

# How many giants do you know?

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Warrington's Irish Project was initiated following the bombing in the city centre. Its aim was to foster relationships and develop a greater understanding between England, Northern and Southern Ireland. From the outset participating schools were twinned together and several successful exchange visits took place. When the Literacy Strategy was introduced nationally a new dimension to the Irish Project was developed through the use of Irish literature, and further schools were invited to participate. As the ICT and Literacy Co-ordinator at Park Road Community Primary School, I was particularly keen to become involved in this initiative, especially as this meant we were twinned with a school (St. Patrick's) in Southern Ireland. As the school had just received its NGfL machines we were eager to try out the potential of the internet and email facilities. Working with different class teachers I was able to contribute to the development of two projects within the school. The first was with the Year Five and Six children who first looked at Irish myths and legends and later compared the work of two authors (Alan Garner and Cormac MacRoais) writing on the same theme, both of which were strongly linked to a locality near to our respective schools. The second, described in this article, involved my own Year Three class as we explored the theme of 'Giants' within our theme of Folk Stories and Fairy Tales (NLS Y3 T2). As part of my general aims for the theme, I wanted the children to appreciate that:

- That other countries have their own traditional tales, some of which may share similar themes to stories that they already knew;
- That these stories may be connected to a place or event;
- That the characteristics of certain more unusual characters, e.g. fairies, witches, dwarves, giants were usually sustained in different stories.

The study of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Jonathan Langley) and then *Jim and the Beanstalk* (Raymond Briggs) gave us the opportunity to compare traditional Fairy Tales with modern alternatives and in particular to investigate the character of a giant more closely. From these stories the children's perception of giants was that they were old, loud, fierce, large and mean, so our investigation question was – 'Are all

giants the same?'

We began by collecting evidence from both the text and the illustrations. This was compiled into a matrix under the following headings:

- What he looks like,
- What he wears,
- What he does,
- How he behaves,
- What he says,
- How he speaks,
- The kind of character we think he is from this information.

With the first two books I modelled the process of collecting the information by discussing with the children how the information could be found. Information about what the giant looks like and wears could be gathered by looking carefully at the illustrations. This raised the questions, 'How do you think the illustrator imagines the giant?' 'Does the author tell the illustrator what the giant should look like?' 'Are there any descriptions in the text which gives the illustrator some clues?'

The other four matrix headings (What he does, how he behaves, what he says, how he speaks) encouraged the children to explore the text very carefully looking for exact words or phrases. The final heading specifically encouraged the children to make inferences and deductions about the giant's character based on his actions and the reactions of other characters to him. On each day a group of children continued completing the matrix. They worked together writing their ideas on a large sheet of paper. This was then reviewed and discussed with me and resulted in a final presented version for our display and input into our database.

From the comparison between these two texts the children decided that given the chance giants are mean, grumpy and like to eat people – especially little boys! However they concluded that giants were not necessarily like this all the time as Jim's giant read poetry and sang songs and could sometimes be quite nice. (Incidentally both giants had red hair as well!)

We began by collecting other stories that featured giants and found that Irish literature was especially rich. From the Project we had been able to loan multiple copies of *The King of Ireland's Son* by Brendon Behan and *The Sleeping Giant*

by Marie Louise Fitzpatrick. Everyone was sent out to scour the library and their bookshelves at home for other 'giant' stories!

The children looked at these two unfamiliar stories in a more detailed way, firstly considering the story as a whole and secondly the specific characteristics of the giant, as modelled above.

#### *The King of Ireland's Son* by Brendan Behan

This text was used as a guided reading book with one group of children. They first began by looking at the front and back cover, to make predictions about the story and to find out information about the illustrator as it is beautifully illustrated. It is immediately obvious that this story is rich in traditional language and retold in such a way that the author's voice shines through. For example, look at the beginning:

Once upon a time, and a very good time it was too, when the streets were paved in penny loaves and the houses were white-washed with buttermilk and the pigs ran round with knives and forks in their snouts shouting, 'Eat me, eat me!' there lived a King of Ireland and he had three sons named Art, Neart and Ceart.

and the ending:

The two brothers were banished and Art and the King of Greece's daughter got married and they had a wedding and everybody ate and drank, and wasn't I at the wedding as well as everybody else and I got a present of a pair of paper boots and a pair of stockings made out of buttermilk; and that's the end of my story and all I'm going to tell you.

This story is also rich in the repetition of patterns of three (which the children had first been introduced to through their work on Goldilocks and the Three Bears.) We also discussed the introduction of magic as this story has a very special horse that enables Art to outwit the giant three times and so rescue the princess. (I find this story morally more acceptable than Jack and the Beanstalk where Jack is described as lazy and then is shown stealing the giant's treasures!) So it was these areas that the children first considered, before collecting evidence and information about this particular giant and comparing him to all the others.

They decided that he was most like the giant in 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' large, noisy and mean, particularly as he kidnaps the daughter of the King of Greece and keeps her prisoner. He also threatens to cut off Art's head, skin him and eat him! He shouts, roars, bellows, swears

(very bad in the eyes of Y3 children), screeches and goes tearing mad and demented. (Thomas was particularly proud at finding that word in the text!) They also noticed that he wears similar clothes to the Sleeping Giant, has big, bushy eyebrows and a beard like the Jack and the Beanstalk giant but his hair is grey not red!

#### *The Sleeping Giant*

Like *Jim and the Beanstalk* this text again bridges the time difference between that era when giants were more frequently around and today.

Long ago, when Ireland was still on the edge of the world, there was a giant living in County Kerry. He was large as giants go, but a friendly, happy sort of fellow.

It explores the confusion that might arise if a giant who had been asleep for hundreds of years and consequently resembled an island, awoke and joined in with life today. The children were able to compare how Celtic people treated this friendly but clumsy giant with how local people; tourists, farmers and fishermen treated him more recently.

The children were enchanted with this story especially as it appeared to be set in a real place. They were particularly interested in discussing whether or not it was true, after all they found County Kerry on the map, together with several islands off the coast. This, in fact, was one of the questions that they asked St Patrick's School in an email to them. The children in Ireland told us that the Blasket Islands, off the Coast of Kerry, do indeed have an island that looks very much like a giant asleep in the sea. It is known as 'The Dead Man'. If you look at this website:

<http://home.netsurf.de/juergen.steinfelder/jsblascl.htm>

and explore the pictures especially on pages 3 and 5 you will see what we mean. Further exploration on the internet led us to discover even more the beauty of this region and relate it to the illustrations in the book. We didn't, however, meet anyone who had actually seen the giant wake up!

Some of our most interesting discussions arose when the children were collecting material for the 'giants' matrix. I asked the children if the Sleeping Giant was old. Initially the answer was 'yes' because he had slept for a long time. Then I asked them to think about him during the time of the druid. Eventually, after much consideration, it was decided that he was not so old, (in giant terms) because he had shortish blond hair and no beard! I had wanted to see if we could put our giants in an age-related time line because the story, *Jim and the Beanstalk*,

definitely had an old-aged giant. The other interesting points about this giant were his lack of conformity in terms of being fierce and frightening. This one cried! People were annoyed rather than frightened of him and he was very obliging – agreeing to go back to sleep again.

Further stories gave us other insights. Some giants are able to change their characters and abandon their selfish ways (*The Selfish Giant*). Others have names such as McKeon in *Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat*. Some become mountains rather than islands (*Man Mountain*), while still more change the landscape in some way (*Finn MacCoul*).

Searching the internet site:

[http://www.local.ie/about\\_ireland/](http://www.local.ie/about_ireland/)  
will yield a number of traditional Irish tales, particularly about Finn MacCumhal (yes, the spelling varies).

### Conclusions

Unfortunately the end of term came all too soon because I would have liked the children to write about their favourite giant. As it was we just discussed the similarities and differences of the characters we had encountered and found that the characteristics of giants were not as universally accepted as we first thought.

The conclusions we came to were:

- Apart from Jim's Giant most giants lived a long time ago;
- They are large, strong and can often be quite loud;
- Age is an issue – the adjective 'old' just won't do!
- They usually have a moustache (5 out of 6) and frequently have a beard as well (4 out of 6). Their hair can be any normal hair colouring;
- They mostly wear the same type of clothes, baggy tunics with belts, leggings and boots with criss-cross laces up the legs;
- They are often unkind and selfish, fierce and frightening; two of them like to eat humans but they do not necessarily have these characteristics and so can change their ways;
- They often like to repeat themselves or chant a little verse;
- It was rare for a giant to live with his family. None of the giants lived with a family – only Finn MacCoul;
- Few seemed to live with a wife – the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk* lived with someone and we are not sure if she was his wife or housekeeper. Finn MacCoul lived with his wife but she was not a giant. (No wonder they all died out or disappeared!)

Certainly if you wanted to write a story that includes a giant then you would have to make quite a few decisions as to what he would be like.

Finally Dominic found us the story *Man Mountain*, by Martin Waddell (another Irish author), so we are even more convinced than ever that Ireland is the place to look for giants but the question now is –

*What is the difference between a giant and an ogre?*

Perhaps you can help.

### Giant tales used in this exploration

*Jack and the Beanstalk* by John Howe (Little, Brown and Company: London, 1988; ISBN 0-316-37579-9)

*Jim and the Beanstalk* by Raymond Briggs (Penguin Books, Picture Puffins: London, 1973; ISBN 0-14050077-4)

*The Sleeping Giant* by Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick (Wolfhound Press: Dublin, 1991; ISBN 0-86327-6431)

*The King of Ireland's Son* by Brendan Behan (Anderson Press: London, 1996; ISBN 0-86264-693-6)

*The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde; illustrated by Michael Foreman and Freire Wright (Puffin: 1995; ISBN 0-14-050383-8)

*Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat* by Robert Munsch (Annick Press Ltd: Willowdale, Ontario, 1989; ISBN 1-55037-070-7)

*Finn MacCoul and His Fearless Wife* by Robert Byrd (MacDonald Young Books: 1999; ISBN 0-7500-2907-2)

### Use of ICT

- Wordprocessing – write character descriptions and 'wanted posters' for each giant.
- Art Package – to draw illustrations for the posters.
- Scanner – to scan in hand drawn illustrations of the giants,
- Data base – to collect and explore information about the various giants,
- Email – our partner school,
- Internet – to explore geographical features that look like giants, other 'giant' tales and to collect clip art of giants.

On the accompanying CD-ROM you can see examples of matrix completed by different groups of children.