with the ordinary stuff of life: chopping wood, carrying water. At night, the fairies and other characters from the stories I gathered came to me and retold their tales, and helped me to use my voice to tell their stories. Biddy Collins used to visit her neighbours each day to tell the same stories the fairies had told her the previous night. Before she'd begin, she'd say, "God bless the hearers and tellers, and where 'tis told and them that's telling it." Afterwards,



her neighbours would give her food. Some probably thought her mad but to me, this was a glimpse of a woman who knew the power of story and the power of blessing.

Some stories are more focused on place than character. Many are stories of origins. One that appealed to me concerned an old woman knitting in her cave on a hillside. When her concentration was disturbed by the whoops and cries of young men hurling on the level ground below she marched down to their hurling field and stamped her foot, demanding a return to peace and quiet. When the lads did not comply she pierced the ground with her knitting needle. Up came bubbling a spring that spilled over and gushed with considerable force, flowing until the whole field was underwater. That's one version of how Inchiquin Lake was made. Other stories tell of shape-shifters: swan maidens and mermaids associated with lakes, or mysterious horses, monstrous eels, and banished sea serpents, even a fairy badger.

Stories of fairies are found everywhere, but in some places, like the East Clare townland of Glandree, they are vividly alive. Some say the name means "valley of the druids" or "valley of enchantment". I lived there myself for a short while when my son was just a toddler. In a house without running water we collected washing water from the stream running past the house, and carried drinking water from a spring in the field across the road. We hung washing on the hedge or the bars of the gate to dry in the sunshine of an Indian summer. The

Do you know what lurks beneath the waters of Cullane Lake? Or why you should never, ever, disturb a Clare woman at her knitting?

In Ruth's book you will find the answers to these and many more questions. This collection of gentle stories celebrates the landscape, people and creatures of County Clare.

Clare Folk Tales is available in good bookshops, on amazon.co.uk, and from the author, price €12.99 plus P+P.

boreens were bordered with rough stone walls, and with the fiery oranges and reds of montbretia and fuchsia, and meadowsweet's creamy lace. It was another time of in-betweens. Life with a young child was simple and magical. Fairies seemed to be there in abundance, and they are never far away when I visit friends who live there now.

Working on Clare Folk Tales, I visited the three corners of Clare, placing myself into the geographical locations of the stories. I often brought friends along for company on the long drives. It can take the best part of two hours from East Clare to reach Loop Head. I hardly noticed time fly by as I retold the stories of every place we passed along the road. It seemed these Clare stories had properly seeped into my cells and become a part of me. I had accepted my storyteller's mantle and become a speaker for this place where I have made my home. I felt truly blessed.

If you should find yourself down this way, you are very welcome to give me a call. If I am free, I will be happy to share a few stories with you, or accompany you on trips to story locations. I am also happy to respond to invitations to come and share stories with you or give a workshop in your area. For more information about Clare Folk Tales, or about storytelling, workshops, one-to-one sessions with me, please just get in touch through visit ruthmarshallarts.weebly.com

Blessings on the hearers and the tellers, and where 'tis told...