

St Brendan's Treasure

Chapter 1: Hidden Messages

"Wait for me! My ankle's sore!"

Sean turned to see Liam leaning against the wall. He was puffing, right out of breath and clutching at his ankle.

"Shift it" yelled Sean, turning back to join his friend, "Football training finished ages ago and I want to get back before it starts getting dark.

"I can't go any faster" groaned Liam grimacing in pain. "My ankle got kicked during training. Then we got chased by that dog and had to leg it. It hurts. I bet it's all swollen up. You'll have to carry me."

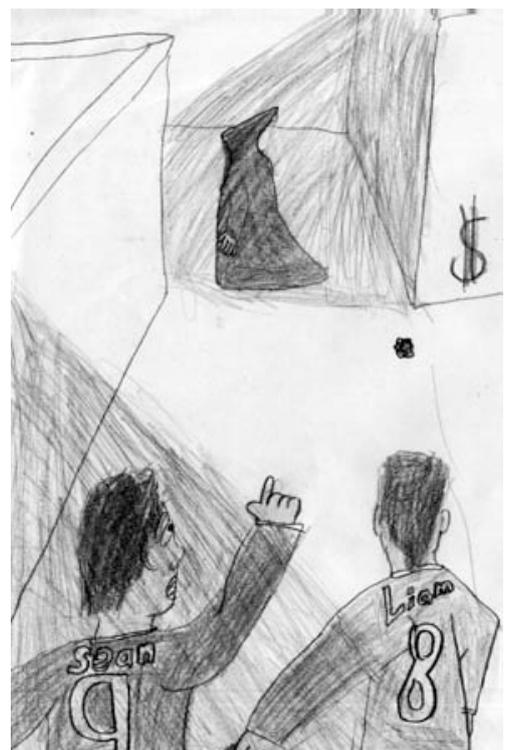
"In your dreams!" scoffed Sean. "I couldn't carry you, yer big lump, but I'll help you a bit. We've got to get through the alley, over the Dart and we don't want to hang around there. Anyway, I think it's going to start lashing it down any moment.

The two friends started down the path. It was true. It did seem darker than usual this evening. When they had said goodbye to their friends after training the early evening light had seemed fresh and full of sunshine but now air suddenly felt heavy and dim, the shadows thick and longer than they ought to be.

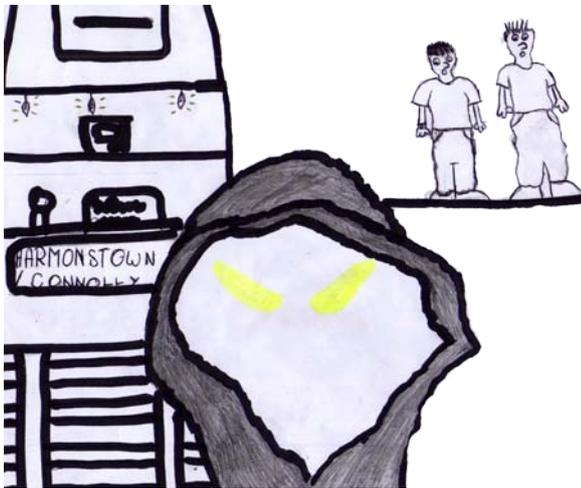
Sean shivered. He always thought of himself as not being scared of anything, well anything except his Ma, but not shadows - except these shadows. The alley looked really dark. Sean grabbed Liam by the elbow and began to pull him along. Liam yelped in pain. "Mind" he gasped. "I thought you were trying to help me, not knock me down."

As they began to go further down the alley, a train clattered along the tracks below. It gave them both a fright. In the half light the sudden brightness made the shadows stretch out ahead of them. Then they stopped still and stared. Among the dancing shadows on the bridge, one moved, detaching itself from all the others. The boys watched as this shadow took shape becoming solid. Now it looked more like a man in a long hooded cloak. You couldn't see the man's face. It was hidden in the folds of the dark hood. The man, if it was a man, turned away. He was bent and hunched up walking like an old man, a very old man.

Liam and Sean stood still. There was no reason to be scared, yet, the cloaked man hadn't done anything scary. He wasn't even looking their way but somehow they didn't feel like getting any closer.



Then the figure stopped and turned. For one second both boys caught a glimpse of his face under the hood. They could see his eyes, eyes that seemed to glow yellow, slightly luminous. For a heart-beating moment, the cloaked man looked straight at them and the boys thought that he was going to walk towards them but he turned away.



It was then that they saw that the cloaked figure had let something fall on the ground as he moved away further along the path. It looked like a crumpled piece of paper and it seemed to break the spell. Suddenly Sean felt like he could move again. He darted forward and snatched up the scrap of paper. He held it up, waving it in the air.

"Mister, you dropped something." But the cloaked man had gone. It wasn't that he had moved away, he just wasn't there any more.

Sean and Liam looked at each other and then at the brown crumpled paper. It looked very old but there was no way that they could read it in the dim half light. They almost said something to each other about what they had seen but what was there to say? All they had really seen was an old man in some sort of cloak, a bit unusual perhaps, but nothing scary. Yet neither boy wanted to talk about it ... well not here, not as it was starting to get dark.

They walked down the rest of the path in silence and then on until they came to the corner of their own street. Both boys lived across from each other so neither needed to go on alone. Sean reached his house first. He held up the scrap of paper to the street lamp but he still couldn't make out what was on it.

"I'll keep it till morning if you like?" he suggested. "We can both look at it properly on the way to school,"

Liam nodded. At the moment he wasn't sure he really cared. His sore ankle had begun to throb.

The next morning, Friday, Sean and Liam walked to school with their younger brothers, Barry and Kevin, as usual. Barry was in 3rd class and Kevin was in 2nd. Sean looked at his brother thoughtfully. Barry with his freckles and his hair sticking up as it always did in the morning was scuffing his feet in the wet grass. Sean wasn't sure if he wanted either Barry, or Kevin to know about the paper. He had got his chance to look at the old piece of paper on his own more carefully in the light of his bedroom. The writing was faded, almost gone in places, but he could see, drawn in brown, was some sort of map and writing with slightly curly letters and kind of square dots. Some

of the letters looked familiar but none of the words made sense. He wanted to talk it over with Liam first.

Kevin had joined up with Barry and they were both trying to dig holes in the mud with their runners. They weren't looking. Sean walked nearer to Liam. "I looked at that paper," he whispered, trying to look as though he wasn't talking about anything interesting. "I think it's a map of some kind although I can't make much of it."

"A treasure map," breathed Liam excitedly and just a wee bit too loudly.

"What treasure map?" called Barry, looking up. "Where did you get a treasure map? Can I see it? Where's the treasure hidden?"

"There's nothing - no treasure. I didn't say I'd got a treasure map"

"Yes you did" argued Kevin. We heard you. We heard Liam say it. What's that piece of paper you showed Liam then?"

"It's just my Maths homework."

"I don't believe you. Let me see." Barry grabbed Liam's arm so suddenly that he dropped the paper. Grabbing his chance, Barry snatched up the paper and ran off to Kevin. The two younger boys huddled over the paper.

"That's not Maths homework!" said Kevin accusingly. It does look like some sort of map. It's got old writing on."

Sean looked mad. "Get it off them," he growled.

"Give it us," yelled Liam and tried to get the map from Kevin who was jumping around trying to keep it out of arms length of the older boys. Sean and Liam tried to grab it but they were afraid to tear the fragile scrap.

"I'm telling Ma if you don't let us in" squealed Barry making sure to keep out of his brother's reach. "Go on, tell!"

Sean and Liam looked at each other and sighed.

"Oh alright then but you can't say anything to anyone!"

"We won't," answered the younger pair, finally standing still but not ready to hand over the prize. "Tell us then."

As they walked on to school, Sean and Liam recounted their adventure the previous afternoon.

"It's probably nothing," warned Liam.

"Just rubbish."

Then they reached school.

It was break before the Sean and Liam had any time to talk it over with their friends but then no-one could talk of anything else.

"What are you going to do with the map?"

"It might be valuable."

"You could sell it."

"How could I do that?"

"On e-bay."

"You could take it to the gards."

"Der! What they'd do with it? They would just think it's a bit of rubbish."

"Can you read it?"

"Course not. It's foreign writing."

"Dunno. Some of the letters look familiar."

"You could ask the teachers."

"They might want a cut of the treasure!"

"You could ask my Granddad."

The boys all turned to stare at the last boy who had spoken. James was a quiet boy who didn't join in very much. It wasn't that he was unfriendly, he just listened more than he spoke. He wasn't very big either. Sometimes his friends just forgot he was there.

"What did you say?"

"You could ask my granddad," repeated James, a bit embarrassed now there were so many faces staring at him.

"Your Grandad," snorted Jake, loudly, quick to make fun of James as usual. "What would he know about treasure maps?"

"Leave it out Jake. Let him finish."

James gave Sean a grateful glance and then went on "My granddad might know. He has loads of books and he can speak other languages. No, I don't know which ones but he wouldn't mind helping us. And he wouldn't tell. He's always going on about no-one listening to him anymore."

"You could do both," said Cian thoughtfully. "If you trace over the map and the words you could give the copy to the teachers and see if they knew what it said and James could show his Grandad the real map after school."

"I would take real care of it," promised James immediately.

James and Cian helped Sean make a careful copy. James folded the map into his Irish book and then together they took the copy to the teacher. Liam wasn't at all happy about this.

"It'll be trouble," he growled. "We should keep it to ourselves."

Sean, James and Cian took no notice. They just wanted to find out what the paper said as soon as possible.

As soon as his teacher came back into the room Sean was ready.

"Miss, can you read this?" He waved the copy of the strange writing in the air, ignoring Liam's warning frowns as his teacher looked at the strange writing carefully. It felt like she was reading it for a long time before she answered.

"I don't know, Sean. It looks a bit like Irish, the way it used to be written years ago but I can't read any of the words. Can I keep this and I'll show it to some of the other teachers? Perhaps they can do better."

She put the copy down on the desk and seemed to forget about it as the maths lesson began. Sean felt relieved that she had let it go. Perhaps Liam was right. It might be better to wait until later.

Kevin and Barry couldn't wait that long. Barry looked for his best friend Mark as soon as he reached the school gate.

"Mark," he shouted waving at his friend, "Can you keep a secret, a really important secret?"

Several other boys in his class looked his way and started to listen in as Mark sauntered over to Barry and Kevin.

"It's Liam and Sean" Barry went on in what he thought was a whisper. "They found a treasure map last night."

More boys stopped to listen.

"No such thing," scoffed Mark.

"S'true," added Kevin excitedly. "We saw it this morning. A ghost in a black cloak dropped it in the alley by the Dart last night. Then he vanished"

"He had a terrible white face" and evil glowing yellow eyes."

"What, after he vanished?" Mark was grinning but he was interested.

"Don't be daft! ...Before he vanished. Now don't tell anyone. You've got to promise."

Barry Sean and Mark went running off but it was too late. Half the class already knew and were busy telling the other half.

"Did you hear? Barry's brother found treasure."

"It was Kevin's brother as well and they only found a map."

"Na, it was a ghost and he told them there's loads of hidden treasure round here."

"Must have been a bank robber got shot or something."

"Probably wants revenge."

"Or he repents of his evil ways. Ghosts do that."

"Bet he murdered someone."

"Bet we could find the treasure quicker than Liam and Sean."

By lunch break, the whole of Barry and Kevin's class knew about the treasure and were begging Kevin and Barry to let them help find the treasure.

"We could look for clues around the school."

"There's that old tree on the "miler." It's got an X pattern in the bark."

"My dog's good at digging."

We could dig at St Anne's. Someone found an old pair of handcuffs there and they really worked."

"Has anyone got a metal detector?"

By the end of that Friday afternoon they had all made their plans. They had forgotten that it had been Sean and Liam who had found the clue. Indeed, they had even forgotten the map. Now it was Kevin and Barry who were the ones in charge and everyone was lining up to be given their instructions.

"Can you sneak a shovel out and start digging by the tree on the Miler?"

"We are going to take the metal detector down by the old Tayto factory."

"There's that hole in the wall by the school. It's suspicious."

The treasure hunt was about to begin.

Sean, Liam, James and Cian tried hard not to think about the treasure map all day. They didn't want to look suspicious and deliberately kept away from their younger brothers. At last school was over for the day.

"Will your granddad be in now if we go there after school asked Sean?"

,"He's always in when I get home from school" answered James.

"Will he mind if we turn up too?"

"No, he'll like it but just don't mind the biscuits."

Now all they had to do was to loose Kevin and Barry who were waiting for them as usual.

"You can walk back by yourselves today," said Liam when he saw them waiting. We've got something else to do.

"Ma said you have to walk with us. I'll tell."

"You do it when it suits you," retorted Sean and the older boys walked off together.

It wasn't far to James house. Sean and Liam had never been inside before. It was a bit dingy and faded and the hall smelt a bit like dusty old socks but James didn't seem to notice. He flung his schoolbag down on the cluttered hall table next to a pile of papers and three half folded umbrellas lying there looking like black strangled bats. James led them into a large room with a faded threadbare carpet. But what you really noticed in this room was all the books. There were shelves of them from ceiling to floor with more making untidy piles on the floor. They weren't even the plastic covered books with bright pictures on the outside like they were used to seeing in the library. No these were big books with hard backs and tiny lettering. There were so many of them.

James' granddad was sitting in a big chair by an old electric fire. He looked a bit like an old book himself with his rounded back and crinkled face like old paper. He turned and pulled himself up as the boys walked in.

"Hello James. Did you have a good day at school?" How's the maths, brainy boy? You'll be a professor before long, I can see."

James turned around feeling a bit awkward and hoping his granddad would notice that he wasn't on his own.

"Err, Granddad...."

"And who are your young friends then James? Aren't you going to introduce them then? Would you like some juice and we can get out the good biscuits."

The boys sat down and tried to politely nibble at the chocolate biscuits even though they looked well past their sell-by date. The chocolate was a bit grey. When they had got through one biscuit they started to explain about the strange piece of paper and where they got it. It sounded so strange that they were sure Mr O'Brien would think they were making it up but when they finished he was still interested and smiling.

"Well let's see this treasure map then."

He took it, put on his thick glasses and went and sat down in his chair. Eventually, without saying anything, he got up and fetched a big green covered book from the top of one pile and took it to his desk. He opened the book and skimmed a few pages, obviously looking for something. Then he started to write, checking something from his big book every so often. It seemed to take for ever and the boys squirmed on their chairs not knowing whether to stay or go. Then finally he looked up.

"Well, this is most interesting," he said smiling broadly. "You were right. This is a treasure map and if this is genuine, it's very old indeed. "

"Can you read it, Granddad?"

"You brought it to the right person boys. I can. It's in Irish, although not the Irish you see every day. It's early Irish, the sort of Irish that was used centuries ago. I am not as fluent since I retired from the university but I can still read this. Come and have a look."

The boys crowded around his desk.

"You see this word 'coire' it means a cooking pot or a cauldron. Now this word here is 'claideb' and means sword. This one 'gai' means spear I think and this one, I am not sure but I think it means some kind of stone. There are four dots, close together, on the map as well. These might refer to the four objects.

The word right in the middle of this map says Clúain Tairb. It is just a bit hard to recognise, but we know the place as Clontarf.

There is a name as well and this is one you should know. It is Brian Bóroimhe. Now James, you should know about him."

"He was the last High King of Ireland, wasn't he?" said James.

"That is right," answered Mr O'Brien and the Uí Bhriain claim to be connected to his clan, the Dal Cais tribe. Why James you could be descended from the last High King yourself. Who knows perhaps you'll be the next one."

"Things have moved on a bit Granddad."

Mr O'Brien was looking thoughtful.

"You know Brian Boru fought a great battle near here on Good Friday 1014, almost one thousand years ago exactly. "

"What? The battle of Clontarf? Yes, you told me all about it. You said that although Brian Boru's army won, he was killed after the battle. His son died as well didn't he?"

"He did but it kept the Norse men, you call them the Vikings, from taking all of Ireland."

"Do you think Brian Boru buried the treasure then?" asked Sean excitedly.

"Who knows," said Mr O'Brien. It is a very long time ago and this area has changed a lot in a thousand years. This was open country then. But there is something else that is odd about this. I need to show you something else. Just let me find the right book."

He got up from the desk and went over to the biggest bookcase in the room. It covered one whole wall and stretched from floor to ceiling. He looked along a few shelves and then dragged over a chair and using the back of the chair to support himself awkwardly climbed up.

"Granddad," said James, running over to hold the back of the chair. "Let me do it. You don't want to fall."

"James, will you stop fussing me. I'm not that old. I can manage perfectly well by myself."

"That's what you said last summer when you decided to climb up the ladder and paint the house by yourself," retorted James, "and then look what happened."

"That wasn't my fault," snorted Mr O'Brien, but he had reached the book he wanted and was climbing down from the chair.

Once he was safely sitting down again, the boys crowded around him.

"Let me tell you a very old story" he said. "Once upon a time four great treasures were brought to Ireland. There was a cauldron, a cooking pot. This would give you any food that you wanted, any time, as long as you were brave and generous, you'd get nothing out of it if you were cowardly and mean."

"I wouldn't mind having that," said Cian. "I could have ice-cream every day."

"If you shared it," answered Liam.

"I haven't finished," went on Mr O'Brien. There was also a spear and a sword. There are many stories about them both. No-one knows for sure but the stories say, the spear would never miss and the sword was known as the 'Claideb Soilsí', the 'Sword of Light'.

"What about the stone?"

"Well that is particularly interesting. The stone was often known as the 'Lia Foil'. It was said that if the rightful king stood upon it then it would cry out."

"What like, *Get off, you're too heavy*" laughed Sean.

"No."

"And those treasures belonged to Brian Boru?"

"That's the thing," said Mr O'Brien. "The four treasures belong to a different story altogether. The stories say that a legendary people called the Tuatha De Danaan

brought them from four cities in the north. Their stories are full of magic. Brian Boru is quite different. He was a historical figure. He really lived. I can't see how the four treasures could get into his story."

"But they are on the map."

"So it seems."

They all argued about what the map might be and what they should do next. James' Granddad was the most enthusiastic of all.

"Even if we don't find anything," he said "It's a good mystery."

"Yes," agreed the boys "but where do we start?"

Eventually they decided that Mr O'Brien would go with them to the library at Northside. They thought that the librarian might be able to find old maps of the area to compare with theirs.

"Let's go then" said Liam

"Patience," laughed Mr O'Brien. It can wait until tomorrow. Meet me in the morning and we will go together.

The next morning was Saturday and the visit to the library proved useful. The librarian was able to print off a couple of early maps for them, although nothing nearly as old as a thousand years but at least they could look for likely places. They spent the day looking at maps and finding out information about the area long ago. They identified places that might have been around in Brian Boru's time.

"There's the bronze age burial mound in the Cadbury grounds. Old cooking pots and daggers were found in mounds like that."

"What about the site of St Brendan's church? That was where St John's is now but the original church would have been there a thousand years ago."

"There's a story about an old well on the Miler but I don't know where it was."

"I can't tell if they match the marks on our map."

"Well it's a start."

"I never knew history could be such fun," said Cian.

"It is when there might be a treasure to find" laughed Liam,

They never gave Barry and Kevin a thought.

Kevin and Barry and a group of their friends were already busy treasure hunting.

Joe was already in trouble. He hadn't been able to wait even until Saturday. Straight after school on Friday, he sneaked a hammer out of his Dad's shed and went off to explore the suspicious hole in the school wall. It was only a small hole but there was an arrow shape in the stone nearby. This had to mean something. It was going fine. He was getting chips of mortar and stone out and the hole was getting bigger when there was a roar behind him. He turned to see Tony, the caretaker, yelling at him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Joe had to think fast.

"Er... I saw a hole in the wall and I'm trying to fix it.

He could see Tony didn't know what to make of this.

"Just get off home."

Joe ran. He just hoped it would all be forgotten by Monday. He decided that he had done enough treasure hunting.

Aaron took his Jack Russell to St Anne's and let the dog dig away. There had to be old stuff here. They had a great time, got very muddy and his dog found a bone but it wasn't treasure. Aaron was pretty sure that it wasn't even a human bone.

Eoghan sneaked a shovel out of the garden shed. He went over to the Miler and found the tree with the X on it. He tried digging under the tree but it was much harder to dig than he thought it would be. The tree roots kept getting in the way. People kept stopping to ask what he was doing. He didn't like it when they laughed at him when he said he was hunting for treasure. It was hard work.

Barry and Kevin had managed to borrow a metal detector. They spent a happy Saturday hunting everywhere. By the end of the afternoon they had a large bag of treasure but none of it looked valuable or old. There were tin cans, bottle caps, a bit off a car, what looked like a bit of a buggy wheel and a few rusty nail. It was all junk. They had found a silver ring and a front door key. They might be valuable to some-one but it wasn't treasure.

When Barry, Kevin, Eoghan, Joe and Aaron met up before they had to go home they were disappointed. They hadn't found the treasure.

"We don't know where to look," complained Eoghan. "Can't you get Sean to tell us more?"

"I'll try," said Barry.

Then it was time to go home.

Sean was still excited when he got home but he was pleased to see that Barry didn't ask him about the treasure map. "Maybe," he thought, "he's forgotten all about it." But Barry hadn't forgotten and he was watching his brother carefully. His chance came when he heard Sean on the phone to Liam. As quietly as he could, Barry knelt down and tried to listen through the keyhole. He could hear Sean's voice quite clearly although he could only hear half a conversation.

"James' Granddad was really great.....

I don't know. I think he believes that map is real.....

The treasures? I like the idea of a cauldron that gives you any food you ask for.....

Alright, I know that if we found any thing it would have to go to a museum.....

What? The mound? Yes that hill thing in the Cadbury's ground is an ancient burial site. It would have been there in Brian Boru's day.....

St Brendan's church is gone but we could look...."

Barry put his ear right up against the door and as he got closer his hand accidentally rattled Sean's door handle. He heard Sean stop talking and then say "Liam, I'll call you back."

Barry got up quickly and ran down the hall but Sean already had the door open.

"Barry, were you listening at my door?"

Barry thought of an answer quickly.

"No. Ma sent me up to tell you to come down to eat."

Barry ran off leaving Sean looking at him suspiciously.

That evening Barry thought of a plan. He was supposed to be with Sean tomorrow, but if he could take the metal detector to the mound near Cadbury's, he might find something exciting.

Sean was thinking that he, Liam, Cian, James and his Granddad might go and explore the site where the church of Brendan the Navigator had once stood. It was a good place to start to solve this strange mystery.

The treasure hunt was really happening!