

Transcript of Podcast 057: Myths and Legends

{Intro -

{NAT - I am a proper sucker for myths and legends. If there's a myth or legend about a place, I want to hear it. I absolutely love stories of things like that.}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a fortnightly series looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Brit with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

We're quite into Spring up here in Scotland, which means we've had some days of nice weather; comfortably warm (mid-teens C), dry, sunny, slight breeze, very pleasant. Great for walking, which I've been doing a bit of lately. Partly because the daylight lasts a while up here between the equinoxes, and partly because this year I've been feeling quite fart and unfit. I've realised the advantage of dungarees is that they fit far more casually around the waist and I don't need to worry about tight trousers. The disadvantage is the extra hassle it is to have a wee.

I'm recording this pod a week and a half in advance, despite it being at least two weeks late in the first place. Part of me is hoping the two cancel each other out. Obviously, they won't.

I've had a very tiring few weeks, culminating in four days filled with that most awesome of combinations: walking, beer, and friendship. Albeit sandwiched between two overnight buses. I know why I take the overnight buses - it's because they're cheap. It's not just the cost of them themselves, although £19 for a bus as compared to £75 for a train is itself a huge cost saving; it's also the saving of accommodation costs too - if I travel overnight I don't need to spend an extra night in a hotel at the destination - plus it maximises my time. When you're travelling between Glasgow and London, even the train can take upwards of 5 hours and if you're travelling in the daytime, that's 5 hours less time to spend exploring. Or, it must be said, drinking socially. The downside is that I'm around 6'3", or 1m90, and buses/coaches aren't an ideal place to spend 8 hours, especially if you book the seat with extra legroom and then get shunted onto a coach that doesn't have any, for efficiency. I mean, okay so I got back to Glasgow over an hour earlier than I was due to, but at what cost to my legs, and my mental health. I barely sleep on buses at the best of times. Still, it cleared my podcast backlog. And it's more comfortable and less hassle than an aeroplane.

London itself was grand. I spent the time with my friend Laura, who long-time listeners to this pod will know well. On the Friday we walked around Kensington, the Saturday saw us in the City of London, and the Sunday had us going to Hampstead Heath, Primrose Hill, and explicitly not Camden Town. Despite the Sunday being Easter Sunday, and despite the weather being pretty good, there were far fewer people on Hampstead Heath than we expected, Or maybe it's just so big that we didn't notice them. On the Monday we took a day trip to the cute ex-seaside port of Rye - once one of the main ports on the Sussex and Kent coasts, the harbour silted up a few centuries back and it now lies a couple of miles from the sea. This has preserved its mediaeval charm. It's full of cobbled streets, old stone cottages, and tourists.

I realised, by the way, I forgot to mention in my last episode that a month ago, on the last weekend in March, and at the start of my busy few weeks away that meant my last podcast was a fortnight late, I did some hiking in Yorkshire. The local branch of The Yes Tribe, that bunch of life-affirming people who inspired me to do the Hike Across Great Britain in the summer of 2019, had arranged to take a day hiking the Yorkshire Three Peaks. These are nominally the three highest mountains in Yorkshire, and are close enough to each other that it's possible to hike them all in a loop in the course of a day. A long day.

I'd only been up one of them before - Pen Y Ghent - on that British Hike as the Pennine Way goes right up it, and my experience then had been in torrential rain and with views from the trig point at the top that just about reached the bottom of the trig point. The other two - Wharfedale and Ingleborough (which both sound more

like they should be small towns rather than mountains) - are the other side of the railway and the main road, and we only saw them in the background on that Hike. Each of the mountains is around 700m high, and while you're not attacking them from sea level each time, all three are certainly quite a strenuous effort, albeit in different ways.

The loop tends to start at the village of Horton-in-Ribblesdale and the generally accepted route is around 24-25 miles. The aim is to complete it in daylight, and I'm happy to report we technically did; we set off around 7.40am, and it took us a shade over 11 and a half hours; we didn't need head torches at any point and it only became too dark to see pretty much only as we arrived back in Horton. There was a good group of us doing it - 12, 13 or so - and we kept pretty much together. And having quite a few people around made it an easier journey, as we could chat to each other, motivate each other, and so on. Doing it alone is definitely possible, and I'd've probably have been quicker, but I think parts of it would have been just that much harder, mentally.

It was definitely an enjoyable day, though I did think afterwards the whole concept felt a bit like a tick-box exercise, and I wonder if you'd get more pleasure out of it by going up each one separately and taking time to enjoy the experience.

And no, I didn't do it barefoot. There's an awful lot of gravel and scree on them there hills.

I am sure though if I'm remembered in a couple of hundreds years time, tho heck knows why anyone would, there'll be myths and legends around me, my adventures, and my barefootedness. There was a late-period Viking King, Magnus Barefoot, I've mentioned him on my pods about Scotland as he was an important figure in the history of the West Coast, one of the myths about him is he got his name from always riding into battle barefoot. It's more likely though it's a synonym for 'bare-legged' (ie wearing whatever the 11th Century equivalent of shorts or capris were. Much like the dungaree shorts I'm wearing as I write this pod actually). Though I'm not about to rage into battle holding a sword aloft. I doubt I have the strength to even do that, though my arms are stronger than they were this time last year, at least.

But myths and legends are strange things. They might start with a kernel of truth, and end up being a whole bloated mass of competing stories and highly improbable events. I'm sure part of it is just some very good spin-doctors, but also, especially with both oral tales and stories of the common citizen, if anything gets written down at all it's been lost in time, so every retelling obscures the truth just a little bit more, and that's even if the original memories are accurate anyway. We see it even today with memes, with children's games, with little things half-remembered that were deemed either too unimportant to make a permanent note of, or possibly the other way, things so common, at least amongst a subset of the population, as to be wildly understood at the time with the expectation that they'd be always remembered. What does the childhood game 'Oranges and Lemons' mean? Will anyone in 200 years time know how the Loss Meme originated? What were, in terms of 1990s teen culture, a "Friendship Book" and the related "Slam"? [In terms of the latter, I've probably still got a couple somewhere.]

This podcast episode is not going to answer those questions. Because it's clearly not my remit. However we will be talking about a few interesting myths and legends that are of particular interest to me and a couple of friends, either because they're local to where they live or grew up, or because they're things that they've found out about and are fascinated by.

One example of the former comes from my friend Dayna, who grew up in Michigan, in north-central USA. Here's a couple of tales from there to get you in the groove.

[Dayna

So myths & folklore has always been kind of my thing ever since I was kid, it's something I always find fascinating. One specific to Michigan are the Nain Rouge, it's French, translated it means 'Red Dwarf', it is specific to Detroit Michigan. Supposedly the appearance of it is said to foretell misfortune of some sort, either on a large scale or a small scale. But according to folklore, Detroit's founder, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, [which side note: there's also a city called Cadillac in Michigan] was told by a fortune teller that he was going to run into this creature and that he should appease it. Like, in no uncertain terms 'do not antagonise'. Unfortunately for him at leats, he didn't listen, and upon encountering the Nain Rouge, Cadillac smacked it with his cane, like any dumb white male, and shouted 'get out of my way you red imp'. Frankly, anyone that's even vaguely familiar with fairy-folklore knows that's a giant big no no, we call them The Good Folk for a reason. And he, according to the folklore of course, as a consequence had a string of really bad luck. He was charged with abuse of power which, if it's true he's smacking people in his way, that doesn't surprise me, and he

was reassigned to Louisiana. Later he was returned to France where he was briefly imprisoned, and eventually lost his entire fortune.

Detroit currently now has a festival for the Nain Rouge, but it's not really celebrating the creature, or imp. The guy that started the festival, he puts it out as it's more of a giant cathartic process for Detroit to yell at either someone dressed up as the imp, or they'll have effigies, and just yell and say 'get out, go away, you're causing all the badness in Detroit, leave'. I know in earlier festivals of it they used to burn effigies, I believe they shut that down due to safety reasons. But that's basically what the festival is, kind of like the Grampus festivals that pop up, but does not celebrate the Nain Rouge. There is a counter-festival for the Nain Rouge, and they come out and protest, and say 'hey the Nain Rouge is a good guy and we should all come together', basically going back to the folklore and saying 'hey the fortune teller says to appease this person, not yell abuse at it'. But that is Detroit's own Nain Rouge.

Michigan also has its own version of a werewolf, called the Michigan Dog Man. It has been popping up since about 1887 in Wexford County, that's where it was first allegedly witnessed. According to the folklore it appears in a 10 year cycle and falls on the years ending in 7. Basically it's kind of your basic typical werewolf, 7 feet tall, bipedal canine like creature, torso of a man so it's a little bit different, supposed to have blue or amber eyes, and it's basically seen in several different locations, but primarily in the NW quadrant of the lower peninsula.

We also have another folktale in lower peninsula before we pop up to the UP. It's a little bit sadder tho, it's called the 'melonheads'. These are basically children that were supposedly residing in around Felt Mansion, southern forest areas in Ottawa County. According to the story these children had hydrocephalus, basically giant bulbous heads. And they lived at the Junction insane asylum by the Felt Mansion,. The way the story goes is, after enduring a lot of physical and emotional abuse, which I think most of us know that these asylums did tend to do, maybe it was done in a well-intentioned manner, but it still happened, but after enduring this they became feral and there's two stories, one was that they just broke out or were released into the forest surrounding the asylum, the other is that they basically attacked the doctor that did all this heinous stuff to them and either ate him or cut him up and hid his body around Felt Mansion,. Now, the Allegan County Historical Society that is in that area asserts that there never was an asylum but there was a prison up there at some point so maybe it still has some truth, I don't know, really it's more of a urban legend that teenagers tell themselves, you know, you'll go up to the area, if you park your car supposedly they'll come out, something that you kind of just do for fun. However because the legend is still pretty well known about Michigan, it has become the subject of a 2011 film called 'The Melonheads'.. You will also see this folklore pop up in Ohio and Connecticut, oddly enough.

Going outside the lower peninsula, going into the upper peninsula, Michigan has sightings of Bigfoot, believe it or not. Bigfoot is not just in the Pacific NW, he apparently also likes to hang out in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan,. And along with him, since we're going to mention some of the more famous ones, apparently Loch Ness is not the only loch with a possible sea-monster, Michigan has their own, Pressie, who is known to be in the Presque Isle River, and supposedly exists, it's like white-tailed, horse-headed creature that's found in Lake Superior. And the Great Lakes are known to be pretty treacherous at times, deep, I mean Gordon Lightfoot did write the Edmund Fitzgerald and say the lake does not give up their dead. And that is very true.

So who knows, maybe we're hosting a lake monster as well. Doubtful, but you never know.

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When I was growing up, I lived with my uncle. And he was born in 1954, so the 70s are his decade. A fact that resonates in his music tastes. He's not the sort of person to listen to Taylor Swift. He even got bored of Bruce Springsteen sometime around 'Streets of Philadelphia', and thinks Genesis stopped being listenable when Peter Gabriel left. Listener, I don't know if you've ever listened to mid-70s Genesis, but if you like songs like 'Land of Confusion' and 'Invisible Touch', you'd hate how they started, with tracks like 'I know what I like in your wardrobe' and 'The return of the giant hogweed' (which, at over 8 minutes, is now the soundtrack to my recent experience in the Forest of Dean) that will alienate you immeasurably.

Anyway. Apart from prog-rock, he's also a fan of 1970s English and Celtic folk-rock. You know, Fairport Convention, Albion Band, Alan Stivell, Dick Gaughan. If you've never heard of them, don't frettle. Folk music is generally all about only one of five topics: sex, death, beer, harvesting, and piracy, Often several at once. It tends to be either very upbeat and cheerful (and what few nuts that poor girl had, she threw them all away' #NoContext), or incredibly depressing ('and for murder of this pretty fair maid, a hanged I shall be').

Obviously, the whole genre of music lends itself well to folk tales, and therefore to myths & legends. One of the first songs I remember hearing that combines this was the rendition by Fairport Convention of the tale of 'Tam Lin', a tale from the Scottish Borders of a man who is charmed by the Queen of the Fairies to take the virginity of any woman who passes through the woodland (at Carterhaugh - a real place, consisting of maybe two houses and a river junction), and who eventually will be donated as a tithe to Hell. Anyway, one day this woman called Janet turns up nonchalantly, and Tam Lin falls in love, He does The Deed (curiously, never actually specified in the tale; it's purely magic, of course), and then because he realises he's in love with her, tells her what she needs to do to outwit the Queen of the Fairies, and enable them both to live Happily Ever After. This being one of the upbeat tales, the convoluted plot (which at one point involves him being turned into, in succession, a snake a lion, and, of course, a naked knight) succeeds, and the Fairy Queen is defeated.

As an aside, this contrasts with the second legend I heard, from the same album, that of Matty Groves, which can be best summarised as: Lord and Lady have unhappy marriage. Lady seduces commoner while Lord is away harvesting. Lady sleeps with commoner. Lord finds out and interrupts them in the act. Lord challenges commoner to duel, with very favourable conditions to commoner. Lord wins. Lord tries to reconnect with Lady. Lady tells Lord to fuck off (which, when you've just seen your hubby kill your lover, and is still holding the sword, . Lord kills lady, with lots of remorse. There's also the feeling that, when you're lying naked in bed with your boss's wife, and your boss rushes in, complete with sword, the one thing you don't do is answer back and be a smartass. Matty Groves had balls, that's for sure, possibly too much so. All very odd, especially to this aroace,

Sex. Death. Harvesting. That's quite a tagline.

Anyway.

One of the bands he has been particularly fond of are one called the Horslips, a name created apparently because one of the band members tried to say 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse' but was drunk and ended up saying 'the four poxmen of the horselips'.

The 70s were a special time. And I use that word quite politically incorrectly.

But. The Horslips are important to this podcast because they were a folk/rock band who did a couple of concept albums in the 70s based around legendary and semi-mythical stories. As many bands did, to be honest, but the Horslips were Irish and took their inspiration directly from Irish mythology, telling those stories through the medium of guitar. They did two in particular - the second being 'The Book of Invasions'. This was based on the tales in a collection called the Lebor Gabala Erem (Pron Leh-bore Gab-arla Erenn), which contains myths around the repeated conquest of Ireland by people from the sea (although given that one of these invaders is described as being the granddaughter of Noah, one wonders how authentic they are), including the Cessair (pron Kess-air), the Fir Bolg, and the Tuatha De Danann [pron. Tooah Day Danaan] (this latter name means 'people of the goddess of Danu'). Each group is in turn conquered and either wiped out or forced to flee, until the final group to invade, the Milesians, defeat the Tuatha De Danann and decide to, er, partition Ireland (don't worry, this time it turned out well); the Milesians keep everything above ground while the Tuatha de Danann can keep everything below ground. As such, the Milesians become the Irish (well, the Gaels, at least, the early Irish), while the Tuatha become ... the Pagan gods, which is an interesting negotiation strategy, to be fair. 'Danu' herself is relatively unattested but people have tried to link her with the Celtic water and mother goddess 'Don', which not only explains the popularity of River Dons in the British Isles but also links back to a very ancient Hindu goddess Danu, the Sanskrit word for 'rain'. It's also a possible origin of the Irish usage of the forename 'Dayna'. I'm not saying my earlier contrib was from a goddess, but, well ...

But I digress. As usual. [it's not an accident my Dayna contributed to my podcast on neurodiversity...]

An earlier album The Horslips made though was simply called 'The Tain'. This is but one part of a whole series of related legends in Irish mythology, dating from around two thousand years ago, called the Ulster Cycle. The Tain itself is the tale of the Cattle Raid of Cooley, or what happens when two powerful lovers get into a pissing contest about who has the best cow - remember folks, cows are dangerous - but there's a whole wealth of backstory and context as well.

Part of the backstory is around the goddess Macha, and this is a name we'll come back to later. The Ulster Cycle tells about how she was commonlaw-married to an Ulsterman (apparently called Cruinniuc [pron. Crunniac]), and she was noted for her speed. While in this relationship, Cruinniuc grew rich, and ended up in the circle of the King of Ulster (probably Conchobar Mac Nessa [pron Conka-vuh Mcnessa]). When he organised a festival, they attended, despite Macha being heavily pregnant, but Macha's instructions went

unheeded when, after alcohol, obviously, Cruinniuc boasted his wife could beat any of the King's horses in a race. The King called his bluff upon pain of death, and Macha was forced to race. Though she won, she gave birth at the finish line (to twins), cursed the men of Ulster to suffer 'like a woman in childbirth' at the time of their greatest need, and then promptly died, at least in that part of her mortal form. Her curse will become important later.

King Conchobar has his own mythologies, outwith the Ulster Cycle, but one such within is around a woman called Deirdre, who he kind of has a crush on even from the time of her birth, which, you know, but still. He keeps her isolated until she comes of age, for that purpose, but she elopes to Scotland with her lover Naoise [Pron. Neesha]. The King sends troops after them but although they're harried, they keep moving on and don't surrender. Eventually the King tricks them by sending a chap called Fergus Mac Roich [Pron Fergus Mac Roych] to invite them back home with a guarantee of safe passage, but manipulating events to separate Fergus and Deirdre on the journey from everyone else, and ensuring Naoise's murder, This was done without Fergus' knowledge, and one of the people murdered was Fergus' own son. Unsurprisingly he doesn't take kindly to this, and flees in exile to the neighbouring Kingdom of Connacht. He will return to the story later. Meanwhile Conchobar married a very pissed-off but resigned Deirdre (she has no-one else), who spends her life being aggressively miserable before eventually telling Conchobar what she really thinks of him, and then killing herself.

Meanwhile, in another story of the Ulster Cycle, King Conchobar has a nephew, Setanta. His whole childhood is itself subject to many myths and legends, not least his birth which mostly involving the warrior-and-craftsman god Lug (one of the Tuatha De Danann mentioned earlier) who later does a Darth Vader "I am your father" revelation on him, but one small aspect was, due to circumstance, he was born literally just beyond the Ulster border, in the Kingdom of Meath. That's just a minor admin issue though. Another thing to bear in mind is, due to his slightly unusual birthing, he had a series of foster-fathers, including his uncle the King, but also Fergus Mac Roich, mentioned earlier. This, too, becomes relevant.

With regards to the Ulster Cycle though, one of the important myths comes from his youth. There was a smith called Culann, and he hosted a party to which he invited the King. On his way there, he encountered his nephew, who was playing a game of hurling, and invited him along to the feast. Setanta said he'd come once he'd finished his game. The King accepted this and went on his merry way to the party. Now, Culann was a well-to-do man and to protect his property he had a fierce and powerful guard dog, probably more akin to a wolf in all honesty, about whom, yes, there are myths. Anyway, once everyone was at the party, Culann released his wolfhound to guard them all; the King having forgotten to tell Culann his nephew would be along later, even when asked. Obviously then Setanta turned up, found everything locked, and then saw a fierce devil beast about to savage him. I don't know how much you know about hurling, but it's a Celtic sport, played on grass with a ball, but similar to hockey in that you use a stick to hit the ball. Or each other. It's generally not the safest game in the world. Modern rules specify the use of a helmet, but don't seem to obligate shinguards. I would. So, here you have a savage wolfhound coming face-to-face with a tweenaged demigod wielding a hockey stick. Probably a good battle, but one obviously won by Setanta. However, when the party realised what was going on, Setanta was very contrite and apologetic, and offered to serve as Culann's guard dog until such time as Culann was able to obtain another mythical wolfhound. One assumes he didn't actually *become* a dog (tho I'm sure there's an overlap between Furies and Irish mythology nerds), and merely served as an overly-active security guard, but it's hard to tell. But as a result of this hands-on form of work experience, he was given the nickname 'Cu-Chulainn' - or 'hound of Culann', and became well known for his own ferocity and battle prowess. In a later tale he's sent to Scotland (specifically, the Isle of Skye) to be taught battle skills by the goddess Scáthach (Pron Ska(k)h-Ha), who my friend Dayna often named herself after in early online days.

All this backstory sets the stage for the main tale, all about cows.

Medb [pron 'Methuv' (chainsaw 'th' not snake 'th') or 'Mayve' depending on dialect], the Queen of Connacht (in the west of Ireland) is lying in bed one night with her husband, Ailill [pron 'AL-ill'], when they start to discuss which of them is the richest. Because that's obviously what lovers do, vibrators and handcuffs not having been invented yet. Anyway, it turns out the only difference between them is Ailill owns the great fertile bull Finnbhennach [Pron. Fin-VENNug. Kind of]. Medb decides the only way she can top that is to 'borrow', and the actual meaning of that word is the cause of everything that happens next, the equally fertile Donn Cualinge [pron Don Cooley] from its owner in the east of Ireland, in the kingdom of Ulster.

Her intention is to borrow it for a year, but the unspoken words are that she'll take it by force if she's not allowed to borrow it. Unfortunately these words are spoken when the party she sends to collect get drunk and

accidentally spill the beans. The deal gets called off, and Medb carries through with her threat to invade Ulster and get the bull.

Ulster raise an army to defend, unfortunately every single man of Ulster called up gets stricken with period pains. Yes. I know. But this is exactly the effect and application of Macha's curse, and an example of, no matter how weird the whole Cycle seems, it is at least internally consistent and very deep and thorough.

Every single man, that is, except one. Cu-Chulainn is unaffected from the curse. And why? Well, remember his birth? Macha's exact words on the curse were that every man of Ulster will suffer at the Kingdom's greatest need; Cu-Chulainn is definitely at least part-man (though a modern legend could easily make him trans or enby), but having been born in Meath, even if by just a few yards, he's not a Man of Ulster and therefore free of it. Convenient. Anyway, he manages to hold off the entire Connacht army by engaging them in single combat at a narrow passage - either a ford or a mountain pass - because he's a Big Strong Man by now (well, seventeen) and he has the Gods on his side; Lug at one point healing his wounds to an extent that he ends up powered with rage and becomes the Hound That His Name Implies. Anyone who's ever played D&D where one of the characters is a Beast or Berserker Barbarian will kind of get the power vibe; he is both.

Towards the end, two people are sent to challenge him. First up is Fergus Mac Roich, his foster-father who fled to Connacht. Cu-Chulainn agrees to yield to him, if Fergus yields next time. Battle is avoided and Fergus passes. Finally, Cu-Chulainn's foster-brother Ferdia challenges him; the two grew up together and developed their fighting skills against each other, so they're closely matched. At first Cu-Chulainn refuses to fight him and tries to persuade Ferdia to not do this, but Ferdia's unwilling - he wants to fight. After three days, Cu-Chulainn is victorious, kills Ferdia, but instantly retires through physical and emotional pain.

By this time the curse of Macha is fading and the warriors of Ulster start to become battle-ready. King Conchobar rouses his troops and sets his stall out for retribution. It looks like there's going to be a huge final battle pitching the two armies against each other, but there is one final loose end to tie up. The Connacht army is led onto the battlefield by Fergus. This rouses Cu-Chulainn who steps in front and reminds Fergus it's his turn to yield. Knowing you don't argue with a demigod, he turns around and walks away. The Connacht army kind of loses the thirst for battle, breaks up, and wanders off.

But, you might ask, what of the cows, where this whole thing started? Well, exactly what you might expect to happen does happen. In all the confusion, Medb takes Donn Cualinge back to Connacht, so now they own both of the greatest bulls in the whole of Ireland. Medb and Ailill have drawn their stupid contest. Except ... when you have two quite, one might say 'alpha' bulls in the same place, it's highly unlikely they're going to get along. After a huge fight, Donn Cualinge kills Finnbhennach, but in doing so ends up mortally wounded itself and, for reasons that seem to only make sense in legendarium, does a tour of the island dropping ripped-off parts of Finnbhennach as it goes, before finally dying back home in Connacht.

The entire Ulster Cycle thus ends up being a tale with no real winners, and the sense that the whole thing was completely pointless. Maybe that's a metaphor for life, who knows. Maybe the actual moral of the tale is to *[take good care of your cows]*.

Now. You might be wondering 'but this is a travel podcast; this is all very interesting but what does it have to do with you, personally, other than your childhood?'. Well, remember at the start of February I took a week travelling around Northern Ireland? I talked about the background to that trip a couple of episodes ago. Well, one of the places I visited was Armagh, which is very close to Navan Hill Fort and what is generally accepted to be the ancient capital of Ulster (Emain Macha). The name obviously refers to the goddess Macha, and one possible explanation and derivation of the first element is a word that means, er, 'twins'. {pause} In reality it's likely to refer to a couple of hills/hillforts present in the area, but you can't keep a good consistent mythology down.

The site is now a kind of museum. In the visitor centre, apart from the cafe, is a small museum talking about the discovery of site and what they found here, as well as a potted history of the place. Outside, there's a replica hut built to ancient standards (apart from the obligatory bigger exit fire escape door) at the back, and it was interesting to stand inside the sort of building they would have lived in, as a family unit. It's a circular structure, built primarily of wood and thatch. In the middle of it is the hearth, where the fire was, while people slept in small designated slightly raised what effectively amounted to wooden frames filled with what appeared to be bark, around the edge of the hut. As an aside, it felt quite similar to other structures I've seen around the world, which suggests that, just like the proliferation of pyramids, every civilisation independently discovered the basic

principles of mathematics and physics at a fairly early stage of development. Humans are a clever bunch, where necessary. {pause} I wonder what happened.

Outside the hut the tour goes along a trail through the woodland with information boards and interesting observations about life in the area and the general history of the contemporary culture. Then there's the hill fort itself, publicly accessible (and popular with dog-walkers!); it's a mound atop a hill, and one of several similar fortifications spanning a period of several thousand years in the area. This particular hill appears to have been the centre of a specific ritual whereby the people here built a huge wooden structure, filled it with stones, set fire to it, and then covered it with earth. I wandered around on a guided tour (and, it being early February in Northern Ireland on a weekday during a global pandemic, I was the only person *on* said tour), purely so I could get a bit more background and context about the area.

Inside the visitor centre, in the ceiling at the base of a dome, are artistic representations of the main players in the Ulster Cycle, including Maeve, the brown bull of Cooley, and Cu Chulainn himself. Obviously there's a lot of artistic licence when dealing with mythological figures from two thousand years ago, but it somehow makes the tales more ... human, more accessible, more real, almost.

Ulster was just one of the traditional ancient kingdoms of Ireland - the numbers in reality varied but overall there are commonly attested to have been five in total, the others being Leinster, Connacht, Munster, and the one whose name didn't really survive as much in culture, Meath. Which is slightly awkward as the current County Meath in Ireland is the location of the Hill of Tara, which in Irish mythology was the seat of the High King of Ireland and therefore in modern parlance would have been seen as the 'capital'. I'm due to finally road-trip around Ireland in July with my friend Anne-Laure and it's one of the places that's on our, well my, hit-list. While some of the other ancient kingdom capitals have almost no remains left, this is Ireland we're talking about, a culture that feels like it lives and breathes that mix of myth, legend, and history like few other countries and societies do, so I'm sure there are other places we'll come across that tell their own stories.

I briefly mentioned Scotland in that tale; of course although being so close there's always going to have been a lot of overlap (and historically, Scotland was invaded from Ireland around 1500 years ago). There's whole stories about people like St Columba who went from Derry in Ireland to Iona off the Scottish coast, for instance. But equally Scotland has its own myths and legends separate to Ireland, which are all just as fascinating to me. Nat, from Natpacker Travels, agrees.

[Nat

This is one of the reasons I think why I love Scotland so much, there's so many myths and legends and everybody knows them. In my local area no-one actually knows any myths and legends, and it's crazy we lost this in Cheshire. There are myths and legends about, we just don't know them, they're not passed on any more, and for me it really makes a place, and it's part of the history, the myths & legends.

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One such is around the Selkies, which Joanna Hastings now talks about.

[Joanna Hastings

The tale of the Selkies that originated in places like Orkney and Shetland and the Western Isles of Scotland has a particular grip on me. I've always been fascinated by stories about creatures who could magically change between animal and human, and the interactions they have with fully human people.

The tale of the Selkies is about seals. The female seal came to shore and took off her sealskin to dance on the beach, becoming human. A watching fisherman stole her skin, and because the girl couldn't change back into seal form without it, he compelled her to stay with him and marry him.

Years later one of her children found the skin by chance and showed it to her. She took it and returned to the sea forever, leaving her husband and children broken-hearted.

There are many variations on this theme. It's particularly compelling because of the analogies to a lot of people's lived experience. Feeling they can't be who they really are. Feeling that they must control, or submit to being controlled by others. Feeling that there's a huge dimension to their personhood which is being stolen from them, that they're not allowed to explore. The loss and injustice of that makes for a pretty gut-wrenching

story, especially when fighting with love and loyalty. Add to that the dramatic landscape of the Scottish islands, the sea and the wind. It's great material to break your heart. It's very easy to imagine this actually happening when you're watching mist rolling over the sea of the Hebrides.

Interestingly it was more than just a story to the inhabitants of the islands until quite recently, maybe even today, I don't know. One well-known rumour holds that a family who tended to have unusual hard growths on their hands was descended from the marriage of a Selkie and a human, The children were born with webbed fingers from their seal heritage, and the growths formed when they tried to cut the webs away.

But literally true or not, sometimes I think I'm surrounded by Selkies, people searching for themselves, and also fighting forces that deny them their own selfhood. Hopefully we'll all find our skins in the end.

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Water-creatures are fairly common in Scottish myth, understandably so given the numerous islands, straits, lochs, and rivers across the area. Another of course is that of the similarly named Kelpies, which have an entire monument dedicated to them just northeast of Falkirk. Kelpies though are horse-shaped creatures of death; they appear and encourage people (especially children) to ride them, at which point the Kelpie goes back into the waters, drowning and then eating the children. They are also believed to be shapeshifters, and are noted to have devil-like hooves regardless of the form they appear in, betraying their origins and intent.

Of course, water spirits are common across the globe, and Dayna gives another example, from Latin America, and comes to a thought about why such stories are so commonly associated with children.

[Dayna

Another folklore that I love comes from Mexico, Central America, South America region, it's La Llorona (I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly), she's kind of your standard Woman In White. The way the story goes, there's a couple of different variations on it, but basically this is a woman had one to two children, two children in most stories, and for one reason or another she drowns them and then kills herself. Generally the variations I've heard is that she was from a lower class and hooked up with a fellow in a higher class bracket, and bore him some children, and finally his family pressures him to cast her aside and marry someone in his own class bracket, and he caves, and in a fit of desperation and not wanting to see her children starve, she kills them, she drowns them, and then kills herself. Another variation I read is where it's more of a husband who is stepping out and cheating on his wife, so in a fit of rage she drowns her children, kind of Medea Style, and then kills herself in regret. Either way, no matter what the variation you read, the end result is she kills her children, drowns herself and when she gets up to heaven they ask her 'where are your children?', and she is denied entrance to Heaven until she can show up with them in tow. So she wanders the waterways looking for her children. But there's also a bogeyman angle to the story, in that she's looking for her children, but if she can't find her children, your children will do just nicely. So there's stories of her trying to lure children in. I've also heard stories of her saving children that were in the waterways and drown ing. So there's different variations, but that is the general jist of it, but I just find it kind of a fascinating story because there are the variations, but it's also sad, and I also find it fascinating that it's not just known to one local area, it's known through Mexico, Central America, and northern South America, and she is used as a bogeyman to children - 'if you do not behave, you have to stay away from the waterways at night, or La Llorona will come and get you.' Which if you think about it, kinda goes back to our old-school fairy tales in that they were cautionary tales, you don't speak to strangers, you don't go off the path in the woods, or something bad will generally happen, so I do find it interesting cos small children know should not be out at night without their parents, should not be playing along the waterways especially if they can't swim, cos if something happens you very well could die, so yeh, that's one of my favourites.

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As you can hear, a lot of these stories, although similar worldwide, have very local identities, say, to a particular river or a specific section of forest. And while some are well-known, having been passed down from generation to generation, some, like Nat said earlier, have been largely forgotten about or indeed lost forever. Nat herself mentions one from her local area on her website - the tale of the Wizard of the Edge, link in the shownotes; here she is giving a brief overview of that very tale:

[Nat

The Wizard of the Edge is a local legend from Alderley Edge in Cheshire. Very briefly, the story goes that there was a farmer who had a white mare that he wanted to sell at Macclesfield Market. To get there he had to go over Alderley Edge. And it was on the edge that he was stopped by an old man offering to buy the horse. He refused, saying he would get a better price at the market. The old man then told him that he's not going to be able to sell his horse at market that day, and he would wait for him on the Edge that evening. The farmer obviously laughed, thinking there was no way this was going to happen, and carried on taking his horse to Macclesfield.

At the market he was unable to sell the horse, just like the old man said. So on the way back the old man was waiting for him on the Edge, and this time the farmer agreed to sell the horse to him. The old man told him to follow him, and took him to a rock face where he stopped, pulled out a wand, tapped the rock face, and it opened.

He led the farmer and his horse inside, and inside there were over 100 knights asleep on the floor, and next to every single knight except for one was a white horse, asleep. So the old man took the horse from the farmer, laid it down next to the horseless knight, and sent it to sleep as well. He then told the farmer that, at the end of the world, these knights would awaken and decide the fate in the last battle for The Earth.

Depending on the version that you hear, he either did then pay the farmer or he didn't. Or the farmer ran away scared, basically. Now at Alderley Edge there is a carving of a wizard in one of the rock faces, which is meant to be where the cave is.

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That sort of tale is quite common, with different variations, across the country and no doubt the world - even King Arthur and his knights are said in one tale to be lying in a cave waiting for the right moment to come alive and save England at its time of greatest need. There are those who'd argue he's running a bit late on that one ...

Sometimes though, you just happen to live in a place whose very name is known worldwide because of a myth or a legend. Like Loch Ness. Or Roswell. Or even Rome, I guess.

I spent some 15 years of my life in the town of Kirkby-in-Ashfield. It's not a terribly interesting place in and of itself, its name being partly Norse and meaning more-or-less 'church in the borough where there are ash-trees'. Despite living there for 15 years I have no idea if there are ash trees there because I don't know what an ash tree looks like. Because I have other interests than the natural world, as you know, and even if you showed me a picture of an ash tree with a huge sign saying 'this is an ash tree', I won't remember it and won't recall it if I saw one. But anyway. Every day that I walked to and from work I crossed the River Erewash, an Old English name meaning something like 'river that meanders through marshy or frequently flooded land'. However, as far as I can gather, in post-Norman Conquest England, the Erewash marked the western boundary of that area of land known as Sherwood Forest,

Now, before I get into details, note that 'Forest' in this sense doesn't mean 'area of woodland and trees', although many ancient forests were indeed that. Rather, 'forest' here means 'area set aside for royal prerogative' - usually hunting. Everyday life was much more strict in a 'forest', as, to all intents and purposes, everything was owned by the King. Which meant you couldn't hunt for food. Or, technically, even pick flowers.

There were many 'forests' in post-invasion England, some of which still survive today in name and, it must be said, planning legislation, if not in royal control, including the New Forest to the west of Southampton, the Forest of Dean (around where my uncle lives), Cannock Chase north of the West Midlands, and Epping / Waltham Forest, which I mention in the third of my London Podcasts. And each has its own tales, its own legendarium (just don't mention escaped wild Big Cats). However, Sherwood Forest has its own, quite famous, specific cast of characters who may or may not have existed, but whose tales have lasted to the present day,

Sometimes it's quite surprising to people to hear that Sherwood Forest is a real place, and not somewhere that, like Atlantis, is shrouded in myth and legend itself. Centred (kind of) on the town of Edwinstowe, the area known as Sherwood Forest currently covers around 420 hectares, or about twice the size of Monaco. In early mediaeval times it was a lot bigger, occupying a quarter of the county of Nottinghamshire, or an area the size of Guernsey. Or a tenth of Bahrain, if that helps.

Anyway.

Sherwood Forest is of course famous for being the happy hunting ground of Robin Hood and his band of Merrie Men. And Maid Marian. After whom one of the main roads in Nottingham is named after. It's not a pretty road, but it is functional. It used to have the Robin Hood Experience as a tourist attraction on it, but it closed over ten years ago due to underfunding. It's strange that Nottingham doesn't make as much of Robin Hood as you'd expect, although there is the statue of him just down the hill from Nottingham Castle-but-it's-not-really-it's-a-late-17th-century-manor-house-rebuilt-in-the-late-19th-Century (the original Castle was destroyed in the badly-named English Civil War in the mid 1600s). It's just up the hill from the 'oldest pub in Britain, The 'Olde Trip To Jerusalem', commonly attested to 1189. Maid Marian Way, incidentally, has the 'oldest pub in Britain', The Old Salutation Inn, from 1240, while right in the centre of the city is The Bell Inn, the oldest pub in Britain, from the 1430s. It may depend on what you call a pub, or even a building; all I'm saying is the Sal has the best beer range.

But enough about that.

There is a public footpath, the Robin Hood Way, that runs for 168 km, or just over 100 miles, from Nottingham Castle to Edwinstowe. It takes in many of the locations associated with the Robin Hood legend, including much of Sherwood Forest, and Creswell Crags. You may note, however, that by road, if you were walking it, the distance from Nottingham to Edwinstowe is 19 and a half miles. That footpath takes a very, *very* circuitous route. I've actually walked a bit of it, by accident, near Harlow Wood, to Friar Took Well and the Forest Stone, between Ravenshead and Mansfield. It wasn't well signposted and I got lost in a muddy field. The Forest Stone, btw, is a commemoration of the location of an ancient 'forest court', or place where a court in the royal forest was convened and verdicts passed on wrongdoers. (It's a lot more complicated and convoluted than that, but just pretend I'm a primary school teacher, okay?).

I'm not going to go into the tales of Robin Hood on this pod, partly because everyone knows them, but mainly because there are so many of them covering several centuries, many of which are quite different. This is unlike the Irish mythologies which were collated relatively early and thus generally only have one version. The earliest mentions seem to be in written reports of people's oral tales from as far back as the turn of the 15th Century, which implies that they were already legendary stories even then; the earliest copies we have of the tales themselves come later that century.

What I will say is that Robin Hood, as a name, isn't an uncommon one at the time. I mean it's not going to be as common as John Smith or Jo Brown, but a combination of a contemporarily popular first name coupled with what was effectively a job title (many surnames developed from the concept that people were called either after their job, for example, 'John the Smith', and everywhere had a smith of some description, or from a description of that person, for example, 'Jo with the brown hair'. In both cases, at least one of their children would have the same notable attribute) - in this case 'hood' would mean 'someone who makes hoods' (or, I guess, someone who wears hoods).

Remember too, apart from being cheesy love stories, the bulk of the tales of Robin Hood are largely around 'sticking it to the man', about cocking a snook at the authorities, about vigilantism, about revenge. These are all pretty common themes in humanity going back millennia, so the idea of any number of people doing just that in what effectively amounted to an authoritarian dictatorship is incredibly plausible, especially in an area like Sherwood Forest which not only had extra restrictions, but also any number of places to hide - Creswell Crags even has a 'Robin Hood Cave', allegedly where he and his posse hid on the run) - and at least one major trade/supply route running through it (the Great North Road, what would now be the A1. Technically not the M1 as that ventures a bit too far west, but ... we'll come onto that in a short paragraph). In addition, Robin Hood-like people did exist and are attested by contemporary sources; one of the most notable is Hereward the Wake, who operated further east in the Fenland country of Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire in the years after the Norman Conquest of 1066, as an anti-government agitator (and terrorist, theoretically). Hereward's adventures themselves have been, shall we say, embellished by oral tradition and source bias, but it's believed he was originally a man of noble standing in pre-conquest days and therefore already notable. It's possible therefore that a person, or several people, either called Robin Hood or using that name as a 'common epithet or alias' because it would be hard to identify a specific person with that common a name, caused enough of a ruckus in northern Nottinghamshire to warrant people to take note, and his adventures were passed around the local villages, if nothing else to provide hope for the common citizens. It just might be that he wasn't from as noble a background as Hereward so history never recorded the original. He was a someone just like you or me. In a world full of no-ones, be a someone, be a timebomb.

That said, everything surrounding Robin Hood is a mystery and a myth, even his area of operation. Although commonly seen in conflict with the Sheriff of Nottingham, Nottinghamshire's a reasonably expansive county and parts are nearer places like Sheffield and Doncaster than they are to Nottingham itself. Sherwood Forest

stretches quite a way north, into Yorkshire. In addition, in several of the tales he's referred to as 'Robin of Loxley'. Good luck finding Loxley in Nottinghamshire, it's a small area just north (NORTH) of Sheffield, on the way to Barnsley, kind of, some 40 miles away from Nottingham itself. Also, one of Robin Hood's Merrie Men, Little John, has a gravestone. He's attested to be buried in Hathersage, in the Hope Valley, some distance *west* of Sheffield and equally about 40 miles from Nottingham. Both are on the opposite side of the current major travel route from London to The North, the M1, to Nottingham and Sherwood Forest. It's probably frustrating to Nottingham that Robin Hood Airport is the main airport serving, not Nottingham, that would be the frequently-renamed East Midlands Airport, but rather South and East Yorkshire, being near Doncaster, and again about 40 miles almost due north of Nottingham.

But at least it's on the right side of the M1, I guess.

Of course, it's quite common for local places to latch on to a noted myth or legend. People seem to like nothing more than to make where they live 'interesting', and having a link or connection to a notable myth provides just that. It just becomes more problematic if it becomes clear that there's no actual way for it to have even been remotely true. It's one thing claiming that, for example, Robin Hood used caves in northern Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire to hide out in - even if he didn't exist, the in-story concept is internally consistent and plausible, because all the tales put him in that general region. And one more story about a legendary figure isn't going to raise any eyebrows; just because the original tales didn't have him, say, visiting the church in Kirkby-in-Ashfield doesn't mean he didn't. He certainly could have done. And if someone created, or, shall I say, 'found', a tale where he did just that, it wouldn't necessarily be dismissed. It would just be a stretch to say he'd done the same thing in one solitary tale near Coventry or York.

Sometimes though, that sort of thing does happen. Here's my friend V talking about a very debunked tale concerning an already legendary figure.

[V -

One of the things that I like most about myths & legends is how they grow up, and how we cling on to them if they're a decent story, long after they've been shown to be demonstrably false. One such example is fairly local to me. Near where I live there are a pair of villages - Aspley Guide and Woburn Sands, which used to be collectively known as Hogsty End. Hogsty End was known for its healing airs, possibly because of the abundant woodland that still surrounds it today, and people used to visit to convalesce.

Now in the village is a house called 'Woodfield'. It's old; we know it existed in 1868 when it was auctioned off as part of a larger estate, but otherwise it's unremarkable. Fast forward to 1925, when the UK government for reasons I don't quite understand and can't be bothered to look up, passed the Rating Valuation Act, which meant that every piece of land and property had to be found to determine the rate on it. In 1927 Woodfield House was valued, noted to be owned by one Miss Key, but unoccupied and in a state of some disrepair after being neglected and empty for some time. That phrase would become key (ha ha) to the myth growing up.

In the 1940s the house passed to a Mr Blainey Key, who lived in Twickenham in Middlesex, and in 1947 he appealed the valuation put on the house claiming it was uninhabitable. At first he claimed the house had been credited with an extra reception room, had a very awkward staircase that had replaced a ladder, and had been damaged considerably by enemy action during the second world war. However it transpired the nearest bomb had fallen a mile and a half from the house, so then Mr Key explained the house was, in fact, haunted.

Mr Key told the committee that the early 18th Century Dick Turpin, the notorious highwayman, was wont to frequent Aspley Woods as a hideout. Turpin knew the family living at Woodfield, most particularly the daughter of the house. She had a lover and the father, outraged at the indiscretion, shut them both up in a cupboard causing their death. As you do. This gave Turpin a cause to blackmail the man, to give him assistance and a place to hide out. Mr Key explained that Turpin also extorted money from the old man, and give it to the poor of the parish. Now this seems a bit unlikely, not least because none of the other legends surrounding Turpin mention his having altruistic streak, but also because although it's fairly well connected village now, being in the commuter belt, in those days Hogsty End was fairly tucked away from the main roads and thoroughfares and would have been a very inconvenient place for a hideout.

Anyway. The ghost of this unfortunate girl, he claimed, still haunted Woodfield, making it a thoroughly undesirable place to live. The claim for a re-evaluation went to a hearing at which Arthur Parker, who was a local estate agent and historian, was able to undermine Key's tale by stating that the house had been built in the early 1820s, while Dick Turpin was hanged at York in 1739. A former maid had claimed she had seen

arms coming through the wall while she was trying to sleep one night, but then rather undermined her own evidence by stating in answer to a question that she had in fact eaten cheese sandwiches for supper.

Blainey Key's case collapsed. He did appeal, employing two different mediums accredited by the Society for Psychic Research no less, to hold seances in the house. They testified that they were satisfied that the house was haunted, however Miss Dickinson, who was the tenant of the apparently uninhabitable house, undermined that by saying that although she had heard stories, she had never experienced any ghostly goings on th the house.

*In the end Mr Key's case was dropped, and he had to pay the full amount of tax he owed on the property. Now despite the obvious holes in Mr Key's story, including a point raised in the trial that the story bore a remarkable similarity to a story about Dick Turpin that had been published some 65 years before that, the house has failed to shake its reputation, becoming the scene of ghost hunting activities and seances that even happen today. Despite knowing that the entire story was concocted by a man trying to reduce his tax bill, believers insist that either the Turpin incident happened in a previous house on the same site, or that the murder did happen at the current house but the part about Turpin was a fabrication. The property is still locally known as *The Ghost House* though, and it is said that on foggy nights, you can still hear the echoing of hoofbeats down the lane as the ghost of Dick Turpin rides through the village.*

]

It is interesting to see how new tales, new myths, begin. You only have to look at tales of Big Cats, of alien encounters, of crop circles, to see examples new myths and legends being created. Often these are entirely new stories, based on people's misreading of physics (like the Morfa Lights), or not being able to accurately judge sizes and distances outside of daylight (like tales of creatures like Mothman or Nessie), that sort of thing, and it's fascinating to think that's how long-established myths were established, especially those in imposing spaces, like mist-covered woodland where your senses are already at a disadvantage, or about creepy houses in a state of ruin, about which few people know any details.

So what have we learned in this episode? Myths and legends can be old, dating back to times before written historical records, or they might be created last Thursday after the experiences of two people in a dusky forest. They run the whole gamut of human experience and activity, from recounting tales of battling armies and rival kingdoms, to embellished stories about folk heroes standing up for the people, to cautionary tales that parents tell their kids when they want them to behave or be careful. Many of them involve animals both friendly and aggressive, death, either heroically fighting against it or being embraced by its chill, but also hope, that we get through life safely and that we will live in a better world at the end than we did at the start.

I wonder if a legendary item is tax-deductible.

{standard end jingle}

Well that's about all for this episode, though I'm absolutely sure it's a subject I'll come back to, since there's any number of myths and legends that I've encountered on my travels; in this episode I just wanted to stick to ones that were local to people. So, join me next time for another adventure *Beyond The Brochure*; quite to where, I haven't worked out yet. I'm sure it'll be exciting and informative. Speaking of exciting and informative, by the way, my VA has worked wonders and I now have a newsletter. The first edition should be available on the first of June, and future releases are planned to be monthly, again on the 1st. It'll probably replace my Facebook Group because that's really not an active space. Sign-up details will be in the shownotes. But until then, keep away from the water's edge, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro theme tune, same as intro, just a different bit of it}

{Outro voiceover:

*Thank you for listening to this episode of *Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure*. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}