

**well, water, rock: holy  
wells, mass rocks and  
reconciling identity in  
the republic of ireland**  
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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the significance of holy wells and mass stones in Southwest Ireland, as expressions of competing narratives of meaning, identity, faith and history. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and participant observation, this essay argues that these places and the ritual activities that regularly occur there reflect and reconstruct contemporary Irish identities. In an era of rapid cultural change, these places comprise a tangible and experiential connection to Irish heritage and tradition. As reflected in interviews, conversations and published documents, these places are viewed as simultaneously embodying indigenous pre-Christian spiritualities as well as being locations of a distinctively Catholic faith. At the same time, they are important as secluded locations where Irish Catholic parishioners held mass during the colonial era of English oppression and as locations of popular religion, in contradistinction to orthodox Roman Catholicism. As such, holy wells and mass rocks demonstrate the ability of sacred places to integrate and reconcile complex and heterogeneous identities.

**Keywords:** Ireland, holy wells, mass rocks, place, healing, ritual, Cork, Bantry

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It is a rare, sunny day and we are on a path leading to St. Declan's well [Figure 1]. There, we meet a man who suffered a stroke the year before and now visits the well daily to "take the water." The devotions make him feel much stronger. After chatting with us, he "does the rounds," walking the perimeter of the chapel ruins, praying the rosary and marking the sign of the cross into the stones. Finished, he blesses himself with the water, takes a drink and fills a small bottle. The well is relatively small, divided into two basins and covered by a stone structure topped with two carvings of a crucifix slowly eroding in the sea wind and rain. Inside the stone enclosure, on a small ledge, is a votive candle.<sup>1</sup>

**FIG 1**

St. Declan's Well, Ardmore, Co. Waterford.  
Photo by the author.



This essay explores how ritual interaction with holy wells and mass rocks informs identity in the Republic of Ireland, and is based upon ethnographic research, participant observation, recorded interviews and informal conversations that took place during the summers of 2003, 2004 and 2005. The bulk of data is drawn from community members in Bantry, Co. Cork, but also includes conversations and observations from nearby communities on the Sheep's Head and Beara Peninsulas and in Ballyvourney (Co. Cork), Bonane (Co. Kerry) and Ardmore (Co. Waterford).<sup>2</sup> This essay brings Irish holy wells and mass rocks alongside current theoretical conversations about the nature of sacred places, ritual and pilgrimage.

While many theorists have argued that sacred places are primarily the result of political conflict and contestation, I argue that these places point toward a different conclusion. Rather than being locations that express ongoing conflict, ritual engagement with these material places enables parishioners to reconcile and harmonize a wide array of seemingly competing or incongruent identities. This piece seeks to articulate how these places are currently perceived by their local communities. In that sense, it is not an attempt at writing history, though I provide a brief synopsis of this historical record to explain local narratives. Of course, articulating what a shared sense of place might be is tricky: impressions differ

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and knowledge of local history is disproportionately found among the older generation. However, shared narratives about wells and mass rocks are annually reinforced through saints' day rituals, so that even young people were familiar with their significance. What follows draws on the most common themes expressed and generally accepted by the majority of those with whom we spoke.

### **Location**

Located in the southwesternmost regions of the Republic, West Cork maintains a strong sense of traditional culture, language and history. It is breathtakingly beautiful, with cliff walks overlooking Bantry and Dunmanus Bays and sunsets over Bantry's historic cemetery. The region is also significant, because it is geographically far away from "the troubles" in Northern Ireland as could be. Protestants are a very small minority in this region and live alongside their Catholic neighbors quite amiably. Bantry is one of the largest communities in the region, though with a population of approximately 5,000 it maintains a sense of cohesiveness unique to smaller towns. And, it is home to several holy wells and mass rocks currently in use by its local parishioners.

There are over 3,000 holy wells in Ireland (Logan 1980: 14; O'Giollain 2005: 13). With notable exceptions, many lie in out-of-the way places, tucked into hollows, behind burns, on hill tops, beneath sheltering trees, near the shore, or alongside medieval churches (O'Giollain 2005: 13–14). Wells themselves vary widely in form: some are nothing more than a small spring, with little else to distinguish them. Others are marked by dramatic whitewashed stone structures, standing stone crosses and filled with left-objects. Consider for instance, Lady's Well at Beach near the Sheep's Head peninsula: a stone enclosure was built around the well in the mid twentieth century, adorned with tumbled stones from the beach (Figure 2). The well is at the basin of a hollow and a statue of the Lady of Lourdes looks down over the space below.

A rich tradition of pilgrimage and ritual surrounds these places. For hundreds if not thousands of years, individuals have visited wells seeking healing and renewal (O'Giollain 2005: 16–18). Practices vary, but follow a common pattern. The individual circumambulates the well, praying the rosary, stopping at "stations" along the way, a tradition referred to as "doing the rounds." Stations do not usually refer to Stations of the Cross, but are comprised of material objects in the landscape: a tree, an ogham stone, a standing stone cross, the ruins of a church (Connolly 1982: 137; Logan 1980: 69–88). Doing the rounds involves engaging with the place in particular ways: placing your hand where ancient saints left their "handprint" stamped in rock, sitting on a stone referred to as the "saint's chair," or running your finger through an indentation carved deep in stone by thousands of other penitents.

While individual visitation of wells remains important, wells and mass stones are most frequently visited on "pattern days" (also referred to as patron days, saint's days, or Lady's



FIG 2

"Lady's Well" Beach, Co. Cork. This well is the site of a large devotion every August 15. Photo by the author.



day) (O'Giollain 2005: 14). Pattern days are a collective pilgrimage, involving a short walk from village to well, where the community "does the rounds," stopping at each station to pray a decade of the rosary and mark the sign of the cross on stone. Afterwards, pilgrims visit the well, drink, bless themselves with water and collect some to take home (Logan 1980: 35–47). Traditionally, such offerings included cloth or ribbon tied to a nearby tree, or coins thrown into the well, but today such items might include medicine bottles, inhalers, baby booties, pictures, birth, graduation, or memorial announcements, rosaries, icons, crutches and, as observed in 2000 at St. Brigid's well in County Clare, a Manchester United cap (Figure 3).

Mass rocks, by contrast, are generally without adornment: large flat stones, often (though not always) located in the proximity of a holy well. The stones themselves are regarded as ancient, though their use as sacramental tables dates to the seventeenth century. The stones are relatively unremarkable—significant instead because of what they have come to mean for the people who visit them for an occasional outdoor mass. When the mass occurs, the stone

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**FIG 3**

Offerings left at St. Gobnait's Well, Glebe townland, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork. Photo by the author.



is transformed in simple ways, through the placing of a cross, the presence of the sacraments and the consecrating presence of the priest. In order to consider how parishioners ritually engage with the materiality of these places so as to make sense of their history and experience, it is helpful to consider current theoretical conversations about ritual, place and pilgrimage.

### **Theoretical Positioning**

Various scholars have argued that pilgrimage—the place itself and the rituals that people bring to it—are products of history and culture (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15). As J. Z. Smith has argued, sacred places are made, not discovered (Smith 1987: 1–10). This perspective calls attention to the role of human agency in creating sacred places. Here, meaning is projected onto a landscape that acts as a blank canvass. And, since such places are the product of history, it is argued, they are continually in process, their meanings changing as political, social and religious contexts change. Further, since this perspective argues that places are not intrinsically sacred, but



are created from the sensibilities and memories that people bring to them, they are also intricately tied to social and political power. From this perspective, sacred places become sacred because they are sites where competing narratives vie for dominance (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 8, Lane 2001: 43, Olupona 2003: 106; Stewart and Strathern 2003: 1–3).

And indeed, holy wells and mass rocks are sites where historically competing interests fought for control: Christian saints countered Celtic druids, English Protestants challenged Irish Catholics and centralized Roman Catholicism confronted an Irish folk Catholicism. Surely such a place could be described as an “inevitably contested space,” as a site “of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995: 15). What became apparent in our interviews however was that this sense of conflict, contestation and debate was not present. Rather, narratives moved seamlessly from pagan past to Catholic present, from local pride to faithful identification with a universal faith. I began to wonder: how were they able to integrate these heterogeneous identities? And how did the place facilitate that process? Rather than seeing these places as locations of contestation and conflict, it became apparent that these places are powerful because of their ability to reconcile, contain and reflect diverse historical narratives, personal experiences and political demands (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15; Hughes-Freeland and Crain 1998: 137; Coleman and Elsner 1995: 208). But how are places able to do this? What enables a place to reconcile the wide array of needs, memories and sensibilities that are brought to it?

The answer, it seems to me, lies in reflecting upon how people ritually interact with the materiality of places. Ritual engagement with place enables one to participate in it, integrating memories and meanings as one does so. Place-based rituals demonstrate an experience of place and identity which is fluid, in process, where multiple, sometimes contradictory, layers of identity and meaning are negotiated and integrated. Pilgrimage in particular with its slow, intentional travel through a sacred landscape, provides a means of physically participating with the material remnants of one’s sacred history, of creating a tangible connection with one’s past (Coleman 2004: 66; Coleman and Eade 2004: 14; Mitchell 2004: 26; Nikolaisen 2004: 98).

My point is this: while I came to Irish holy wells and mass rocks expecting to find debate, contestation and conflict—given its long history of just that—I instead found people for whom these multiple identities had been seamlessly integrated. This process of reconciliation and the integration of multiple heterogeneous identities has everything to do with embodied ritual engagement with the materiality of the place. Rituals in place allow one to affirm and identify with multiple narratives at once, illustrating that “we are not only *in* places, but *of* them” (Feld and Basso 1996: 20). Interviewees affirmed multiple and potentially conflicting aspects of Irish identity through ritual engagement with the materiality of the sacred places and objects. In many ways, it is the unchanging

tangibility of holy wells and mass rocks that makes this possible. They remain fixed features in a rapidly changing world, fixed features that have nonetheless successfully integrated multiple histories and meanings into themselves. Through ritual engagement with these sites, through placing their bodies literally within the place (and drinking the place into their own bodies), people can do this as well. The places and the people are pagan, Catholic, revolutionaries, peacemakers, fiercely local and yet simultaneously part of a global faith.

### The Druid's Well

Following our guidebook, we turn off the road and head toward a dolmen, a megalithic stone table, six feet high and possibly 5 to 6,000 years old. As we wonder where to go next, a tractor comes toward us from across the field. I am immediately nervous: where I am from farmers do not take kindly to strangers tromping through their fields. But the tractor stops and a man emerges, smiling. We tell him we are hunting for holy wells. Squinting into the sun he points toward the top of Mt. Maulin. "You see just up there? Where the clouds hit the top of the hill?" We can see no roads. No trails. "You really want to see it?" He asks, almost incredulously. After driving his tractor back home (his dog, too blind to walk rides along with him), he meets us once again and leads us on a long hike, past the dolmen [Figure 4] and up the steep incline of the mountain. After a difficult scramble, we are at the top. We are also muddy, hot and wind-blown. The well is a simple stone basin, white crosses painted above it. Coins (both Irish pence and the new Euro) are scattered in the basin. The view of Bantry Bay is astounding. Here, our kind guide explains, people used to pilgrimage on to St. John's Eve, the traditional bonfire night.

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**FIG 4**

A dolmen (megalithic tomb), found on the way to St. John's Well, near Castletownbere, Beara Peninsula, Co Cork.





As the above description illustrates, these places derive power from their proximity to material manifestations of an ancient past, some of which are incorporated within the pilgrimage itself. These material markers of history reinforce collective associations of wells with an ancient pre-Christian past. Interviewees were quick to point out proximity to ogham stones, dolmen, or stone circles. As one man said: "Quite often, holy wells are beside things from much earlier, like around these monuments and stone alignments and stone circles... Within a hundred feet of very old burials and they're dated from an age of like 1500 BC. You often find that holy wells and mass rocks, they're closer to earlier monuments" (CM). For many, the practice of worshiping at wells is seen as being part of this ancestral heritage of reverence for the forces of nature and for the land itself.

Holy wells and mass rocks are perceived as having an ancient, indigenous character and as such they are manifestations of an unbroken continuity with an earth-centered heritage (Brenneman and Brenneman 1994). As one individual noted: "Most of these wells are regarded as pagan wells, not Christian. And of course the pagan trinity was earth, fire and water. Have you heard of that? Earth, fire and water. And yes, water was very important... You're talking thousands [of years], two thousand, three thousand... going back [before] St. Patrick... going back to paganism, going back maybe 10,000 years" (SO). Many agree that ritual practices at such places provide people with a tangible link with their ancient past. As one man explained: "You know, the holy wells are descended from pagan wells... And the old pagan Irish, the Druids... They didn't think about God, but there was power in fire and there was power in water. Most of the wells you'll see about here can go back those thousands of years" (DF).

While some observers were less certain that *all* the wells had such an archaic history, everyone with whom I spoke attested to this historical continuity: the wells are both material and symbolic links between the contemporary world and a pre-Christian past. As one observer noted:

SO: Oh yes, oh God yes, they still go [to the pattern days]. They don't always walk now, they go by car but they still go. You know even people who don't go to mass still go to the wells.

SC: Oh that's interesting. Why do you think that they would be?

SO: Well, of course the wells go back 10,000 years, the mass only goes back about 2,000. It's a modern innovation you know, God forgive me for saying it.

Hence, while our interviewees collectively pointed to the pre-Christian nature of holy wells, their assertions are reinforced through the proximity of standing stones and other ancient markers. By ritually engaging with these markers on the landscape—by simply passing them on pilgrimage, or through praying at them as "stations" when one does the rounds, these reminders of an autochthonous heritage are intertwined within a Catholic practice and the ancient past is brought palpably into the present.

## The Saint's Well

We are at the holy well at Beach. Our friends are filling small bottles of water to take home. One gentleman is instructing his young son as to how to do the rounds, telling him to walk in a clockwise circle along a small incline behind the well. As he begins the ascent up the narrow path, his father points to an indentation in the stone. "Make sure you put your foot there," he says. "That's the footprint left by the saint. It'll bring you good luck."

Ardmore. After visiting the holy well we are on the beach to find St. Declan's stone. It's an enormous granite rock, clearly of a different type of stone than any other on the beach. Local lore says that the stone floated here from Wales, after St. Declan left the Welsh coast for Ireland. It followed him. The tide has left it propped up on two other stones, creating a small opening underneath: about 20 inches high. Crawling underneath (really dragging yourself, as the space is not high enough to crawl), cures backache. My back has been aching for weeks, so I volunteer, soaking myself in the pools of water left by the high tide.

Christianity may have been a modern innovation, but it too left a mark upon the land, transforming the way people experienced and interacted with places. Throughout conversations and interviews, a clear tie to an indigenous heritage was often followed by a description of the ways in which the wells were baptized into Christianity by the early saints (see also O'Giollain 2005: 24).<sup>3</sup> Through this symbolic act, the places themselves were converted to this new faith and in doing so granted Christianity a kind of adoptive autochthonous legitimacy. One observation illustrates well the way in which places seamlessly integrated these two identities:

[They] probably go right back to pre-Christian, Celtic, Irish religion... That idea of taking over what was not harmful and what was not contrary to the Christian faith in the natives' spiritual practices was probably the basic reason underlying their use... the saints that they are associated with now, could probably be traced back in origin to pagan deities or spirits... that were Christianized and incorporated into Christian worldview as saints. (TO)

Such descriptions establish the Catholic faith as a tradition that is continuous with the Irish pre-Christian past, a natural evolution of the pagan heritage, built upon the same foundations and drawing from the same soil (see Connolly 1987: 50). Elsewhere, authors have also described Irish Catholicism as, "less hostile to hydrolatry," and more ecologically focused (Rattue 1995: 62). Margaret MacCurtain agrees when she argues that, "Christianity in Ireland, since its origins in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, has been permeated by this ethos of worshipping a God-in-nature" (MacCurtain 1993: 7).

Stories frequently describe early Christian saints who baptize the well, tame its potentially dangerous spirit and convert it to Christianity. In his work on contemporary Irish



Catholicism, Lawrence Taylor records an example, wherein St. Columcille adopts a druidic well.

When he heard that [the well was known to harm anyone who touched it], the saint went boldly to the well. The magicians [druids] ... rejoiced greatly when they saw this, since they imagined that he would suffer like ills from touching that noxious water. But he, first raising his holy hand in invocation of the name of Christ, washed his hands and feet and after that, with those that accompanied him, drank of the same water, which he had blessed. And from that day, the demons withdrew from that well and not only was it not permitted to harm anyone, but after the saints' blessing and washing in it, many infirmities among the people were in fact cured by the same well. (Taylor 1995: 43)

Such stories are vitally important: the earth and water are themselves converted to this new faith. Through this rhetorical turn Christianity, which is clearly recognized as an imported faith, gains the legitimacy of an autochthonous tradition. The ability of the place to integrate this new identity enables contemporary parishioners, while visiting the site, to likewise integrate both their pre-Christian and their Christian heritage.

This is done through ritual interaction with the place: by putting one's foot or hand in the saint's print, sitting on the saint's chair, lying on the saint's bed, or crawling under the saint's stone. The place's ability to integrate these contradictory identities is reflected in informants' views regarding pre-Christian spirituality and Irish Catholicism. As one individual noted, ancient stone circles were arranged to reflect the summer and winter solstice, were intended to celebrate the cyclical renewal of life: a theme that translated easily into Christian teachings. As he noted, "so Christianity fit right in with earlier ways. [In Christianity] they met with the same stories and they made sense alongside earlier beliefs" (JC). Others agreed: "So when St. Patrick came, he didn't change the religion topsy-turvy all the sudden from pagan to Christian. He took a lot of the pagan customs and Christianized them. And he did it gently and the people weren't upset. It was slipped in nice and quietly. So the wells were part of the, as I say, the pagan past and he Christianized them" (DF).

I think that St. Patrick was the greatest P.R. man ever; because when he came over to Ireland ... he didn't condemn the whole thing. When he came to a well that had pagan connotations, he said, "Oh well, that's fine ... pagans like that place, so we'll bless it and make it a Christian well." And many of these ceremonies that are carried out at holy wells in Ireland, they go back to very nearly pagan times. (SO)

By participating in ceremonies that "go back to very nearly pagan times," rituals of place create an embodied memory that is both Catholic and indigenous. Hence, these sacred places affirm strong ties to an autochthonous past even as they venerate Catholic saints. As one individual commented, "So a lot of the Christian traditions didn't come with

St. Patrick or St. Ciaran, they came from the older Irish people. You often hear an Irish country person saying, 'Well, you get better soon with the help of God. God is good,' and they add sort of under their voice afterward, 'and the devil isn't a bad one either.' They play both sides" (FO).

Participating in a ceremony at a mass rock, or making the sign of the cross over the well, is a way to "play both sides," invoking one's identity as inherently tied to the indigenous landscape, while also sharing in a Catholic faith that transcends the local experience. What is important to note here, is that it is the ritual engagement with place that makes this link possible. The saint's footprint at Beach, or St. Declan's stone are examples of ways in which people engage physiologically with the place itself. It is the ritual interaction with the place that reconciles these identities at an experiential, embodied level. Saints did not reject pre-Christian wells but incorporated them alongside Irish Christianity's ability to reverence water, stone and fire. And hence, contemporary believers can as well.

### **The Priest's Place: Locations of Resistance**

August 15, 2005:

Mass has just concluded and people are now making the rounds. As I walk past the well, I stop. There is a weathered stone in the pathway. I've been told this is the headstone marking the burial of a priest, killed here by the English for saying mass. I hesitate for a moment before stepping over it. It's a reminder of how significant an event it is to be here, hearing the mass, in this place.

These places received another layer of meaning through English colonialism and its attempts to curtail Irish culture and religion. This began as early as the Statutes of Kilkenny (1366), which suppressed Irish language, laws, customs and even modes of dress and haircuts and was largely directed at those Norman settlers who had "gone Native," intermarrying and becoming part of Irish society (Cosgrove 2001: 134). Henry VIII continued this process, enforcing a policy of cultural conformity, demanding that Gaelic chieftains surrender their lands to the crown, receiving them back as feudal fiefdoms. In turn, they were commanded to abandon Irish language, legal and cultural systems and to speak, dress and live like the English. And of course, he introduced the Reformation to Ireland. Monasteries, the strongholds of Celtic Catholicism, were dissolved in areas under English control, their lands were given to the Church of England and Irish Catholics were instructed to pay tithes to the new Protestant church. However, outside the Pale, the Reformation had little success and friars, priests and monastic communities continued unscathed. Indeed, the Catholic Counter-Reformation soon took a strong role in Irish Catholicism, seeking to strengthen liturgy and sacramental worship, even though the Catholic Church was impaired by a loss of land and resources (Carroll 1999; Connolly 1982, 1987; Miller 2005; O'Giollain 2005).



Penal Codes were imposed by English colonial authorities attempting to suppress the practice of the Catholic faith (as well as Nonconformist Protestantism), curtail Catholic landownership and deny Catholics the right to elected office, entering the legal profession, access to higher education, or commissions in the army or navy. Beginning in 1697, Catholic clergy were officially banned from Ireland, forbidden to return, "under penalty of incurring death for high treason" (Wall 2001: 180). The ban on clergy was only nominally enforced after 1750 and was officially lifted in 1782, but for decades afterward, Catholic clergy took care to avoid confrontation with the English authorities (Connolly 1982: 7, 9, 60; O'Brien 1995: 11–12).

With the confiscation of Catholic churches and monasteries and the imposition of the Penal Codes, mass was held in stables, in private homes, in ruined abbeys, abandoned churches, or mass rocks in open fields (Connolly 1982: 94–6). These *scathlans*, or small shelters partly

FIG 5

Annual devotions at the holy well at Kilmacomogue, near Bantry, Co. Cork. Photo by the author.



FIG 6

Shrine at the holy well at Kilmacomogue, near Bantry, Co. Cork. Photo by the author.

protecting a priest and altar from the elements, were an important part of Irish Catholicism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Wall 2001: 183). In Bantry, the most prominent mass rock is directly adjacent to Lady's Well at Beach. Other mass rocks in the region are only a short walk from a nearby holy well, such as on Sheep's Head Peninsula and near St. Gobnait's well in Ballyvourney. Their out-of-the-way locations made them difficult to find and ideal places for prohibited ritual activities. As one observer noted: "Most of the wells, you can't find because they're neglected. Ancient, that they are. Kilmacomogue is grand. But generally they're neglected. And usually in back fields where they wouldn't be found. Even Kilmacomogue, it's away in the back area, back of a field behind the graveyard" (DF) (Figures 5 and 6). The well and mass rock at Beach are a perfect example: located

in a hollow, the space can hold several hundred people. Due to the unique acoustics, those within the sheltered area are able to easily hear the words of anyone standing at the mass rock, but sound does not carry outside the space. Additionally, standing on the hill above the well affords a clear view of the Bay and approaching roads (Figure 7). As another observer noted:

The mass rocks particularly would be associated with the Penal Times, because there were no church buildings, so that would be where ... the community gathered for celebration of mass, celebration of liturgy. The holy wells probably go back way, way earlier, some of them right back to pre-Christian times ... But the actual location of the mass rocks, I mean, it could be practical ... a lot of them are in fairly secluded areas, kind of hidden valleys which ... makes sense if you are wanting to have an illegal gathering. (TO)

**FIG 7**

A view from above Lady's Well, Beach, Bantry, Co. Cork, showing the hollow below and Bantry Bay in the distance. Photo by the author.



And indeed, though the Penal Laws forbade mass at mass rocks, pilgrimage to holy wells and the celebration of pattern days, these activities continued unabated. It is estimated that prior to the Potato Famine only 33 percent of the population attended mass regularly and most religious activity took the form of popular devotionals, such as pattern days at holy wells, or the occasional open-air mass. After the Famine, however, institutionalized religion was energized and a wave of conservative practice emerged: from the 1860s to the 1960s, well over 90 percent of the population attended weekly mass, while folk practices at wells and mass rocks declined (Connolly 1982: 89; Connolly 1987: 49; Miller 2005: 96). But, as Michael Carroll has argued, for Counter-Reformation pre-famine Irish it was "participation in rituals at local Holy Wells, far more than simple attendance at mass that validated Catholic identity" (Carroll 1999: 19. See also Connolly 1982: 135 and Connolly 1987: 49–50).

Stories about Catholic resistance often centered on priests traveling long distances to hold mass in the open air,



or to bring the sacraments to people's homes. And indeed, stories of priests holding mass at mass rocks in hidden locations are widespread (Brenneman and Brenneman 1994: 65; Taylor 1995: 50–1). As one man explained:

You see, we were always oppressed here by the English. They were in here all the time and the religion was suppressed. They were always trying to put down the Catholic religion. They would pay 5 pounds reward and a priests' head was 5 pounds. And they brought the Penal Laws and all this, to keep down the religion. [The wells] were secluded, very secluded. You've been to Beach? And you know how secluded that is now. They could be all around the place and they wouldn't find them ... and sometimes the soldiers found them and the priests were beheaded. There's actually a priest buried there that was killed saying mass ... And you get wells up in the mountains you know, or down hidden valleys. Those were hard times. (DF)

Here, places act as locus of memory, tangibly embodying a history that is indigenous, Catholic and resistant to English rule. As the above quote shows, materiality of the place—the physical presence of mass rocks in secluded areas—enables contemporary parishioners to weave together a complex narrative of place and self, a narrative that is simultaneously pre-Christian and resiliently Catholic.

This narrative is given flesh, so to speak, in a vital feature of these sacred landscapes: the grave of a murdered priest, killed in the act of performing mass (Connolly 1982: 138). Consider, for example, a burial described in the nearby township of Goulanes: "In Priest's Valley, supposedly whichever priest was out there was actually killed either at the mass rock or in the vicinity" (TO). Another local historian described the place this way:

As far as the mass rock near Goulanes was concerned, he [the priest] was supposed to have been killed there ... Apparently ... the priest saw them coming and said "Go away, carry on, take care of yourselves, I'll have to finish mass." So, anyway he was killed there and that's it. It takes only a man, you know, to cut off his head and take it to Dunmanway and get 5 quid for it. (SO)

Likewise, regarding the priest said to have been buried beside the mass rock at Beach: "And apparently during the penal times the priest was killed there and the grave is the stone ... That's what they say, you can't be sure, you know" (SO). Another observer reflected this sentiment as well, "There is a priest buried there (at Beach). There is definitely I think, yes. I remember the headstone used to be there one time, the stone. Well, it's actually still there, look [points out the headstone]. And he was shot from the rocks for saying mass there in the penal days, by the black and tans" (JO) (Figure 8). One woman in the nearby town of Bonane commented on a mass rock in the vicinity. The stone, she explained, marks the place where a priest was killed. "Horses came running down upon him and he didn't hear them coming. They beheaded the priest and he is buried there." Indentations on the mass

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FIG 8

Unobtrusive stone marking a priest's grave, in the midst of the path circumambulating Lady's Well, Beach, Bantry, Co. Cork. Photo by the author.



rock associated with the imprints of a saint, "collect water and it is *holy* water. Not just water. It's *holy* water." The holiness, she then emphasized, was directly related to the death of the priest. Once, she informed us, a dying woman took the water and was cured. "It cured her, because it was holy water at that mass stone, because of that priest" (AB). Through the sacrifice of the priest's life, the place has become holy and through this embedded memory of suffering and resiliency, the place speaks to the contemporary imagination of the faithful (see also Verling 2003: 78).

This is not simply a matter of story and narrative—these associations are made tangible and real through ritual engagement with place. Through pilgrimage, stepping over the gravestone, touching the mass rock, drinking the water, incising a cross, these narratives become part of embodied memory (Figure 9). The powerful presence of the murdered priest, literally embedded in the earth, transforms the space

FIG 9

Pilgrimage to Lady's Well at Beach, August 15, 2005. Bantry, Co. Cork. On this day, approximately 300 people made the walk, which takes them along a rugged path, over stiles, through fields and along stunning views of Bantry Bay.





and brings additional layers of meaning to the site. As one man said regarding the mass rock at Bonane, "Someone who dies for their faith is a martyr, a martyr is a saint and the place where the saint is buried is a holy place, where relics are found and miracles occur" (TO). These features of the landscape evoke an era of religious contest, of social and political resistance and negotiation even as they integrate these narratives within a seamless whole.

While historians debate the degree to which priests were actually suppressed, it is important that this memory of the rebellious priest, risking life and limb to promote the Catholic faith, remains so vivid in so many people's minds. The local wells on the Sheep's Head Peninsula, in nearby Goulanes, Ballyvourney, Gougan Barra, or Bonane are sacred not only because of their continuity with a pre-Christian past, but because of their proximity to mass rocks, their hidden location which enabled them to be used as covert locations for the distribution of the sacrament and because of the legendary presence of the bodies of murdered priests. The powerful presence of such features in the landscape enables mass rock and holy well to work in concert, integrating an additional layer of embodied memory found, literally, within the earth.

### Our Lady's Well

We've returned to St. Olan's stone. There is the ogham stone and next to it the well: clear water, with a stone enclosure around it and a tree that seems to be growing directly out of it. And, around the small clearing, the stations. Each marker stands perhaps a meter tall, a half-meter wide. Each bears a different Station of the Cross. When people talk of doing the rounds and visiting stations, they do not usually mean the more orthodox Stations of the Cross like these. Stations are usually rocks, trees, a ruined church. But in this place, alongside a pre-Christian ogham stone and the holy well baptized into Christianity by St. Olan, are these proper Stations of the Cross—a 19th century innovation.

There remains another important nuance to these categories of identity. These places act as representations of a uniquely Irish expression of Catholicism, an expression that exists alongside (and sometimes in opposition to) the official orthodoxy of Rome. These are sites for sincere devotion to the Catholic faith, but they also work to remind parishioners of their independence from Rome, of a uniquely local faith. As Lawrence Taylor has argued, "If religion in one sense is the most intimate expression of the local and communal, the Church certainly qualifies as an international regime... The Catholic Church has also done much to reform the local culture and even transform the landscape" (Taylor 1995: 25).

The form of contemporary ritual at holy wells and mass rocks is shaped by this history. Carroll has argued that the process of "doing the rounds" and visiting "stations" took its current form during the Counter-Reformation. Carroll contends that by imposing an acceptable liturgical format upon a folk practice such traditions received validation

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from church officials. The Tridentine emphasis on gathering for the mass was likewise emphasized during this time, but modified by the Irish populace and shaped into what became known as pattern days. In the nineteenth century however, when the church sought to eliminate heterodoxy and bring its parishioners back within the fold of established liturgy and sacraments, "the contest between church and (holy) well," became increasingly apparent, (Taylor 1995: 54; see also Connolly 1982: 143–7). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, pattern days had severely declined and mass attendance at established parish churches had become nearly universal (Connolly 1987: 42). Historians disagree about why this shift took place, but what is important to note here is that these places—and people's ritual engagement with them—made it possible for individuals and communities to integrate two potentially competing identities: local folk Catholicism (with its emphasis on sacred springs, wells and local folk traditions) and universal Roman Catholicism (O'Giollain 2005: 32).<sup>4</sup>

Such integration would be impossible without the place itself and one's bodily engagement with it. As one interviewee put it:

I suppose the primary value is local, focus sites for the local community. And, I suppose, focus sites for individuals and individual ritual that would not necessarily be connected with the whole ritual of seven sacraments, or church building, or the mass or the priests. And, then, because you've got that kind of local folk element and I suppose priestly liturgical element, they can come into competition. 120 years ago, there was a great process of Romanization going on ... a very vigorous process of trying to abandon local customs and try and bring in practices and liturgies and rituals of ... the universal church ... attempts to ... try to get rid of local customs and local gatherings and patterns and saints' days and pilgrimages. [They weren't] seen as particularly pious, because you would have huge gatherings of people, there would be a lot of drink. There would be gambling, there could be racing, there could be get-togethers, you know sexual encounters ... a bit of an ease-up. And, that wasn't necessarily favored by some of the clergy. (TO)

David Miller emphasizes this negotiation between Irish popular religion and Catholic orthodoxy, suggesting that "between the late sixteenth and the mid-nineteenth century the official Catholicism of the chapel had to contend with a popular Catholicism of the natural landscape" (Miller 2005: 98). Indeed, the places are emblematic of a distinct folk Catholicism. As Miller explains:

Embedded in this social landscape was a sacred natural landscape which sustained forms of spirituality not central to the Tridentine creeds. The Celts ... looked for the Gods in high places ... If the summits of the earth's prominences were the places to seek the gods, the orifices of the earth's surface—lakes, rivers, caves and springs—were the places to approach the Celtic otherworld. (Miller 2005: 98–9)



While Tridentine reforms sought sacred spaces that were "accessible" and "orderly," Irish folk religion called for sites that were just the opposite. Indeed, the "value of a site as a destination for pilgrimage was enhanced, not diminished by its inaccessibility" (Miller 2005: 98). At the same time, the disorderly pilgrimage to holy wells and mass rocks, "the sacralization of springs, lakes and even rain-water collecting in natural and man-made depressions in rocks (bullawns)" had the effect of ensuring "that spiritual resources were within reach of nearly any Catholic, not just of religious virtuosi and professionals," and so challenged the centrality of Rome (Miller 2005: 100).<sup>5</sup>

By praying at a holy well, hearing mass at a mass rock, or visiting the stations, parishioners are able to integrate two potentially competing religious identities: that of local folk religion and orthodox Roman Catholicism. I encountered this first-hand in the midst of my research, when I sought to interview a parish priest about the local holy wells. The Father was very polite, but declined to comment, advising me to contact the local caretakers of the well. As he explained: "They know the place. On pattern day, they get the place ready—we leave it up to them. We just come and say the mass. But it's their place" (BP).

### Conclusions: Multiple Identities in a Single Place

Places encompass a multiplicity of meanings and identities and engaging with material elements of the landscape through ritual practices enable individuals to reconcile potentially competing identities within themselves. In the contemporary era outdoor masses at mass rocks have seen a significant revival, becoming once again a more regular event (Figure 10) (O' Giollain 2005: 29). As one local observer noted: "In the last 50 years since Vatican II, there has been an attempt to kind of go back and re-explore and maintain traditions that have survived and recognize that that kind of 'let's not do this anymore' attitude was not necessarily the best approach to take" (TO). Reenacting these moments of religious subterfuge, contemporary Irish Catholic faithful share in the memorialization of their ancestors, affirm their identity as a people of resiliency and demonstrate once again their legitimate claim to the land. Through their revival in this

FIG 10

(Left) 1973 mass at Lady's Well, Beach, Bantry, Co. Cork. Photo by John Crowley used by permission. (Right) Mass at the same locale, 2005. Photo by the author.



"second life," traditional cultural activities such as doing the rounds or attending a pattern day take on additional layers of meaning, particularly within a context where folklore recovery has historical ties to nationalism (O'Giollain 2000: 174, 113).<sup>6</sup>

Community members likewise celebrate this revival. As one noted: "My brother (who is a priest) said mass at that mass stone 2 or 3 years ago. I thought it a great thing to have mass said by a local man at that mass rock, for the first time in 2 or 3 hundred years. A great thing" (SO). Another mass rock on Sheep's Head Way has recently been memorialized as well, a clear indication of its contemporary significance. The trail to the site has been cleared and marked and a memorial stone erected, reading: "In Remembrance of Our Ancestors Who Worshipped Here, Mass Celebrated 12 May, 2000" (Figures 11 and 12).

Ritual engagement with these places, the palpable interaction with well, standing stone, saint's footprint, priest's grave, mass rock or station, works to shape a cohesive sense of identity: one intimately and intricately tied to the land and

**FIG 11**

Memorial commemorating mass at mass rock (mass rock shown in background, top right), Sheep's Head Peninsula, near Bantry, Co. Cork. Photo by the author.



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**FIG 12**

Lady's Well, near the mass rock on Sheep's Head Peninsula, near Bantry, Co. Cork.





its history. These are places informed by a record of political contest, of multiple and potentially competing identities. And yet, ritual engagement with these sites shapes an embodied memory where contest gives way to cohesion. One observer's explanation puts it well:

(Mass at the holy well at Beach) ... connects into ... the whole idea of the mass rock and the whole idea of Penal Times... It connects right into the whole matrix where our religion and our nationality link and it connects into that whole idea of being Irish and being Catholic... We project that back where Catholicism was being persecuted, supposedly under the Penal Laws... And that's an example of the Irish maintaining their identity in spite of oppression. Which is a long way of saying that celebrating mass at the mass rock ties in not just to the spiritual or liturgical experience, but also into the whole national imagination or national identity. So it can be quite powerful. It's good to have mass in the open air. (TO)

Holy wells and mass stones, then, work to shape a coherent national identity, one that draws upon millennia of history and connection to place.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike some theoretical arguments on the politics of place that emphasize the essentially contested and conflicting nature of sacred places, Irish holy wells and mass rocks demonstrate how multiple identities can be reconciled through ritual engagement with material places. These places are sacred because of their ability to contain, reflect and integrate these multiple and potentially conflicting identities. It may be worthwhile to recall that such identities exist within a region of Ireland as geographically and philosophically apart from "the troubles" in Northern Ireland as can be. This is a region where one of the greatest heroes is Wolfe Tone, a Protestant and where Catholics and Protestants live alongside each other peacefully, amiably and with virtually no conflict. These places are able to memorialize the sacrifice of ancestors, affirm a legitimate and indigenous claim to the land and celebrate Irish nationalism, without provoking animosity, violence, or ill will toward those who are not Catholic. A single place is thus able to share in multiple loyalties, welcome multiple identities and engage with multiple belief-systems. The power of these places preexist any contemporary conflict: water, rock and earth, while shaped by human memory, transcend it as well.

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## notes and references

<sup>1</sup> See Stiofan O'Cadhla (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Names of interviewees have been withheld.

<sup>3</sup> Use of Saints' Lives to justify the historical consolidation of Ireland into diocesan synods, beginning in 1111 is well documented elsewhere. See Brian O'Cuiv (2001) for more.

<sup>4</sup> See Connolly (1982, 1987) and Miller (2005).

<sup>5</sup> See Lane (2001: 48) and Chidester and Linenthal (1995: 14) for a discussion of center and periphery in sacred spaces.

<sup>6</sup> See O'Giollain for a discussion of cultural revival and contemporary Irish nationalism (O'Giollain 2000: 4; O'Giollain 2005: 29).

<sup>7</sup> The value of sacred places should be considered in light of the history of English colonialism and land seizures and the long struggle to reclaim Irish land (Clarke 2001: 152–62; Hayes-McCoy 2001: 140–5; Martin 2001: 104–8; Moody 2001: 238).

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