



Finding Local Legends

by Bob Pegg

How to spot a local legend

- It's a story that is linked to a specific location – town, mountain, riverbank, graveyard, castle etc.
- It will have been passed down and around by word of mouth, and will probably also have appeared in print (see below). It's likely that people in the community will still know it and tell it, as it will be “in with the bricks” culturally.
- Beyond pure entertainment it may have a function such as: “explaining” how a particular feature of the landscape earned its name, or came to be (a giant dropped a hodful of rocks and created a mountain); strengthening and confirming the identity of a community (bold folk descended from a legendary hunter); fleshing out an event or life round the bare bones of historical detail (the Wolf of Badenoch plays chess with the Devil).
- However much it is rooted in events which can be shown to have taken place, the local legend will contain elements that can't be verified

historically and which, when looked at more closely, can often be found in other stories linked to other places.

Broadly, a local legend may not be as entirely “local” as first appears. The whole story, or parts of it, may also be found in essence in other places and other times. One of its outstanding qualities is an ability to adapt, like an organism, to a particular location, and to create within that location’s community a feeling of connection to landscape and a sense of shared history.

Where to find local legends.

A good starting point is **the internet**. Try typing in the name of a region or place, followed by “legend”, “folk tale” or whatever, and see what comes up. The results might not be very detailed – perhaps a tourism-related site – but they could well set you off in the right direction. A search may take you to www.archive.org, a wonderful site which includes facsimiles of many out-of-print antiquarian works which are crammed with local legends.

Another port of call is the **library**. Go to the “local” section and, with luck, you’ll find a treasure trove of information. There may, for example, be a volume of stories compiled by an enthusiast, and published by the local newspaper some time during the last hundred years or so. Or you might be lucky enough to find a book particularly relevant to your location, like Hugh Miller’s *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, which gives tales, mostly from the fishing village of Cromarty, that go back to the 18th century and earlier.

Your **local newspaper** may well have run a series on local legends which you can track down in the archives.

Another good source is the **guide book**. Back in the 19th century, when railway and steamer tourism was at its peak, it seemed that every stopping place produced its own guide book (and local newspapers were often the publishers). Along with details of accommodation, local history, prominent topographical features, flora and fauna, geology and archaeology, these little books, which are often in local libraries, frequently contained a selection of local legends.

After all that book work, why not go out and **ask people**? Try the baker, the butcher, the library again – “I’m looking for someone who knows local stories...” You have to follow your nose, but you will generally find that people are keen to help you, and you will often be directed to folk who have a fund of knowledge that they are more than happy to share. Residential homes and drop-in centres for retired people can also be useful places to visit in your quest. Once you know a couple of the stories, you can use them as cues to start a conversation.

If you have the opportunity, work with your **local school**. The children have all kinds of links with the community, both through family and neighbours. Using stories that you’ve already gathered, give them some examples of the kind of thing you’re interested in – ghosts, tragedies, awful deaths are perennially appealing. They’ll come back with some wonderful stuff, and can also give you links, if you want to pursue them, to other members of the community.

Bob Pegg

catsback@gmail.com