

Father Moore's Well: An Appreciation.

Ronan Foley, Department of Geography, NUI Maynooth.

In 2007 I was planning the writing of a book on healing waters in Ireland¹, and thinking about what kinds of places I should include. It was always my intention to start with a chapter on holy wells. Given there are around 3,000 of them on the island, I thought I should narrow it down to around ten wells that I would study in detail. As I thought about which wells to study for the book, a number of Maynooth colleagues assumed I would include Father Moore's, especially given its importance to Kildare people. At the time I knew nothing about the well or even where it was, but armed with instructions I chanced upon the well in 2008 for the first time. I visited it in early September and heard for the first time the story of the hat. Just as importantly I met a group of people at the well, one of whom told me that he had been cured of a chronic back condition after wearing the hat. For an elderly man who had been flat out in the Blackrock Clinic the week before, he seemed to be well able to play with his grandchildren. Quite apart from the story, the mix of visitors to the well that day; old and young, settled and traveller, reverential and curious, inspired me to revisit the site regularly and also look at it in more detail for my book. This short piece is not intended to be a history of the site but rather a brief appreciation of the well and to emphasise the importance of Father Moore's and wells in general to Ireland's cultural and spiritual heritage. In addition it is a testament of gratitude to its various guardians, the committee members and their families and the ongoing care of Father Moore's hat by the Forde family.

As a lecturer in Geography at NUI Maynooth, I have a particular interest in places associated with health and their histories. While sites such as holy wells, but also other healing water sites like spas and baths, have lost much of their earlier significance, they linger on in people's lives and actions. Geographers have also become very interested in recent years with the notion of *deep mapping*, the gathering together of stories about small places and the people who lived in those places and the actions and events that took place there. While history often seems to be written about and for famous or wealthy people, it is lived and experienced by much larger numbers of ordinary people, who to me seem to be just as, if not more, important. In Ireland and in settings like holy wells in particular it is precisely the stories of the well, the legends, the cures, the *pisreógs* and *dinnseanchas* (place myths) which make them what they are and which deepen the significance of a place in people's lives. So it is at Father Moore's, where countless generations of Kildare people since 1826 have kept the well and its stories alive. Yet every additional visitor brings a new story of their own to the site and sustains and renews that tradition and history.

For me the history of Father Moore's Well is precisely the kind of deep mapping which deserves to be recorded. The history of the well is partially described in the 1937 Schools Collection held in archive form at UCD, where it is noted;

'At Rathbride, there is a well esteemed holy well. It was formerly named from St Brigid, less so now and is generally known as Fr Moore's Well There is a stone crucifix 3 feet high placed beside the well under a bush, four wooden crosses stand at some distance back from each other around the well and a number of ex-visitors crutches etc. have been left by pilgrims as memories of services obtained. The place is still much resorted to and *several cures* have been effected. The former name of the well was Black Well or St Brigid's well'.

What this quote shows is that the site is much older than Father Moore, but it is his name that is now attached to it. This is common in a lot of wells, where the old name, and even at times

¹ Ronan Foley (2010) *Healing Waters: Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland*. Farnham, Ashgate.

the location, has shifted over time but the deeper history and spiritual reputation of the place remains defiantly the same. An old image of the site also exists from the account by Walter Fitzgerald² which records the original location of the well in the pool to the left of the current site (Figure 1). This image also shows the discarded crutch or cane, a global symbol of the 'cure' at a whole range of watering sites world-wide and as likely to be found in the Canadian Rockies or the South of France as in rural Kildare. So the stories and the images associated with Father Moore's are both local and global and of much wider significance than we sometimes give them credit for. They also record the ongoing stories of the 'cure' and the power of particular people and places to provide healing.



Figure 1. Image of the Original Well site, c 1914.

This idea of a mobile site is also visible in the present day as new visitors leave their marks, literally on the site, through the left offerings of rosary beads, pictures, personal objects (soothers, flowers, candles, boots, hair ties, paper flowers). Every time you visit, the objects change slightly, older ones are removed or decay, newer ones take their place; some are moved into the ditch at the side or blown away on the wind (Figure 2). Yet the essential power of the place remains the same, and each visitor has their own reason or memory of the site, their familial or even communal link to it. So the well can invoke a mixture of feelings in visitors, both joyful and painful, yet always honest and real, which in part accounts for its ongoing popularity and importance.



Figure 2. Views of the Shrine in 2008 and 2010

² Fitzgerald, W. (1914), 'Father Moore's Well', *Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society* 7:5, 329-332.

The well is also especially popular with the Travelling Community who have their own deep affinity with the site and its open and natural setting and regularly bring children there to be blessed or leave wooden crucifixes to commemorate loved ones. Finally, small written notes found at Father Moore's and at other wells, speak to their emotional importance in people's lives. These are usually associated with health concerns and are a testimony to the belief that people entrust to the well and its healing powers. Words encountered in the notes include reference to 'help in a speedy recovery ... a good outcome for our baby ...to help people get over their lost brother'. The well itself receives generous donations, which are used to both maintain the site but are also given out to various charities at the end of the year, a worthy outcome which provides a curative benefit of its own. Indeed the charities that benefit are both local and global (such as NGOs working in the developing world), so that the impacts stretch way beyond the well walls.

The history and reputation of Father Moore's Well live on into the new decades of a new millennium. There is a renewed interest in wells with visitors from both Ireland and beyond taking a genuine interest. Visiting US academics have visited the site, while my own students tell me stories of how they were brought to the well as small children by their parents and grandparents and grew up with stories of the hat. It is also the intention of myself and some colleagues to revitalise a website called *Sláine*, to try and record the locations, stories and experiences associated with Irish holy wells more generally and the plan is to get this up and running later in the year. Another NUIM scholar, Laurence Taylor, studied wells in Donegal and talked about the power of the stories to keep places alive such that no places could exist that were entirely silent. While the silence and stillness at Father Moore's Well is at times a blessing, the site itself will never be mute as long as the people of Kildare sustain it in their small stories, daily visits and deep memories.