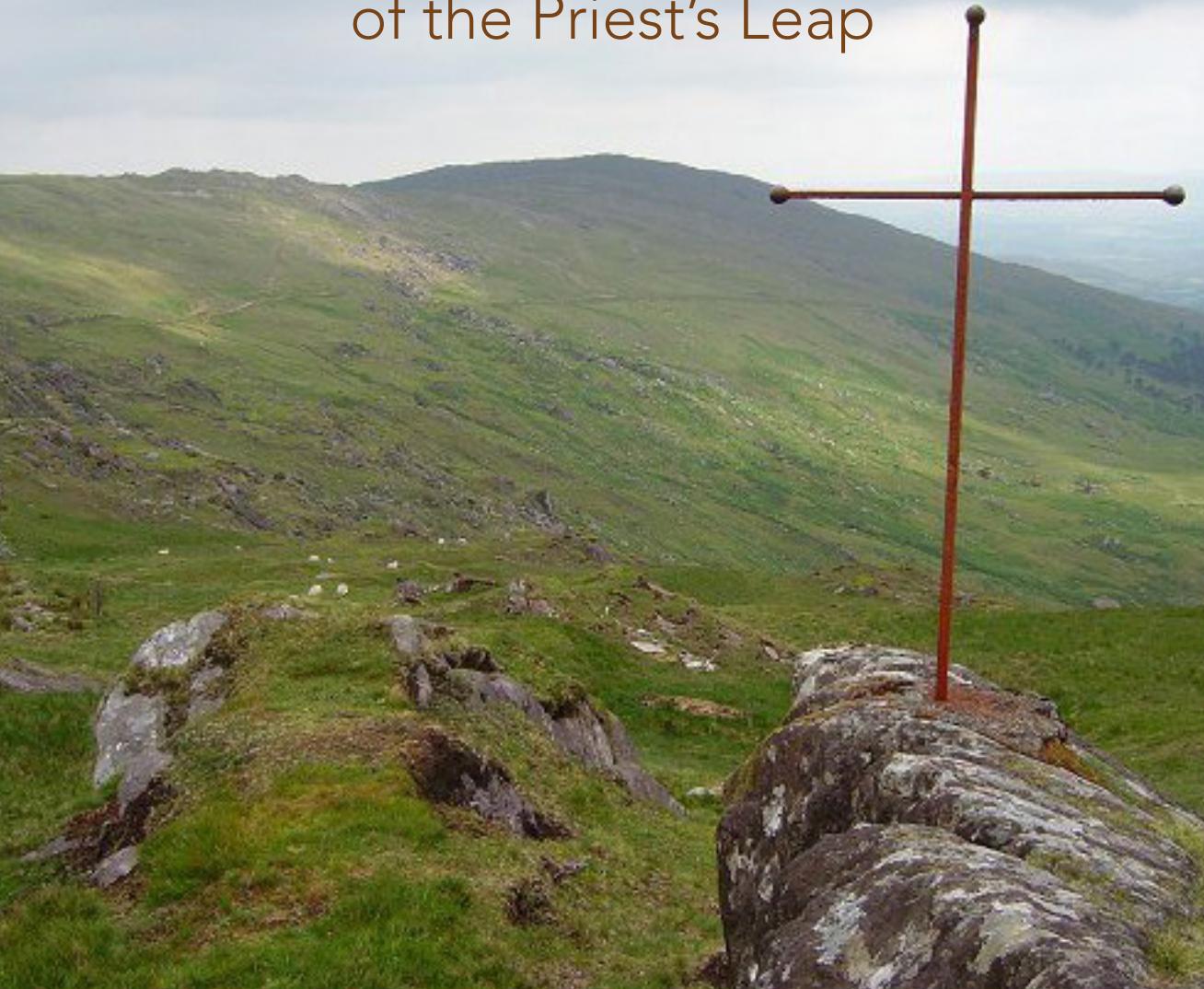




BANTRY
HISTORICAL
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SOCIETY

The Amazing Story of the Priest's Leap



LÉIM AT SAGAIRT
ERECTED TO PERPETUATE THE MEMORY OF
THE PRIEST'S LEAP
TRADITION HAS IT THAT A PRIEST
ESCAPED HIS SOLDIER PURSUERS BY
LEAPING ON HORSEBACK ACROSS THE BAY
THE MARKS ON THE ADJACENT ROCK
INDICATE THE SPOT WHERE HORSE
AND RIDER LANDED SAFELY



T.D. Sullivan, (1824-1914), born in Bantry, he was an Irish nationalist, journalist, politician, poet and song writer. He served as Lord Mayor of Dublin from 1886-1888.

This following poem by T.D. Sullivan tells the story (dated to 1612) of the priest's leap from the top of Coomhola Mountain, just over seven miles north of Bantry town, across part of Bantry Bay, to a place in Newtown near Bantry town where he, on horseback, landed safely away from Crown Forces who were chasing him, with intent of murder, as the Penal Laws were being enforced in Ireland at the time. The commemorative plaque at edge of Road No. N71, across from Rowa/Rowex Pharmaceuticals, near Bantry, marks the spot where the priest landed. The actual stone on which the horse alighted, photographed hereunder, still bears the marks from the incident, and is in situ on the ground outside the footpath. To this day it serves as a reminder of Penal Times in Ireland through the 17th century. The poem was written over two hundred years after the event.

The Priest's Leap

The priest is out upon the hill before the dawn of day;
Through shadows deep, o'er rugged ground he treads his painful way.
A peasant's homely garb he wears, that none but friendly eyes
May know who dares to walk abroad beneath that rough disguise.
Inside his coat and near his heart lies what he treasures most,
For there a tiny silver case enshrines the Sacred Host.
Adoring as he goes, he seeks a cabin low and rude
To nourish there a fainting soul with God's appointed food.

...

For so it is within the land whose brave and faithful race,
In older days made all the isle a bright and holy place.
Its temples are in ruins now, its altars overthrown.
Its hermits' cells in cliff and cave are tenantless and lone.

Poor helots, plundered and despised, they tread the soil today.
But yet, though fallen their fortunes be, through want and woe and ill,
Close hid and fondly loved, they keep their priests among them still,
Their faithful priests, who tho' by law condemned, denounced and banned
Will not forsake their suffering flocks or quit the stricken land.

...

The morning brightens as he goes, the little hut is near,
When runs a peasant to his side, and speaks into his ear,
!Fly, Father, fly, the spies are out, they've watched you on your way,
They've brought the soldiers on your track to seize you or to slay.
Quick, Father dear, here stands my horse, no whip or spur he'll need,
Mount you at once upon his back, and put him to his speed,

And then what course you'd better take 'tis God alone that knows,
Before you spreads a stormy sea; behind you come your foes,
But mount at once and dash away; take chance for field or flood,
And God may raise His hand today to foil those men of blood".

...

Up sprang the priest, away he rode, but ere a mile was run,
Right in his path he saw the flash of bayonets in the sun.
He turned his horse's head, and sped along the way he came,
But, Oh! there too his hunters were fast closing on their game,
Straight forward then he faced his steed and urged him with his hand,
To where the cliff stood high and sheer above the sea-beat strand.
Then from the soldiers and the spies arose a joyful cheer,
Their toilsome chase was well-nigh o'er, the wished-for end was near.
They stretched their eager hands to pluck the rider from his seat,
A few more lusty strides and they might "swing him to their feet".

For now betwixt him and the verge are scarce ten feet of ground,
But, Stay! Good God, out o'er the cliff the horse is seen to bound
The soldiers hasten to the spot, they gaze around, below,
No splash disturbs the waves that keep their smooth and even flow.
From their green depths, no form of man or horse is seen to rise,
Far down upon the stony strand no mangled body lies.

"Look up! Look up!" a soldier shouts, "Oh what a sight is there,
Behold, the priest, on horseback still, is speeding through the air".
They looked, and lo, the words were true and trembling with affright,
They saw the vision pierce the blue and vanish from their sight.

...

Three miles away, across the bay, a group with wondering eyes,
Saw some strange speck come rushing fast towards them from the skies.
A bird, they deemed it first to be; they watched its course, and soon,
They thought it some black, burning mass flung from the sun or moon.

It neared the earth, their hearts beat fast, they held their breadth with awe,
As clear and clearer still – the horse and then – the man – they saw.

They shut their eyes, they stopped their ears to spare their hearts the shock
As steed and rider both came down and struck the solid rock.

...

Ay, on the solid rock they struck, but never made a sound.

No horrid mass of flesh and blood was scattered all around.

For when the horse fell on his knees, and when the priest was thrown,

A little forward, and his hands came down upon the stone,

That instant, by God's potent will, the flinty rock became

Like moistened clay or wax that yields before a glowing flame.

Unhurt, unharmed the priest arose, and with a joyful start,

He pressed his hand upon his breast; the Host was near his heart.

...

Long years have passed away since then, in sun and wind and rain

But still of that terrific leap the wondrous marks remain.

On the high cliff from which he sprang, now deemed a sacred place,

The prints left by the horse's hooves are plain for all to trace.

And still the stone where he alit whoever likes may view,

And see the signs and tokens there that prove the story true.

May feel and count each notch and line, may measure if he please,

The dint made by the horse's head, the grooves sunk by his knees.

And place his fingers in the holes for they are there today,

Made by the fingers of the priest who leaped across the bay.



photograph by Cathriona Tobin



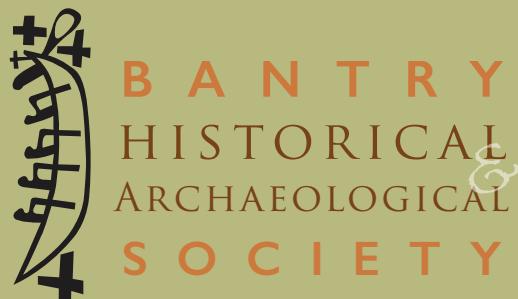
Market Day Bantry Co. Cork.

T.D. Sullivan wrote several poems. He was probably inspired to write the following verses from what he witnessed in his home town of Bantry, when farmers and /or farmers' sons came in to town, either going to the fairs to sell animals and farm produce or to attend church.

The Farmer's Son

Where'er are scattered the Irish nation
In foreign lands or on Irish ground,
In every calling, and rank, and station,
Good men and true will be always found:
But 'midst their masses, and ranks, and classes,
When noble work must be dared and done,
No heart's more ready, no hands more steady,
Than the heart and hand of a farmer's son.
...
His homely garb has not fashion's graces,
But it wraps a frame that is lithe and strong;
His brawny hand may show labour's traces,
But 'tis honest toil that does no man wrong.

For generous greeting, for social meeting,
For genial mirth, or for harmless fun,
'Midst high or low men, 'midst friends or foe-men,
Oh, where's the match for a farmer's son?
...
Some other men may have words more flowing
To prove and plead for dear Ireland's cause,
And others, too, may have ways more knowing
To win her smiles and her fond applause;
But when her story is crowned with glory,
Howe'er the battle was fought and won,
In front to gain it, and still maintain it,
You'll find most surely a farmer's son.



Clár Éire Ildánach
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cover image: Priests Leap looking west c.RichardWebb_ccl