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Of Forts and Fairies[1]

Jeffrey Tolbert
jat639@psu.edu

> They are everywhere; their home is in the forths, the lisses, the ancient round grass-grown mounds. There are thorn-bushes they gather near and protect; if they have a mind for a house like our own they will build it up in a moment. They will remake a stone castle, battered by Cromwell's men, if it takes their fancy, filling it with noise and lights. Their own country is Tir-nan-Og—the Country of the Young. It is under the ground or under the sea, or it may not be far from any of us.
>
> - Lady Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*

Abstract: This article is an exploration of a particular place in two time periods: the period of my doctoral fieldwork in 2012; and, indirectly, the present of early 2022, a full decade after my initial (and so far only) encounters with the place in question. It is an attempt to think about place both in the immediate, embodied way enabled by conventional in-person ethnographic fieldwork, and in the more remote way demanded by physical and temporal separation. (The latter process, the critical work of relating to a place after the fact, is present mostly in the revisions to the original text, as well as in this introductory section and in the brief postscript.) The location in question, Fairy Fort Farm in Tipperary, Ireland, is a personal chronotope, an index of my time in a place and the subsequent years spent writing and thinking about Ireland without being there. It forms a portion of my own local cosmology, my own understanding of how I relate (and have related) to the world and other people via embodied, emplaced experiences. An important question raised by this exploration of place is the ontological status of a very particular set of "ruins": the eponymous fairy fort located on the farm. The question of their status as ruins, or possibly an imitation of ruins, unsettled my own understanding of fairy places in Ireland's supernatural landscape. Although I attempt to center my friend Michael's interpretation, the question of the fairy fort's nature remains a compelling one for what it reveals about the central role of experience in the construction of local cosmologies.

Keywords: place; fairy traditions; ruins; ontology

Introduction

This article is an exploration of a particular place in two time periods: the period of my doctoral fieldwork in 2012; and, indirectly, the present of early 2022, a full decade after my initial (and so far only) encounters with the place in question. It is an attempt to think about place both in the immediate, embodied way enabled by conventional in-person ethnographic fieldwork, and in the more remote way demanded by physical and temporal separation.[2] (The latter process, the critical work of relating to a place after the fact, is present mostly in the revisions to the original text, as well as in this introductory section and in the brief postscript.)

Bakhtin claimed that "a locality is the trace of an event, a trace of what had shaped it. Such is the logic of all local myths and legends that attempt, through history, to make sense out of space" (1981, 189). The locality that is my focus here, the farm in Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipperary, Ireland, where my friend once lived, bore (and presumably bears) the traces of many such shaping events, many such myths and legends, as well as the life of its owner. It has become, as well, a personal chronotope, an index of my time in a place and the subsequent years spent writing and thinking about Ireland without being there. It forms, that is, a portion of my own local cosmology, my own understanding of how I relate (and have related) to the world and other people via embodied, emplaced experiences (Tolbert and Rupert, this issue).

An important question raised by this exploration of place is the ontological status of a very particular set of "ruins": the eponymous fairy fort located on Michael's farm in Tipperary. The question of their status as ruins, or possibly an imitation of ruins, unsettled my own understanding of fairy places in Ireland's supernatural landscape. Although I attempt to center my friend Michael's[3] interpretation, the question of the fairy fort's nature remains a compelling one for what it reveals about the central role of experience in the construction of local cosmologies (Tolbert and Rupert 2019, this issue).

The term *fairy fort* is critical to this ontological quandary. The name Michael gave his place, Fairy Fort Farm, stemmed from his interpretation, based on his own experience, of the significance of his land's most prominent physical feature. Also known as ringforts, fairy forts are defined simultaneously as archaeological remains of a particular kind and, by some, as otherworldly locales (Ní Cheallaigh 2012, 370). These monuments, as well as natural features such as bushes or trees—like the *sceach* saved from demolition by storyteller Eddie Lenihan in 1999 (Clarity 1999; Lenihan and Green 2004)—are some of the sites still connected with the fairies, and in the contemporary world people may still avoid interfering with such places (Ní Cheallaigh 2012, 370; Ó Giolláin 1991, 211; Glassie [1982] 1995, 66). My friend Michael did not avoid his, however. Rather, he positioned himself as its caretaker, and its inhabitants truly were his good neighbors.

Yet Michael's interpretation of his place was at odds with one which might be termed "official": that of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland (ASI). The ASI, part of the National Monuments Service, maintains a database on "all monuments and places (sites) where it is believed there is a monument known to the ASI pre-dating AD 1700 and also includes a selection of monuments from the post-AD 1700 period" ("Archaeological Survey of Ireland" n.d.). At the time of writing, the ASI's interactive online map lists forty-three monuments or possible monuments in Borrisoleigh alone. The majority of these monuments are classified into fairly self-explanatory categories: ringforts,

hillforts, churches. Some, however, are listed as "redundant" records, natural, non-ancient (or even nonexistent) features mistakenly reported to the Survey. The fort on Michael's farm, identified as SMR No. TN034-018, is classified as a "Designed Landscape Feature." According to the ASI's record, "This is a 19th century garden feature\enclosure associated with nearby farmhouse as depicted on 1st ed OS 6-inch map" (Farrelly and O'Brien 2012).[4] In this system of classification, in other words, the fort is not a fort at all.

At stake here is the imbrication of the otherworld in the remains of the (human) past, a central feature not only of Irish folklore but of many supernatural traditions around the world. What does it mean for the fairies if the fort is not a fort? What does it mean for human believers? As Paul Manning (2017) has argued, ruins—the decomposing and yet somehow eternal material remains of prior human life—are often regarded as the typical and necessary habitations, the literal *haunts*, of supernatural beings. If there is no ruin (or at least, not one of the proper type) at Fairy Fort Farm, can there be fairies there? That this question mattered (and matters) so much to me is ironic: Michael himself was unfazed by my announcement that archaeologists had labeled the fort as something other than a fort. The narrative of his place and his life in it remained unchallenged by what was, ultimately, a scholarly quibble—as he called it, a "load of rubbish."

As David Hufford has argued, supernatural belief is often supported by actual individual experience and can be as rational as any other type of knowledge (1982). Nowhere is this truer than in cases where supernatural belief is connected directly to the external, physical landscape, arguably the most overtly experience-able part of any human actor's world (Relph 1997, 208). When a supernatural place remains *there*, on the landscape, the process of belief (Motz 1998) may be enriched, strengthened, anchored to tangible elements of the physical world and therefore more closely tied to lived experience. Local cosmologies—of which supernatural belief may be one small part—are similarly at least partially *emplaced*, that is, partially based on our daily experiences in place and the structuring influence it exerts on our thinking and feeling.

This article, then, explores Michael's understanding of his place, filtered through his stories as well as through my own experiences, and colored by the exigencies of scholarship. It is an attempt at deploying what Fiona Bowie (2013) calls *cognitive, empathetic engagement*, in which "one seeks to interpret the world through the categories implicit or explicit in the emic model. This act of imagination enables the observer to deepen his understanding of the life-worlds being studied, to see internal connections that might otherwise remain obscured" (707). In the end I cannot say whether Michael's fort "really was" a fort or not; but I can say, without hesitation, that it was a fairy place, because Michael knew it as one.

The Ethnographic Present: 2012

The short name of the place, the one that seems both easiest, to an English speaker, and the most revealing, is Fairy Fort Farm. Its full address is Fairy Fort Farm, Curraghgraigue, Borrisoleigh, County Tipperary. Or Summerhill, Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipp. Like many Irish places, the farm's location is less than precise. But the short English name says what needs to be said, at least for starters: it is a farm, and there is a fairy fort.

To get to the farm, you head up a little avenue off the main road from Borrisoleigh town. You pass the hostel on the way, a clean, modern little rectangle of gray stone and cement with two floors, a large kitchen, and a sitting room with an artificial fireplace and an old television. Just beyond is the home of Derry, my friend Michael's son, the yard most likely occupied by playing children or a large and loud but friendly dog. The little road up the hill—or *boreen*, more properly—is paved, but a strip of straggly grass runs down the center, and bushes and brambles close in on both sides. At the top of the hill the road hooks right, turning muddy. Around the corner to the right are the animals, the chicken coops, the pig pens, the fields. If you continue up the hill, to the left, you pass the holiday cottages, a pair of whitewashed buildings with brightly painted doors and hand-lettered signs. At the very top is the farmhouse, the home of Michael O'Donnell, and beyond that, the fort. The fort gives the farm its name and connects it in language to traditions of the fairies. The fort is smallish in size and surrounded by trees. It appears to be a ringfort, one of those omnipresent monuments thought to be defended farmsteads dating from between 500 and 1000 AD (Lynn 1975, 29–30).[5] Numerous traditional narratives frame these forts as the homes of the fairies (Ní Cheallaigh 2006; 2012).

Michael's experiential knowledge of his place—validated by his daily comings and goings, as well as his occasional sensing of the supernatural—is, in a very real sense, what makes this place Fairy Fort Farm. His experiences on the farm, his knowledge of the history of his home, and the values he attaches to the land, the fort, and the fairies, illuminate the complex relationships between vernacular and official understandings of place. I argue here that supernatural experience can serve to validate aspects of local knowledge that appear to contradict official discourses of place. Local cosmologies may in fact incorporate numerous disparate, and often conflicting, streams of knowledge, enriching the sense of place even as they confound scholars accustomed to straightforward (and non-experiential) assessments of facticity.

It may seem incongruous that a place steeped in Irish fairy tradition should have a prominent Internet presence. In popular usage, tradition, folklore and cognate concepts tend to connote oldness, rusticity, remoteness in time as well as space (Tolbert 2015, 97; n.d.) Yet I found the farm through a Google search, as clear a marker of "modernity" as any I can imagine. Its website proclaims, "***Fairy Fort Farm*** is comprised of a traditional-style animal farm, a fairy fort (to make wishes on), the Blue Star Hostel and self-catering cottages," and exhorts visitors to "Come and enjoy farm walks through the fields and meadows, by streams and moorland. You will find many different species of wildflowers, rabbit holes, fox dens, and badger sets. Breathe the fresh country air, relax, and unwind" ("Fairy Fort Farm" n.d.). The farm also has a Facebook page and a Wordpress blog in addition to the main website. If the farm is "traditional," it is also contemporary, and its owner savvy.

The farmer, Michael O'Donnell, feeds the animals, manages the hostel, and gives tours of both the farm and the fort. Born in 1948, he is of average height, with silver-gray hair. He wears glasses and speaks with a broad, gentle brogue. He built the hostel down the hill and renovated the holiday cottages, which he rents to visitors. The place is thoroughly Michael's, its previous histories woven seamlessly into his own, its smaller features—fields and fences, signs, animal enclosures, and the fort itself—all bearing evidence of his presence in and work on the land.

Figure 1. Michael O'Donnell

I first visited Fairy Fort Farm in February of 2012. Michael picked me up at Templemore Station and drove me back to the farm, and the first night we had tea in his sitting room, where he told me a little about the old gods of Ireland. Over the next three months I returned to Fairy Fort Farm three times, staying twice in the hostel and once in the loft of Michael's farmhouse. Each time I stayed less than a week, but despite the short length of my visits, I developed a strong sense of Fairy Fort Farm as a place with a specific story, animated by the presence and experiences of my friend Michael. Some days I tried my hand at farm work: I helped make a new pigsty (more through moral support than real labor), and I became intimately acquainted with an electric fence which I helped build and for whose efficacy I can unfortunately vouch.

In our first interview, Michael told me how he came to Fairy Fort Farm. Before he purchased the farm in the early 1980s, Michael owned a pub in Borrisoleigh called Phil the Fluter's. As Michael tells the story, an old man came into the pub one day and sat nursing a

Figure 2. The hostel, down the hill from the farm.

Figure 3. The farm entrance, with a holiday cottage on the left.

Guinness for a long time. Instead of paying his tab, the man repeatedly asked Michael if he would like to buy a farm. Michael was interested, and was especially captivated by the presence of the old fort behind the farmhouse.

> MOD: So when I came back, anyway, I looked and I saw what I thought was an old fairy fort up at the back. And straight away I was captivated by this old fairy fort.
> But I asked Jimmy, I said to him, 'That fort that's there at the back,' I said, 'is that part of this farm?' And he- he fudged the question. He didn't really want to answer me, to say yes, it was, in case I would be frightened. And in case it would turn me off, you see.
>
> JAT: Is that right?
>
> MOD: Yeah, because a lot of people would be afraid of the fairies and the leprechauns and all that, you see. And, he thought that maybe, if he said to me, well, 'Yes, it is part of the farm,' that I'd be saying, 'Oh God no, I don't want to buy it.' It's, you know— the little people are living there, and, I'd be afraid to— do anything with it, you know? So, instead of feeling like that, I felt the opposite. I was absolutely delighted with the thought that it would be part of the farm here, you know?
>
> JAT: Yeah.
>
> MOD: So I finally got it from him, anyway, that yes it was part of the farm. And the only way I actually got that from him was, I said to him, 'Where is the bounds ditch?' You know? So without mentioning the fort, I pointed out to him this couple of ash trees, and I says, 'Is that the bounds ditch there, where the ash trees are growing?' And he said it was.
>
> JAT: Ah.
>
> MOD: So the fairy fort was at this side of the ash trees, so I knew then that the fairy fort was part of the farm here. (O'Donnell 2012a)

The place begins to take shape. It took some doing, but Michael was able to purchase the farm. He set about renovating the old buildings, but he kept the old stove in the farmhouse. "I deliberately kept that there because I felt, that that was like the heart of the house," he told me. "As long as there was a stove in it I felt it was, like a dwelling house, shall we say."

“I knew all the other fields were there,” Michael told me. “But, the one thing that was very important to me was the fort. Yeah. I was kinda really, I felt really drawn to it” (O’Donnell 2012e). He maintains the fort so that people can go up into it and look around. He’s aware of traditions of belief against removing things from the fort, but he feels that if he addresses the fairies respectfully, his efforts to maintain the place won’t cause any problems:

> MOD: And I’d say like, you know, ‘Well I’m, I’m going to remove some bushes and some bracken here now, lads, but, you know, you don’t mind this, ‘tis all part of the whole thing, you know, and... I’ll make it up to you some other way.’ You know what I mean?
>
> JAT: Yeah.
>
> MOD: And- there’s always- I feel myself there’s always a sort of a comeback of respect to me, because I show respect to them. You know? And... While some people- now, I know a lady now, for instance, who would be afraid to go up on the fort. She said to me if her cows went up on the fort, if they stayed there forever, she wouldn’t go up and hunt them off it.
>
> JAT: Wow.

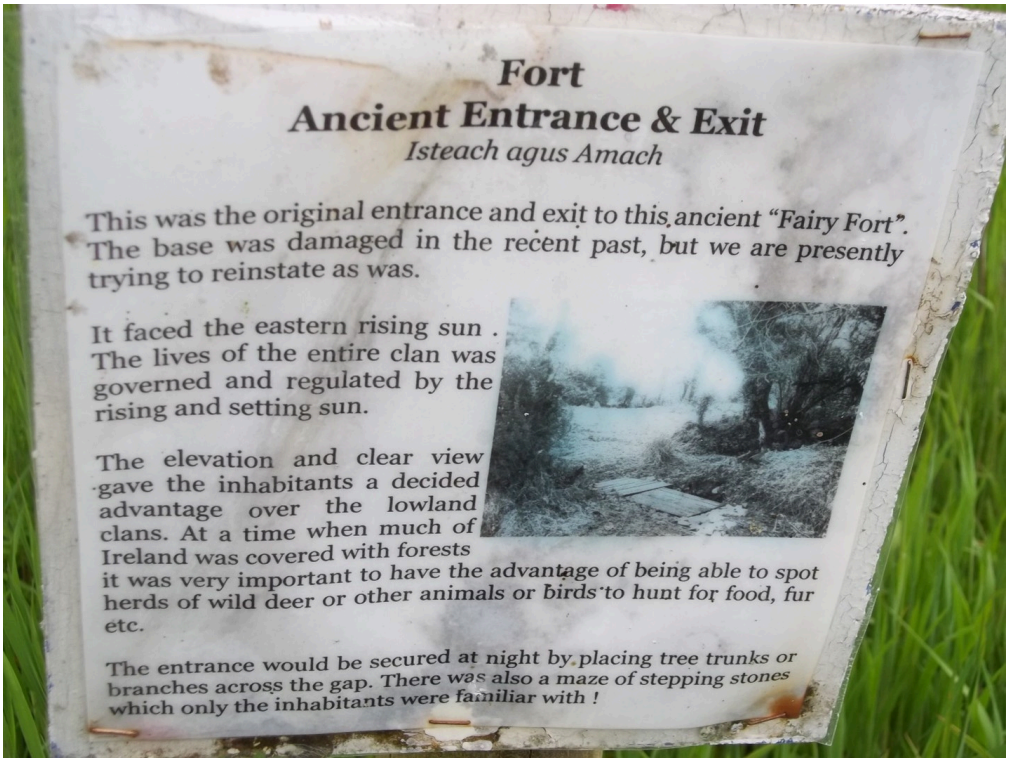

Figure 4. A sign posted outside the fort entrance.

MOD: Yeah. And, um, she says she might try to call them down, or she might rattle a bucket maybe with oats, or something like that, to get them to come down. But there was no way that she'd actually go up onto the fairy fort to actually hunt them off it. You know? Because again she'd, she'd be afraid that she'd be interfering in something that the fairies were doing with the cows, or something. Do you know what I mean?

Michael here highlights the differences between his own engagement with the fairies of his place and the larger corpus of fairy traditions, which are not monolithic but include a range of attitudes and opinions (Correll 2005, 14). His interactions with the fairies of his place, and his sense that respectful engagement with them is possible, reflect a highly personal interpretation of established tradition. He acknowledges that others have historically feared the fairies and even now avoid interfering with their places; but in his own place, in his daily life, it is possible for him to interact with the fairy fort directly without danger.

The fort is open, largely free of the trees and brush that typically grow wild in ringforts (Ní Cheallaigh 2006, 108), and even contains a few innovations of Michael's own, including a wooden teepee-like structure and a "message tree" for visitors to leave notes. The fact that I was encouraged to walk up into the fort and explore it at my leisure was itself a departure from fairy tradition (a fact of which I was keenly aware). Michael feels the presence of the fairies as he goes about his daily business, moving around his land and tending to the farm. Sometimes, he told me, on cold wet days when he is reluctant to start his work, the leprechauns dance around him and lift him up from the ground, raising his spirits with their antics. But his most dramatic encounter with the fairies happened inside the fort itself. The story involves a sick foal, and his decision to take the young horse up into the fort when conventional veterinary medicine failed to cure it.

Audio clip of Mare and Foal story (recorded by Jeffrey Tolbert) available at https://semioticreview.com/sr/index.php/srindex/article/view/69/160

MOD: I'll tell you what it was. I had a mare called Lizzie. And, she was a big mare that I trained myself, and I used ride her around the roads here. All around. So, she had a lovely foal, and, the foal- beautiful foal, but, after a very short while I noticed that the foal wasn't suckling the way he should be suckling. And, he was- he was just hanging in there. And, quite literally, hanging in there, because his head was hanging down, and he wouldn't scarper away from you when you'd go near him, the same as most foals will. All foals, in fact, that I've ever had, will always just scarper away from you when you go near them.
And I was getting very worried about it, and, I just didn't know what to do, you know? Because the mare, she had plenty of milk. And her milk tasted fine. I actually tasted it myself to make sure it

was okay, that 'twasn't rancid or anything like that. (O'Donnell 2012b)

The vet who came to the farm was unable to diagnose the foal's illness. Soon after, the weather got cold, and Michael became convinced that the foal would not survive the night.

MOD: So, anyhow, I said to Diane, then, I said, 'I'll tell you what,' I says. 'I'll bring the mare up onto the fort.' And I says, 'If you can hold her there,' I says. 'Then,' I says, 'I'll get the foal up.'
So I brought the mare up onto the fort, and I went back for the foal. And the foal was just standing in the yard, not a move out of it, and I went straight over to him, and put my arm around his hindquarters, and, my other arm kind of under his neck, supporting his front part. And I just, more or less, I suppose you could say, pushed him along in front of me. And I had to push him up the slope of the fort. I got him in through the shed, and- it was just, he was just like an old dog, or something. A quite old dog that we, had very short time left to live.

JAT: Yeah.

MOD: So I got him up into the fort, anyway, and pushed him over towards the mother. And he went towards the mother- I thought he, maybe he was going to suckle her. But, he put in the nose, and then he took out the head again, and he was— he was sniveling, and— twisting his nostrils, you know? And no sign of him suckling her or anything.
So, we both sat down on, like, the root of a tree that was growing along on the surface of the fort. We sat down on that, and, I was pondering and talking my thoughts aloud. And I was saying, 'Jesus, what will we do with him at all?' like, you know? And- it was starting to get dark. And there was a moon in the sky, I remember the same evening. But it was getting dark, and the next thing this dark cloud- I said to Diane, I said, 'Do you know something?' I says, 'One good shower of rain now,' I says, 'that, that foal is gone.'
And, I said, 'It's going to take a miracle,' says I, 'either from yourself, or from the leprechauns,' I says, 'for to cure him.'
And I said it again a second time. I said, 'It's going to take a miracle, now,' I says, 'from the fairies, or the leprechauns,' I says, 'to cure him.' That's the way I said it the second time.
And with that, this black cloud passed over the moon, and the place was plunged into darkness, and I heard like the snap of a twig behind me in the bushes. More over towards where the mare

had been standing, than, behind me. But at the back of us, at the same time.
And, the next thing I heard all this flurrying and rushing like, through the trees and the branches. And 'twas a little bit weird, a little bit frightening, but 'twas completely out of the context of what the scene had been, up to then.

JAT: Mm.

MOD: It just had been quiet, nothing moving or stirring, or anything like that. So, I said to Diane, 'Listen, listen,' I said, 'what's that?' I said. And she was kinda saying to me to listen at the same time as I was saying to her. And we stopped, anyway, and, we listened, and we heard all this carry-on going through the bushes, rustling through the bushes. And- I- straight away, it came into my mind what I was after saying about the fairies and the leprechauns.
And with that, the cloud passed over the moon, and there was like- a, kind of a beam of light came down from the moon.
And there, in front of our eyes, was this half-dead foal, and he bombing around the fort.

JAT: Is that right.

MOD: Flying around one way, and the next thing, he'd go over to the mother, and he'd go up on the back legs against the mother, and then he'd turn and fly around the other way again. And- when I say fly, I mean galloping around, you know.

The foal made a miraculous, and seemingly spontaneous, recovery. The next day Michael was unable to get near him.

MOD: And no way could I catch him. And finally, before I could catch that foal, I had to get the two of them into a small stable, and I had to get—through intrigue, and what have you—get in around for to get a rope over his neck, and I finally caught him and I put a head collar on him. And this, this was- it would be weeks later, before I could do that.
Up to that point, when I brought him up onto the fairy fort, I could walk over to him anywhere at all, and I could walk over to him without walking stealthfully. I could walk over to him very-

> brusquely, and rough, and he would just stand there, quiet as a mouse.

The narrative powerfully demonstrates the positive role the fairies play in Michael's experience of his place. The experience depended in part on existing knowledge of fairy tradition: to even imagine, even half-seriously, that a dying foal might be helped by the fairies required a prior understanding of the fairies and their power. Equally important, the narrative also enhances the sense of Fairy Fort Farm as a place, adding a new layer of supernatural and personal significance to the fort that gives the farm its name (Ryden 1993, 40–45).

Michael's knowledge of his place reflects the complex interpretive practice characteristic of vernacular religion, which involves "various negotiations of belief and practice including, but not limited to, original invention, unintentional innovation, and intentional adaptation" (Primiano 1995, 43). The significant differences between Michael's encounters with his local fairies, and the policies of avoidance that are more familiar from fairy tradition, are typical of vernacular processes of believing (see Bowman 2004, 4). Another vernacular negotiation relates to the nature of the physical fort itself, which, according to the Archaeological Survey of Ireland, is not a fort at all, but a "19th century garden feature/enclosure."

I worried about how Michael would react to this "official" knowledge of his place, but happily, my fears were unfounded. Michael's response illustrates the strength of his beliefs, based in experience:

Figure 5. Inside the Fort.

MOD: I think that's a complete load of rubbish. I wouldn't give that any credibility at all.

JAT: Yeah.

MOD: Yeah, none whatsoever. You know. I've- you know, to me it's, just, it's just quite simply a fort.

JAT: Mm-hmm.

MOD: You know? And it's not- it was never built as a feature. Maybe whoever built it the first, they put their heart and souls into building it as a safe, as a kind of a fortress against any other, maybe people or clans that might want to invade the place or whatever, you know?

JAT: Mm-hmm.

MOD: But at what stage the leprechauns came into it, I don't know. I can't say for sure, like, you know? Who knows, maybe there was a fortification of some sort there for maybe thousands of years, going back to the far mists of time.

JAT: Mm-hmm.

MOD: You know? Who knows like, you know? There's many places, like, where new castles have been built on top of what were old wooden, say, forts or whatever, you know?

JAT: Oh yeah.

MOD: And actually that's the case in most cases, no matter whether you go to castles in Ireland here or anywhere else. That, it's a natural, a natural progression, isn't it? D'you know? You have a house which is built of straw, you decide then you'll build one of clay. Then you decide later on you'll knock that and you'll build one of stone. D'you know? Later on you maybe knock the stone house and build one of brick, and, super-warm home and have all the luxuries of the twentieth century or whatever, you know?

Reasonably, Michael here suggests that physical sites, in continuous use, have built, lived histories quite apart from (though potentially connected to) their supernatural associations. The conflict between experience and official knowledge (which existed more in my head than in reality) evaporates: Michael's understanding of his place is secure, regardless of differing interpretations.

The evaluations Michael makes of these interpretations are based on his own experiences and prior knowledge.

Another vernacular negotiation is Michael's use of the fort as a tourist attraction, which could be seen as running against the traditional avoidance of fairy forts, and by extension, as a refutation of fairy belief. But Michael's belief in the possibility of respectful interaction again stems from his own experiences. It also extends to visitors:

> MOD: Most people I think are maybe hoping that by coming and visiting that, they can take this tentative step toward, maybe at some stage, maybe meeting the fairies or, interacting with them some way, or whatever. You know?
>
> JAT: Yeah.
>
> MOD: So, sometimes maybe people might be a little bit apprehensive about that at first, you know? But I always reassure them when they come by that I've only had positive experiences with the fairies. And, once I explain that to them—that the fairies aren't, they're not going to go out of their way to hurt them or anything like that—that people can feel okay about going onto the fort, but not to damage anything. To show respect for everything, not to damage anything, and not to do any- I explain to children, 'Don't do any shouting and roaring around the fort'-
>
> JAT: Mm-hmm.
>
> MOD: -you know? Because I say, you're in somebody else's house practically like, you know? The fairies live here, this is their abode, and you wouldn't like it if somebody went into your house and started shouting and roaring, you know? So- and children are very respectful of that, when I explain all that to them, you know? (O'Donnell 2012c)

Marketing the place *as* a fairy place, Michael is careful to respect it as such. And this attitude, the respect for this place as the domain of beings other-than-human, is persuasive. When Michael took me up into the fort for the first time and left me there to explore, I did not feel afraid, but was nevertheless careful to apologize aloud when I stepped on a twig. And like Michael, my sense of the place as a *supernatural* place—a place to which traditionalized beliefs about the supernatural are attached—was not diminished even after I discovered an official discourse which holds that the place is not what it appears.

Diane Goldstein, in a discussion of ghost tours and the sale of haunted houses, argues that while scholars of belief have tended to be disparaging of the commodification of culture, such culture is

in fact “multifaceted, complex, and as likely to be a site for social meaning as any other” (Goldstein 2007, 173). This is undoubtedly the case with Fairy Fort Farm, a site where experiential understandings of place persist despite contradictory official discourse and the self-conscious commodification of belief. My own experience of this place, and my friendship with Michael, would not have been possible without his efforts to advertise the farm.

Fredrik Barth has called for scholars to take seriously the kinds of knowledge that people utilize in their daily lives: “Our analysis and comparison should turn to an inspection of the differing *criteria of validity* in different traditions of knowledge and the different kinds of knowledge that are *produced* by embracing these different criteria” (1995, 67). In similar spirit, discussing the megalithic mounds that dot the Irish landscape, Tok Thompson argues that perceptions of historical continuity are important to communities regardless of academic notions of historicity: “The point is not that folklore is scientifically ‘correct,’ but rather that it contains both changes and continuities—aspects which we may term ‘truth elements,’ which at times may be metaphorical, general, or at times specific and precise” (2004, 349). What Thompson calls truth elements, and what Barth calls criteria of validity, are the experiential dimension of knowledge, created and tested through daily action, that contribute to the formation of local cosmologies. Physical places are both repositories and shapers of local knowledge. As Christopher Preston suggests, “knowledge is not causally determined by landscape, but the constructions we call knowledge do not float free of the natural world” (Preston 1999, 215). Michael’s knowledge is validated by his experience of his place, by his interactions with the land. He remains open to new possibilities, but keeps his own understanding of his place firmly in mind.

In his interactions with the fort on his farm, Michael has evaluated established, traditional or “official” knowledge, accepted those elements that are borne out by his experiences and rejected those that are not. Notably, Michael’s engagement with his fort, while diverging from tradition, is not entirely unique. Discussing attitudes toward fairy forts in 19th-century Ireland, Máirín Ní Cheallaigh writes, “The farmer who interfered with a fairy fort or associated souterrain was not only asserting either a confidence in his own ability to weather any acts of fairy vengeance or a lack of belief in the truth of traditional narratives. He was also stating his independence of the structures of belief and agricultural practices by which many of his neighbours defined themselves” (2006, 110). Similarly, Michael’s choices regarding the fort and its fairies reflect his own informed evaluations of history and established tradition. But the specific choices he makes reflect a particular contemporary attitude toward belief that reconciles elements which appear contradictory, fashioning a new and highly individualized belief system that seamlessly incorporates experiences from his own life. This process is what Peter Berger labeled “inductive faith,” which “encompasses rather than contradicts the various explanations of empirical reason (be they psychological, sociological, or what-have-you)” (Berger 1970, 57, 64–65).

Yet Michael’s most significant divergence from fairy tradition is how he frames his personal relationship to the land and its fort. “Well, I see myself as being given the honor of being a custodian of this Fairy Fort Farm here,” he told me. “And, again, I’ll get back to the word respecting and nurturing and preserving all the old, say, anything that’s of antiquity in this place here” (O’Donnell 2012d). He continued,

> But I also, in addition to looking upon myself as a custodian, I also think of the fairies and the leprechauns as those who have been here for, I suppose thousands of years, and those who will continue hopefully to be here for thousands of years. You know? And they will be, unless people become so cavalier towards them that they just level everything in their path. And just destroy everything. You know. And if they destroy everything like that, then maybe they'll destroy the fairies as well. Same as if all our houses and our cities were destroyed, well we'd have no place to be, so we would be finito too.

Tending to his place, inviting others to experience it, Michael has added to the existing meanings layered upon this small portion of the landscape of County Tipperary. The ostensibly incompatible official discourses of place, the process of commodification: these factors, while undoubtedly influencing the narrative of Fairy Fort Farm in complex ways, do not diminish the sense of this place as a *significant* place, a place where human effort, the natural world, and otherworldly beings regularly interact. Making places is therefore not only about constructing narratives and attaching them to specific locales: it involves as well a strategic weaving-together of existing narratives, bonded firmly to the place by personal experience. The addition of the supernatural aids this process by combining individual experience with the authority of tradition and the power of the otherworld.

Figure 6. Signs around the farm.

The experience of storied places like Fairy Fort Farm aligns with what folklorists call legend-tripping. This process enriches the experience of place by encouraging newcomers to add their

own meanings to the narrative(s) of place(s). Lisa Gabbert suggests that "landscapes, such as the types of landscapes visited by legend trippers (but certainly other kinds of landscapes as well, such as holy sites), are not simply passive receptacles into which meaning is put, but may actively create or shape the reality in which they participate" (2015, 162). This is not possible, of course, in places seemingly *without* stories, places which have stories we don't know or that have been forgotten. But in the case of Fairy Fort Farm, Michael's narrative is there, sitting on the land, visibly suffusing his farm, bolstered by his experiences and available for others to experience as well. This endless capacity for new personal experience, for an ever-deepening sense of place, is a fundamental part of how we all interact with places, but particularly those whose significant narratives have been in some way emphasized, called out and arranged and made accessible. Historic sites, haunted houses, childhood homes are all possessed of such significant narratives. And they all share the capacity for *being experienced*, for the creation and display of new significances. At Fairy Fort Farm you may or may not meet the fairies, but you can *try*. That possibility is part of what makes it the place it is.

Postscript: April, 2022

In the summer of 2018, my friend Michael O'Donnell passed away. His son Derry told me that he plans to continue operating the farm as Michael would have, "and keep his legacy alive" (personal communication).

To imagine Fairy Fort Farm without Michael's animating presence is to make a drastic change in my own map of the place and my own sense of connection with it. Time is as significant a factor in local cosmologies as physical place, and the changes it brings powerfully impact our understandings of the "local," however defined. Yet tradition remains a powerful structuring element, tying the changing landscapes of the present to those of the past. The farm's website, which has changed considerably since 2012, now proclaims:

> When the the [sic] sky is dark and cloudy, the Little People come out to play. They are searching for gaiety and excitement. No better way to get them jigging and dancing round than to play them a few tunes, or sing them a few songs. They love it, they can't resist ! They jump and cartwheel around the fort. Most of all they run in and out along the thin trees that cross over the moat, from one side to the other. ("Fairy Fort Farm" n.d.)

The site also indicates that visitors can even camp inside the fort itself ("Accommodation" 2016). Camping in a fairy site is not something I would have imagined without Michael's creative negotiations of fairy tradition. In this way, and doubtless many others, Fairy Fort Farm bears the signs of Michael's passing at least as clearly as the fairies'.

For Michael, the farm was defined by its fort, which inspired its name. For me, the farm was defined by Michael. His absence from the place—a place I have not seen for a decade—changes the place's nature in my mind, its *place* on my mental map. If Fairy Fort Farm is the "trace of an event," for me at least, that event is Michael's time on the farm, and my brief acquaintance with him. His absence requires a re-mapping, a reconfiguration of my orientation toward Ireland, my time in it, and the role of Michael's farm in Tipperary in my understanding of my fieldwork period.

The fort's ontological status—is it a fairy fort? Is it the fairies that make it so, or some archaeological factoid concerning the context of its creation?—is bound up in this re-mapping in complex ways. To what extent is the place still Michael's, and still a "fairy" place? Without their caretaker, do the fairies remain? In Michael's absence, does it still matter, if it ever did, whether the fort is "really" a fort? The answer to this last question, of course, is no—it doesn't matter at all. And yes—it matters immensely. The fort's status is validated and codified by the name Michael gave his place, by the life he lived there, and by the stories he left behind.

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Endnotes

1. This article is derived from my doctoral dissertation (Tolbert 2016), primarily Chapter 4.↩

2. See (Postill 2017) for a related discussion of the exigencies of "remote ethnography."↩

3. I use Michael's real name here. Michael was proud of his place and its history. Not long after he told me the story of the mare and foal, which I relate below, he called in to a local radio station to discuss Fairy Fort Farm. He also repeated the mare and foal story, the same in all its essential details as the version included here. ↩

4. To view this information, users can visit https://maps.archaeology.ie/HistoricEnvironment/. Searching for the townland of Curraghgraigue in the town of Borrisoleigh, North Tipperary, will yield a list of monuments; users can then click on TN034-018 to see the information on Michael's fort.↩

5. Importantly, the precise nature and dating of these structures, and even the term "ringfort" itself, are the subjects of some debate among archaeologists. For example, Fitzpatrick (2009) traces the difficulties with the term "ringfort" itself, including defining and dating the structures so labeled, and ultimately argues that the term be rejected by archaeologists in favor of "native enclosed settlement" (303).↩

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