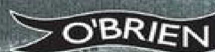
Eithne Massey

Where the Waters Flow

THE STORIES AND LORE OF IRELAND'S RIVERS



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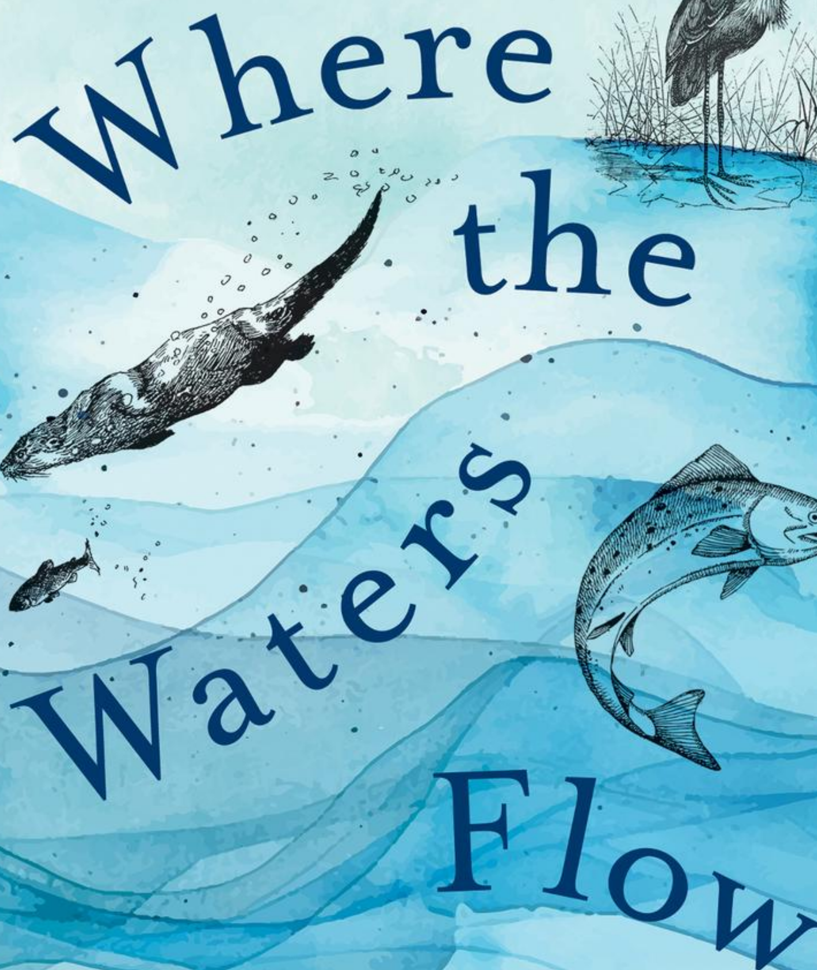

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Reviews of *Legendary Ireland*, also by Eithne Massey

'The celebration of the natural world and the close connection to it are everywhere in this striking collection.'
Irish Voice

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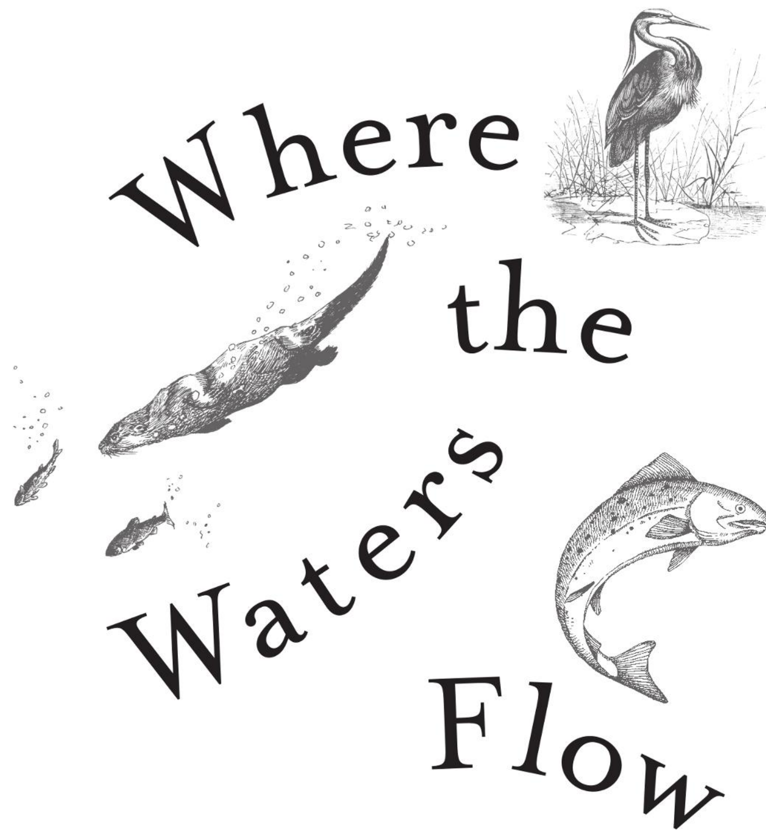

Where the Waters Flow

THE STORIES AND LORE OF IRELAND'S RIVERS

Eithne Massey

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ALL THOSE WHO LOVE RIVERS, AND BATTLE FOR THEIR SURVIVAL.

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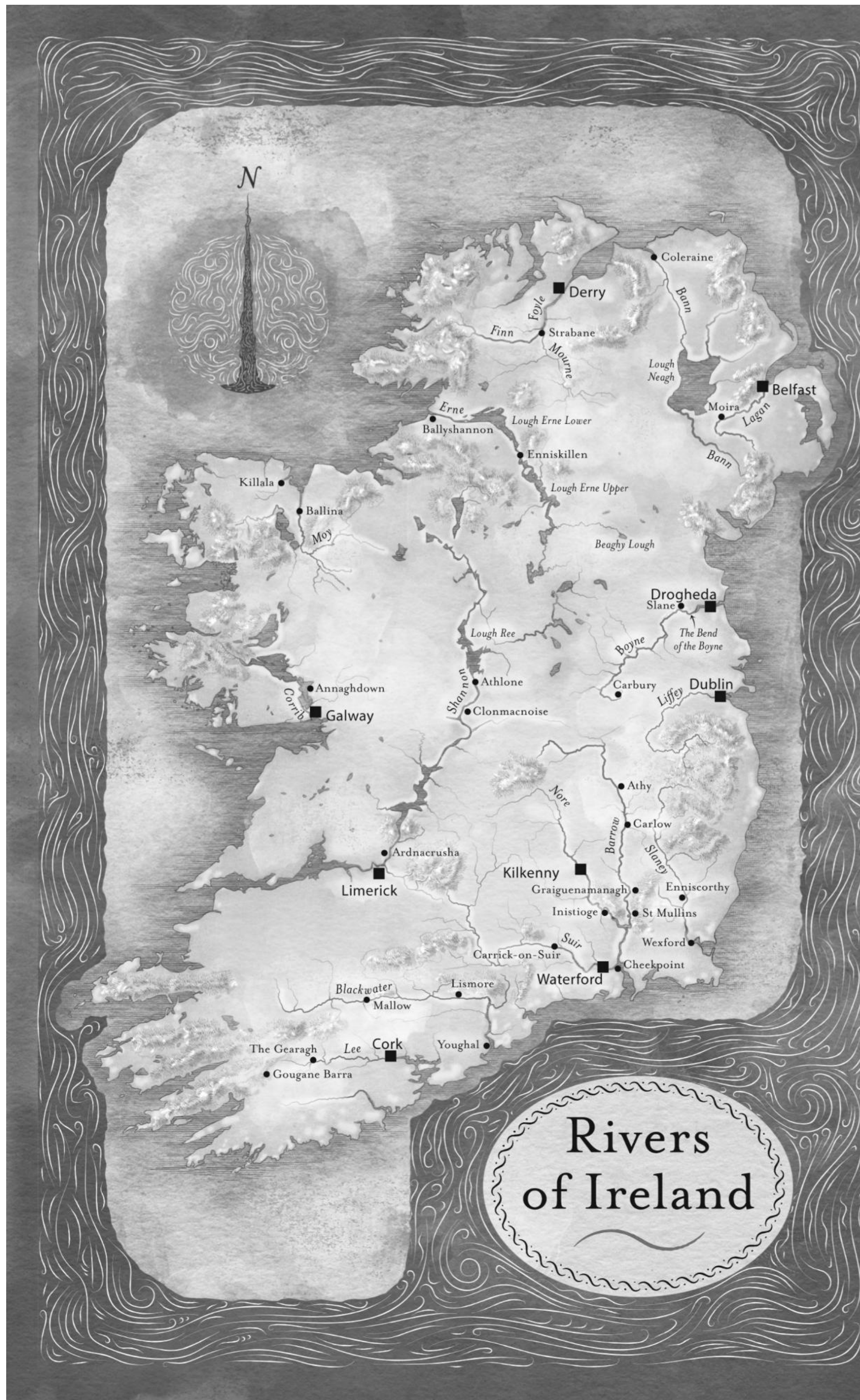

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Misty sunrise on the Barrow.

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Introduction

A river runs through us, no matter where in Ireland we may be. There will always be a stream, a river, a ditch nearby, leading to a larger channel of water and finally to the sea. These local watercourses are sometimes quiet and undramatic and are often ignored by those who pass by them every day.

Where the Waters Flow is an exploration of some of these shining waters and a plea to see them, hear them, care for them better than we have done. This book will take the reader on a journey around Ireland, looking at some of the history, myths and folklore associated with fifteen rivers, beginning with the Liffey and ending with the Boyne. The stories we will explore will come from every epoch of Ireland's history, from the myths which tell of the first invasions of Ireland to twentieth-century folk accounts of fiddlers hunted by fairies. During our river journey we will meet medieval bishops, wild squireens and women who raise the dead. A book of this length cannot hope to do more than paddle in the shallows of the wealth of these stories, but it will hopefully inspire readers to go a little deeper. Each river and its valley is a world in itself.

Look at a map of Ireland. You will see a fine network of lines covering its surface, like blue capillaries, connecting each part of the country, the lifeblood of the island. Rivers are the great connectors. They were the path taken by the first settlers as they ventured upstream from the coast, into the heart of Ireland. They were also the route adventurers took downstream towards the coast when they wanted to travel beyond the sea that surrounds us. For humans, like the salmon, rivers are both the call of home and the call to adventure. In the past they have been used as a protection from attack, acting as the frontier line between opposing tribes. This role can still be seen in the rivers that act as the dividing lines between counties. Rivers were also used as an access route by Gaelic and Viking raiders and by later invaders. There are many contradictions

inherent in rivers, the source of life and healing that also carries the threat of death, the cradle of civilisation that can annihilate human life and our works. There are two sides to every river.

In mythical terms, rivers symbolise life and fertility, and also death. The mighty Ganges and the rivers of Eden, the sacred Nile and the holy River Jordan, the Otherworld rivers of the Lethe and the Styx are just some of the rivers which flow through the myths and religions of the world. A river protects the infant Moses, and another carries the head of the singer Orpheus downstream. But as well as being the fount of life, a river can rise up in anger. The Scamander river-god in the *Iliad* battered the murderous hero Achilles with a furious, roaring torrent that swept across the plains of Troy, because he had defiled the god’s waters with the bodies of the men he had killed.

Rivers in Irish myth and folklore are somewhat more benign, although we do have stories of rivers rising up and pulling humans into their watery and fatal embrace. Irish folklore tells us how some rivers take a toll of a human life every year, and how others have drawn back their waters so that a man seeking a drink dies of thirst. Often seen as a route to the Otherworld, sometimes the voyage there is not a voluntary one. Rivers carry the symbolism of the earth they rise out of and the sea they flow into. Throughout Celtic Europe, many water deities were placated with offerings to rivers and lakes, and they were sometimes used for gruesome divinatory purposes. Warriors in Germany placed newborn babies on their shields and sent them to float on the water of rivers. If they floated, it was proof that the child was theirs.

Rivers were the place where kings and heroes were conceived and born. The Mórrigán straddled the banks of the river where the Dagda mated with her. It was in a river that Nessa gave birth to King Conchobar. Rivers have mourned with those who have lost their loved ones and provided inspiration and knowledge to those who walked their banks.

In historical terms, our Irish rivers have been used and sometimes abused by humans since settlers came and constructed their homes on the banks of the Bann around 7600 BCE. Our ancestors built in the shelter of riverbank trees, and they lived on the food the river provided. Rivers supplied the water that kept them alive, and they used its flow to cleanse themselves and carry their waste away. River water powered the mills to grind the corn for their daily bread. Tradition says that King Cormac

created the first cornmill to lessen the labour of his beloved. As time has gone on, water power has been used to make everything from cloth to paper to gunpowder.

While many rivers have been harnessed for energy, the concentration of nineteenth-century industry in the eastern parts of Ulster has led to river pollution and changes to their natural configurations. Rivers like the Bann and the Lagan have suffered more from human interference than rivers such as the Moy on the country's west coast. In our own times, the rivers of the heavily farmed south-east of Ireland are particularly vulnerable to pollution from fertilisers and agricultural run-off. Buried, channelled, canalised, dammed, blocked and poisoned – there is hardly an indignity that rivers have not suffered at our hands. The final indignity is that in the twenty-first century they are largely ignored. Rivers rarely even appear on road maps anymore. On other maps, the river has become the thinnest of blue lines, sometimes without even the courtesy of a name, viewed merely as an obstacle to be crossed or possibly a traffic hazard with an old-fashioned humped bridge.

We have become blind and indifferent to the fact that our rivers, like so many others on the planet, are under threat. While the wet climate of Ireland means that we are unlikely to lose the flow of our rivers to drought, the possibility of preserving them in a healthy state literally hangs in the balance. As the twenty-first century moves forward, numerous Irish rivers are listed as seriously polluted. There has been little or no improvement in the quality of our rivers in almost a decade, and phosphorus and nitrogen levels remain high in about a quarter of them. Overall, the condition of just over half of our rivers is high or good, while the other half is considered moderate, poor or bad. There have been some improvements in the water quality in rivers such as the Liffey and the Slaney, but a decline in others such as the Barrow and the Shannon. Since the second half of the twentieth century there have been inestimable losses in biodiversity and in the numbers of every form of river life, from the pearl mussel to the salmon. These losses – in particular the catastrophic decline in salmon numbers internationally – owe much to climate change, but also a great deal to the phosphorus and nitrogen which flow into our rivers from the bright green fields on their banks. Industrial activity, industrial-scale forestry, sand extraction and human waste removal also play a role in the damage done, but intensive

agriculture is the most widespread threat. Irish farmers, many of whom are finding it hard to make ends meet, have been reluctant to cut back on their use of artificial fertilisers or look at different ways of dealing with animal waste, a major source of nitrogen pollution. The growth of toxic blue-green algae, most obviously in Lough Neagh but also in other rivers and lakes all over Ireland, is one of the clearest signs of the destruction of the freshwater environment. While the situation in Ireland is not as serious as it is in some other European countries, there is no room for complacency. We are part of an international problem.

Globally, floodplains are considered among the most threatened of all ecosystems. The threats to rivers cross international barriers. Pollution upstream is carried down to other communities; the headwaters of a river are particularly vulnerable as the whole river system will be affected by any pollutants close to the source. Damming upstream can deprive another area of water. The massive dams being built in Turkey are just one example of the use of rivers as a political tool, taking water security from people living downstream, in addition to playing havoc with biodiversity. Areas of once fertile land in Iraq and Syria, bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, have been left dried up and barren, partly because of climate change but also because of the dams upriver. Disruption of the flow of water raises the question of who holds the rights to rivers and their waters. There are many who believe that these rights are held by the river itself.

Recognition of rivers as individual and unique entities has developed into the argument that a river is itself a living creature. This is the argument put forward by the Rights of Nature, an international movement which is active in Ireland. Some county councils have already passed a motion recognising such rights, and there has been movement towards submitting a referendum proposal which would enshrine these rights in the Irish Constitution. Rivers in Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia have been acknowledged as having rights as legal entities, including the right not to be polluted. There has been a shift in our relationship to the natural world. Where before, the majority of people thought of the river as a resource, something to be exploited and bent to our will, there is now more awareness that the river – and the ecosystem it supports – has its own individual integrity.

The problem with listing a river as a legal entity is that it does not recognise that rivers are beyond human laws, and that their rights should perhaps at times supersede individual human ones, such as that of land ownership. In addition, laws and directives are sometimes just ignored, and laws can actually bind and limit rights as well as protect them. The rights of rivers can flow into a morass of legal technicalities as easily as humans can, while using legal language when dealing with rivers can limit our understanding of their importance and innate power.

The language we use when we speak of rivers – words like flow, mouth, source, bridge, depth, bed – are all highly charged with imagery and emotional heft and evoke a response that no legalese can possibly achieve. Imagination and wonder are important factors in our relationship with rivers, though it must be admitted that calling rivers 'sacred' has not always safeguarded them. The sacred nature of the Jordan and the Ganges has not protected them from being two of the most polluted rivers in the world. But the legal designation of the river as a minor needing a 'guardian' somehow diminishes the river, pulling it into our human-focused approach. It also raises the possibility that the role of the guardian could be usurped by a group or individual who might not have the river's best interests at heart. The Ganges was declared a legal entity (though it later had its legal status challenged and overturned by India's Supreme Court) but is still a victim of massive pollution by humans.

If we accept that rivers are in some sense living beings, perhaps they may also become as angry as the Scamander river-god, as the Biblical increase in flooding worldwide demonstrates. Myths of apocalyptic floods going back as far as the Epic of Gilgamesh look to the future as well as the past. In Ireland, the combination of climate change, massive building on floodplains and the rampant increase in hard, impermeable surfaces around rivers has resulted in disastrous flooding in many communities. These local tragedies have served to re-focus our attention on rivers and to acknowledge their power. Whereas traditionally the approach taken to flood control was to create further barriers to the river's freedom to flow, new approaches such as re-wiggling – replacing the meanders in formerly straightened rivers – demonstrate our changing relationship with rivers.

This changing relationship can be seen in the huge numbers of people now fighting for the rights of rivers. The number of associations and

groups actively struggling to save rivers and their wildlife has increased exponentially, both internationally and in Ireland, and there are far too many to list individually. These groups are dedicated to the protection of the fish, fowl, insects, animals, plants and most of all the water of our rivers. These are the people who have taken on the voice of the river, and these are the people to whom I have dedicated this book.

Although they cannot speak in human terms, it would not be true to say that rivers do not have a voice – nothing is more alive and various. The rippling, whispering, gurgling, bubbling, sighing – and sometimes roaring – they make as they flow has its own story to tell. To be on or in a river brings us out of our normal modes of being. Simply walking along a riverbank, watching the light on its water and listening to its music, can lead us to a place where we lose our sense of individual consciousness and become part of its flow. Even urban rivers, bounded by stone or concrete, can take us out of our everyday selves, as we look at the light reflected from the water under ancient stone bridges or watch the water transformed by the ripples of rain falling. That is one of the great gifts they give us. For rivers are the great givers, endlessly patient with creatures whose lifespan is not even a drop in their endless flow, their youthful rushing and falling, their turning back on themselves, their last meanderings.

Rivers pull us in. In Irish myth there is a strong connection between the music of water and the bubbles that can be seen on the surface of rivers with the deepest form of poetic inspiration, or indeed revelation. Stories describe the hypnotic state that is familiar to those who spend time listening to the voice of the river and watching its light-filled flow.

In these myths, the music of the water is sometimes identified as the sound of the Sídh, Ireland’s fairies, or of mermaids. Women and women’s voices are closely linked to rivers, from the Washer at the Ford to the drowned girls who sought knowledge at forbidden wells and were swept away, becoming the water itself. The writer Manchán Magan points out that almost every river is gendered as feminine in the Irish language, and the vast majority of Irish stories relating to the birth of rivers are connected to a female.

Irish folklore abounds with stories of the Sídh linked to rivers. Fairies, though they cannot cross running water, often lure humans to the other bank of the river, where they do things differently and where time ceases

to matter. There is an interesting connection between the hypnotic effect of rivers, the connection with the Other Crowd (as the Sídh are often referred to) and what is called the state of ‘flow’. ‘The Flow’ is described by neurologists as the condition when one is deeply engaged in an activity, concentrating hard, fully immersed. There may be difficulty involved in the activity, but when we are ‘in the flow’ we feel not stress but pleasure. In this state time passes and we have no idea whether it’s been ten minutes or half an hour since we started the task. We have been taken by the fairies of the central nervous system to another world where time works differently. Interruption of this state can feel like a sharp and painful loss.

Perhaps a river feels a loss when its flow is blocked and diverted by weirs and dams and mill streams. Or perhaps it just shrugs and gets on with the job as water does, taking the path of least resistance, while over time making channels through rock and moulding entire landscapes. The message of the river is constant renewal and the capacity to keep changing (we never step in the same river twice) while remaining inherently the same.

Rivers have mouths, like humans. They have sources, like stories. In the stories which follow I hope that the rivers will speak to you.

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Blessington Bridge and the River Liffey, 1938.

The Liffey

‘the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of’
James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

The Liffey, once known as the *Ruirteach*, the wildscrambling one, starts quietly enough as a small dark spring (or several small dark springs) in

the rugged landscape of the Wicklow Mountains, close to the Sally Gap and on the western slopes of Tonduff mountain. It is, like the source of so many rivers, undramatic; an amalgam of pools and rivulets which spring up in an expanse of bog, and any exploration of the Liffey's beginnings will be a boggy experience. What is known as the Liffey Head Bridge is not, in fact, the highest point of the river, which is further up the mountains, but the dark peaty pools, surrounded by moorland and exposed to the winds and birds wheeling, does give a sense of the river's beginning.

Dublin, the Liffey's city, also takes its name from the words Dark Pool or *Dubh Linn*. From the source, the river makes its way westwards towards the sun setting on the plains of Kildare. The Liffey is a contrary river; instead of taking the most direct route east over the mountains to the sea, she meanders in a circular way through three counties before reaching Dublin Bay. Her journey takes just under 130 kilometres, although the source and mouth are no more than 22 kilometres apart.

Over time, the Ruirteach saw its name changed to Life or Liffey, the plain which covers much of Kildare and west Dublin. The legend associated with this is that Deltbanna, who acted as butler to King Conaire Mór, travelled over the plain with his wife, Life, who, seeing its beauty and fertility, asked that it should be named after her. Thereafter:

> Deltbanna dealt out no more liquor for the men of Erin until the plain was called by his wife's name.

There are other sources for the name Life, including a drowned princess and a maiden converted by St Patrick. The Liffey is also associated with the high king Cairbre Lifechair, son of Cormac Mac Airt and lover of Life. While Cormac is considered one of the greatest high kings of Ireland, famous for his wisdom, Cairbre is better known for the bitter enmity between himself and Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the leader of the Fianna, the renowned troop of hunters and warriors. Their rivalry resulted in Cairbre's defeat of the Fianna at the Battle of Gabhra. Cairbre was not given a chance to celebrate his victory; he killed Oscar, grandson of Fionn, but Oscar in turn took Cairbre's life.

A less tragic story tells how St Moling came from his hermitage on the River Barrow to ask the King of Leinster to reduce his rent. The king agreed but changed his mind after St Moling had left and sent his soldiers

in pursuit of the saint. When St Moling saw the men following him, he made the Sign of the Cross over the Liffey, and the waters rose up and blocked his pursuers.

Before it reaches the Plain of Life, the River Liffey rushes down to the beautiful Blessington Lakes, a reservoir created by the damming of the river at Poulaphouca for a hydro-electricity scheme. Built in the 1930s, this was one of the earliest of such projects in the new Irish state. Further west is the site of the Poulaphouca Hydro-Electric Dam and the water treatment plant for the two reservoirs which still provide most of Dublin's water. The writer A.A. Luce describes the calamitous effect the creation of the reservoir had on the trout population of the rivers that fed it. For the first season the fish 'had a right royal time of it', but then tapeworm killed practically all of them, as the reservoir was a perfect breeding ground for disease. Prior to the damming of the river, travellers from Dublin would take a tram to view the three pools formed by the steep incline of the waterfall at Poulaphouca. The middle one was where the Pooka (*Púca*), that fairy creature which often took the form of a black horse, was said to live. This is now the main road between Blessington and Baltinglass. Before the bridge was built here, travellers would have passed through Ballymore Eustace, a quiet village which has known its share of excitement in the past. Ballymore Eustace is where the river settles down and becomes a river of the Pale, the area around Dublin that was controlled by English settlers during Norman and Tudor times. Its six-arched bridge was a strategic crossing point of the Liffey and was a target of attack from the Irish of the Wicklow Mountains, notably in 1578 when Rory O'Moore burned the town. As late as the 1820s the town was described as a place of some consequence. Now, it is possible to pass through Ballymore without realising the river is there at all, as it is tucked away behind houses and the church, although there is a lovely walk along its banks.

The castle that guarded the village is long gone. The Church of Ireland graveyard still holds some grave slabs, an effigy of a sixteenth-century Fitzeustace knight, and its baptismal font dates from the tenth to eleventh century.

Poulaphouca, pictured in the nineteenth century.

The other major feature of Ballymore was its mill. Probably dating as far back as the church, the mill at Ballymore is listed as one of the possessions of John Comyn, Archbishop of Dublin in the late twelfth century. The ruins are a short, wooded walk from the bridge, and date from 1802 when a woollen mill was built by Christopher Drumgoole. It went through various incarnations, but by the late 1800s Copeland's woollen mills were well established, using the wool from the sheep that grazed the surrounding mountain pastures. By the beginning of the twentieth century the mill had declined and eventually the complex had become little more than a large atmospheric ruin. It has recently been given a new lease of life by plans for the conversion of parts of the building into a micro-distillery.

The Liffey mills have from earliest times served the needs of those who lived on its fertile plain, with its herds of sheep and fields of grain. There were 200 mills in the river's catchment area: woollen, corn, paper, cloth, printing mills for calico, flour and tuck mills, mills for grinding linseed oil and even making gunpowder. Many of these mill buildings,

long neglected, have been transformed in recent years, but even into the 1930s some had a sinister reputation. One, located between Chapelizod and Lucan further down the Liffey, was already in ruins when the Folklore Commission recorded the story that it had been built by the Devil in a single night. This is an international tale, but it also echoes stories of that mythical builder the Gobán Saor, who in turn may be an incarnation of the ancient Irish smith-god, Goibhniu. Mills figure prominently in folklore and folktales, with saints like Moling building miraculous ones on the banks of the Barrow, and the Hag of the Mill, Lonnach, playing an important role in the story of King Suibhne.

The middle stretch of the river is quiet and wide, travelling across the great fertile plain of Kildare, long settled by the Normans and after them the Anglo-Irish. Families farmed the good land, and the wealth of these landlords resulted in the construction of some of the most impressive Georgian mansions in Ireland. Carton, Castletown, Straffan, Sandymount and Millicent are just a few of these. These big houses and the lives of those who lived in them and worked in them – and their gardens – have ultimately left us with a legacy of grace and beauty. And despite the proximity to a massively bloated capital city, there is oasis after oasis of vibrant wildlife here.

Old mill buildings at Islandbridge, 1968.

The Liffey valley is the only place where I have ever seen a kingfisher in Ireland. This most elusive of river birds, the tiny kingfisher or *cruidín* is mainly spotted as a flash of blue along the riverbank. As with many other species, kingfishers were hunted down in the nineteenth century, their beautiful feathers used to adorn fashionable hats. The good news is that, like all wild birds, they are protected in Ireland and the kingfisher is still widespread. Their main habitats are the Boyne, Cork Blackwater, Barrow and Nore. Kingfishers have some strange habits, using regurgitated fish bones as building material in the nests they make in burrows. As the fledgelings grow and the number of waste pellets

increase, home life must become rather unsavoury. For whatever reason, for their second brood, the adult kingfishers move to a new nest. This practice was explained to me as a smart move as it ensures that adult children don't move back in!

Writer Arthur Young greatly admired the grand houses of the Liffey valley and their wooded estates when he toured Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century, and was particularly impressed by the plantations of trees, some of which still survive. In more recent times, Ireland's fast-growing population has resulted in the creation of very different kinds of estates, of both the industrial and the housing variety. Industry and the large housing complexes of the dormitory towns of Dublin now dominate the valley.

Large multinationals have sprung up. What were small villages have become large towns. Clane is a typical Liffey town in that its population increased from 600 in 1971 to over 8,000 in 2022. Nearby is Bodenstown graveyard, the quiet resting place of one of Ireland's national heroes, the political and revolutionary leader Theobald Wolfe Tone. Clane is also the burial site of Mesgegra, King of Leinster, killed by the Red Branch knight Conall Cearnach during a conflict with the Ulster king. On her husband's death, Mesgegra's wife Buan lifted up her cry of lamentation, 'which was heard even unto Tara and to Allen, and she was dead'. She is said to be buried at Mainham, north of Clane, where there is a holy well and the remains of a motte, now surrounded by apartment blocks.

In the eleventh century, the monastic settlement at Clane was one of the many victims of Viking raids. The Vikings founded Dublin, coming from the east up along the river. The early core of the city was at Wood Quay, close to where Dublin Castle is now. But there was also a large Viking settlement further west, at Islandbridge, where the river is no longer tidal. The presence of the Phoenix Park on one side of the river and the War Memorial Gardens on the other has preserved a sense of rural greenness in this western enclave of the city. The stretch of the river here was once famous for its salmon, which may be one of the reasons the Vikings chose to settle there. The Viking finds in the Islandbridge/Kilmainham area constitute the largest Viking burial plot outside of Scandinavia, with fifty-nine graves currently identified. Viking finds were made in the area from 1832 onwards, and more discoveries were made in the 1930s when the War Memorial Gardens were created.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, yet another sword and spearhead were discovered there.

Irish National War Memorial Gardens, Islandbridge.

This site must have been a massive burial complex, stretching westwards along the bank of the Liffey and southwards towards the ancient monastic complex of Kilmainham. The remains date from circa AD 825. The finds include tongs and weights and spindle whorls and what are possibly needle cases, so it seems likely that there was a thriving settlement here, one of the earliest longphorts in Ireland. Glass, amber, white metal and bronze ornaments, iron swords, spearheads and shield bosses have been found, as well as human remains. The ford at Islandbridge continued to be an important strategic crossing point on the Liffey, marking the western reaches of the settlement of Dublin and the site of more than one battle.

The sleeping Viking warriors and their families on the hill overlooking the river are now part of the Irish National War Memorial

Gardens. The Gardens, constructed to commemorate those Irish soldiers who died in the First World War, has thankfully been rescued from its former neglect; as late as the 1990s it held the sense of a place abandoned. Now, it has blossomed, with beautiful rose gardens and a lovely river walk. At Islandbridge the river shows the last vestiges of its rural self, uncorseted by stone walls, flowing freely through green banks bordered by trees.

From the Memorial Gardens it is possible to walk westwards along the southern bank of the Liffey to Chapelizod, a place much associated with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a book built around the river itself. In the novel, H.C. Earwicker dreams. Beside him in his bed is Anna Livia, his wife, once a sprightly young girl, who begins as 'a cloud, shower, a rivulet, brook, a young thin pale slip of a thing', becoming Missislifi and falling into night and the sea, 'and it's old and old it's sad and weary', with her 'old father', her 'cold mad father'. The two washerwomen on either side of the young Liffey babble and gossip and the language of the book tries, as Joyce himself said to critic Arthur Power, to emulate the language of water itself.

Joyce also connects Chapelizod with the legend of Tristan and Isolde (or Iseult). This is one of the stories told by the troubadours of the Middle Ages, part of the Arthurian Cycle. There is a tradition that says 'Izod' comes from the name Iseult and that this was the home of Iseult, the lover of Tristan and wife of King Mark, heroine of this tragic cycle of love and revenge. In Irish, Chapelizod is *Séipéal Iosóid*, meaning 'Iseult's chapel'. Connections are frequently made between this story and the Celtic tale of Diarmuid and Gráinne, but there is actually not that much connecting the two stories, apart from the fact that the young woman, promised to an old king, falls in love with a young warrior and they run away together. Gráinne is a very different character from Iseult; she is a woman with a strong will who mocks Diarmuid into making love to her. As they cross a river on their flight and the water splashes her thighs, Gráinne tells him that the river has more courage than he has.

Other sources link the origin of this unusual name – still called Chapel Lizard by some of the older locals – to Lazer or Leper. There was a leper house in nearby Palmerston.

The writer Sheridan Le Fanu grew up close to Chapelizod and set some of his stories nearby. He described it as a gay and pretty village,

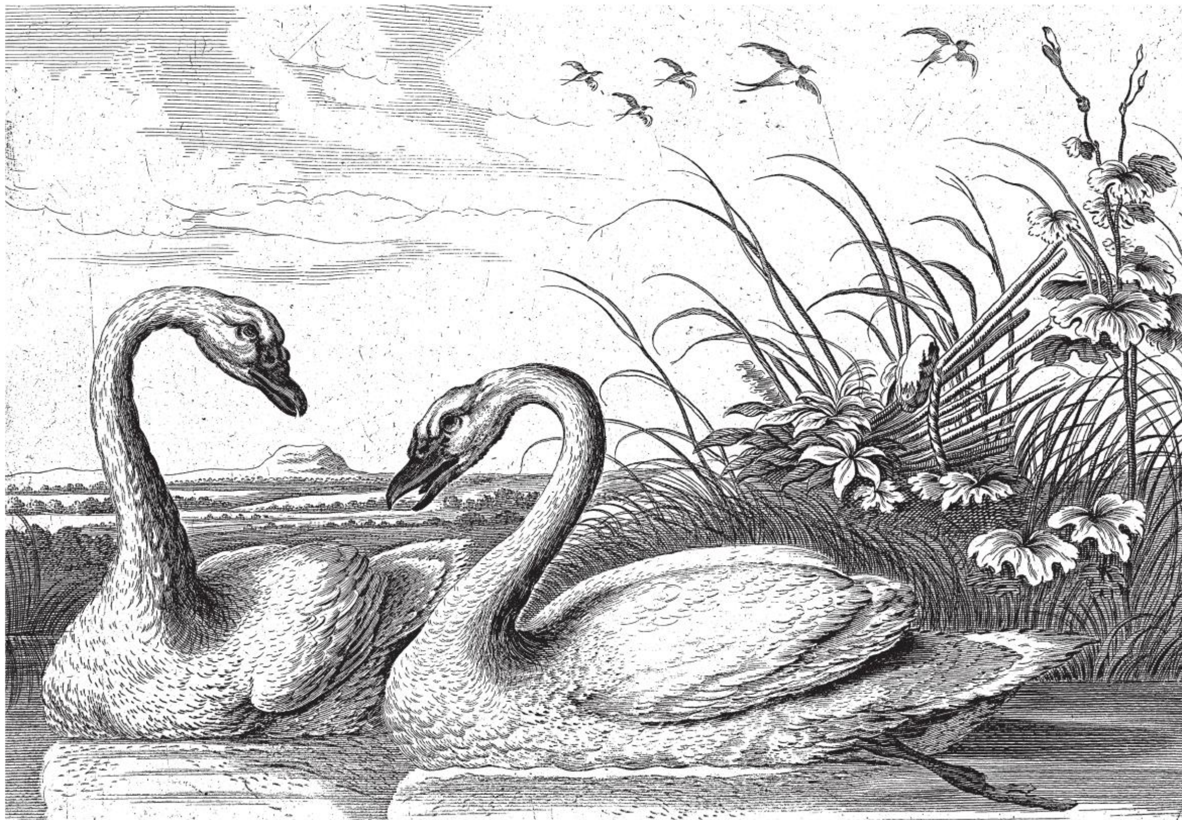
and it is one of the few village suburbs of Dublin that has managed to retain a certain charm, though Dubliners no longer come out during the long summer days to visit its famous Strawberry Beds.

In its heyday, the Strawberry Beds was the scene of outdoor dancing, drinking, flirtations and probably a lot more. Cars from the city were kept busy ferrying groups of young people back and forth to admire the river views, while eating strawberries served on cabbage leaves by the local growers. The concentration of various army barracks in the area must have resulted in a strong military presence and I imagine the place had something of a louche atmosphere. It was certainly considered a venue for romance; honeymooners from Dublin came out here if they could not afford to go further afield.

The Liffey between Chapelizod and Islandbridge is the site of a true story involving James Joyce's celebrated frenemy Oliver St John Gogarty, a man of a multitude of talents and writer of rip-roaring memoirs. He is the first character to appear in *Ulysses*, as 'stately, plump Buck Mulligan'. But there was much more to Gogarty than a wild young buck in a Martello Tower. He was a respected surgeon, sportsman, writer and politician. A friend of W.B. Yeats, George Moore described him as 'author of all the jokes that enable us to live in Dublin'. Distrusted by many, Gogarty's wit was often scatological and sometimes wounding, and even as a member of the Irish Senate he could not resist a joke, suggesting that the stone bird on the Phoenix Monument in the Phoenix Park should be included in the Wild Birds Protection Bill. But he was a serious supporter of social and economic reform, especially for action on the tenement housing and substandard sanitation that was causing the astronomical death rate in the poorer areas of Dublin. Mercurial and restless, Gogarty ended his days in America. One has the feeling that the piety of the new Irish State made him miss the Dublin of his youth, when one of his claims to fame was his encyclopaedic knowledge of Monto, the red-light district of Dublin.

Gogarty was made a Free State senator in the 1920s, thereby bringing on himself the ire of the anti-Treaty side, who burned his house in Renvyle in Galway. They also kidnapped him, luring him into a car on the pretence of a patient needing help. He was huddled in a fur coat – it was a freezing January day – and driven to a house on the Liffey, near Chapelizod. There he was told he would be shot if some Republican

prisoners were not released. The garden of the house led down to the banks of the river and Gogarty decided that the best chance of escape lay there. He convinced his captors to take him outside, saying he urgently needed to void his bowels. He then slipped his arms from his coat and made for the river. Fifteen minutes of freezing water and vigorous swimming brought him to freedom. Years later, when the Civil War was over, Gogarty released two swans on the Liffey as a sign of gratitude, and who knows, perhaps it is their descendants that can be seen on a summer's evening from the War Memorial Park, tranquilly gliding on the water, unworried by the politics of the old, or indeed the new Ireland.



THE SWAN

The essence of tranquil beauty, swans glide across the river, creatures of myth and magic. Leto was the mother of the heavenly twins Artemis and Apollo, who hatched from two eggs; she had been impregnated by Zeus in the guise of a swan.

European folklore is full of swans, viewed as solar symbols, often shown wearing golden chains around their necks. Swan maidens fly and float backwards and forwards in the myths of the Scandinavian and Germanic people and are prominent in Irish myth.

The best-known story is that of the children of Lir, where, out of jealousy, their wicked stepmother turns four children into swans. The legendary hero Mongán took the form of a swan, as did the three sons of Tuireann; and at the end of the story of Midir, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, and Étaín, his lover, the couple's final transformation is into two swans. The story of the god Aonghus and the Swan Maiden Caer Ibormeith is a love story with an unusually happy ending. Not so that of Dealfaith. The great hero of Ulster Cú Chulainn threw stones at a flock of white birds flying overhead, unaware it was a woman of the Sídh and her handmaidens coming to declare her love for him. Flocks of white birds often foretell magical events in ancient Irish stories. In Mayo folklore, swans carry the souls of virgins.

Bronze Age Ireland celebrated the swan in artefacts such as the Dunaverney flesh-hook. This ceremonial feasting tool is beautifully decorated with two groups of birds: on one side a group of ravens and on the other a family of swans, two adults and three cygnets.

Swans may have been a taboo bird in terms of hunting, although in later times a roasted swan was the centrepiece of many a medieval feast, and there are recipes given for the delicacy up until 1861, when Mrs Beeton's cookbook appeared.

Swans are not considered endangered in Ireland. In recent years, the Swan Census has shown an increase in Whooper swans, with many more of them migrating to Ireland from Iceland during the winter months, and a decrease in the numbers of the Bewick's swan, which no longer has to travel as far south as Ireland during the winter in order to survive. The third type of swan found in Ireland is the Mute swan, which in many cases stays in Ireland throughout the year.

Swans have the gift of seeming unperturbed by proximity to humans, bringing beauty into everyday city life by nesting everywhere, under bridges, on canals, beside the roar of trains and traffic and humans. Gliding along tranquil waters, they are an inspiration to poets, artists and storytellers. As Seamus Heaney put it in 'Postscript', the sight of swans on a grey lake can still catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

And so, eastwards, to Dublin. Past the many barracks that have become centres of culture rather than defence, past the old markets at Smithfield, rejuvenated with stone and iron. Past the old sites of colonisation and control, along the quays, making our bows to the Four Courts, the monolithic Civic Offices and, a little away from the quays, Dublin Castle.

The river's story has always been overshadowed by and in some ways overshadows that of Ireland's capital city. Dublin and its river have borne the brunt of every invading force since Ireland was first settled, and the city was the site of the 1916 Rebellion, which finally brought Ireland the independence it had sought for so many years.

At the time of its early twentieth-century creative flowering it was a small, intimate city, where it was said that you could not walk the length of Grafton Street at around four o'clock without meeting someone you knew. But despite its recent growth, the faint sense of Dublin still being a place where everyone knows everyone, or at least knows someone they know, remains part of its charm.

Dublin’s history is a rich tapestry of stories and songs. The city has experienced change after change during the last hundred years, since Ireland became an independent state and Dublin became a capital city of a young nation. Nowadays, the city is beset with the problems that massive growth and creaking infrastructure bring with them. The Greater Dublin area is home to almost half of the Irish population. When we look down the tidal Liffey to the east, to the new skyscrapers of Dublin Port, it does not seem possible that this is the shabby-genteel city Joyce wrote about, mourning its spiritual paralysis. What was a wasteland of disused storage sheds and abandoned factories has become the redeveloped Docklands area, looking out beyond Ireland to the sea and the world beyond. Financial centres and technical hubs, multinational giants, their giant logos dwarfing the humans passing underneath them, overpriced apartments and expensive restaurants – everything shouts capital investment. Walking along the Liffey quays on a summer’s evening, away from the shadow of Christ Church, with its ghosts of Darkey Kelly (a famous murdering madam), past the house on Usher’s Island where Joyce set his short story ‘The Dead’, the city quays are no longer lined with crumbling Georgian decay. The view to the west is of the sun setting over a series of beautiful bridges, some old, some new. They cross a river which has become a serene and stately matron, making her final farewell to the city before she joins the sea.

MESGEGRA AND BUAN

Poets have a romantic reputation in many of the ancient Irish stories, but they are also sometimes depicted as vindictive and as greedy as any king or warrior, and they held the power to destroy with satire, a power which has always been greatly feared. This story, set near Clane in Kildare, demonstrates the evil that can be caused by the insatiable greed of a single satirist. It contains echoes of the motifs found in many other river tales: the dream, the nut found in the river, the lost limb. It is set at a ford on the Liffey. Fords and bridges have a particular resonance in Irish stories; they are where offerings are made, the site of battles and the place where the Otherworld is glimpsed.

When it was known that Athairne the Unrelenting had begun his rounds of the courts of Ireland, the women hid and the chiefs put away their cattle, for the poet was insatiable in his demands and a satirist of tremendous power. Perhaps he had gained that power when he stole the god Midir’s three cranes. In the crane curse, the poet stands on one leg and points at the victim with one eye closed, then recites the satire. It is the most powerful malediction of them all, causing great harm and sometimes death to the recipient. By the time he reached the court of Mesgegra, the King of Leinster, Athairne had already taken the eye out of a king’s head. He demanded the last remaining eye from King Eochaidh Mac Luachta, and Eochaidh had given it, condemning himself to blindness. He had done so rather than have his people cursed or drawn into battle with the Red Branch Knights of Ulster, who would always come to the defence of their poet if they felt he had been disrespected. They say that the lake where the king washed his face got its name, Lough Derg, from the red blood that flowed from the empty eye socket.

Athairne himself came to a violent end, but not before he had brought untold trouble to the people of Ireland. And it was always for spite; there might be women far more beautiful in the court, but Athairne would demand to sleep with the queen; there might be gold and silver and rubies strewn in his path, but Athairne would look for the jewel that was impossible to find. When Athairne came to the court of Leinster, his first demand was that Mesgegra’s wife, Buan, be given to him for a night. The following morning, he placed her under a *geas* that she would go away with whatever hero could present her with her husband’s head.

In Leinster, Athairne demanded a hundred and fifty cattle. The Leinstermen agreed and built a bridge on the Liffey, close to the Black Pool, so that they could drive the cattle across the river northwards, towards Athairne’s home on the Boyne. Athairne then demanded a hundred and fifty maidens.

This time, the Leinstermen refused. Athairne and his followers took the maidens anyway, and there was a great siege at the Hill of Howth. The men of Ulster, including the

champion Conall Cearnach, came to the poet's assistance, and Mesgegra was forced to flee. His charioteer carried Mesgegra and Buan westward along the green Liffey valley, towards the king's fort of Dinn Rí in Carlow. Mesgegra and Buan slept on the banks of the river, holding tight to one another throughout the night, restless in their sleep. When the morning came, a nut the size of a man's head came floating down the river. The charioteer woke and said he had been granted a vision, and he was entitled to half the nut. He fought with Mesgegra and the king's hand was severed. So, when a tall man with a twisted neck and a great bush of red-gold hair appeared on the opposite bank of the river and challenged the king to single combat, the injured Mesgegra feared for his life.

The tall man was Conall Cearnach. With the exception of Cú Chulainn, Conall was the greatest of the Red Branch knights. He was a fearsome warrior. Fuelled by rage and the thirst for revenge, he had killed many people, but he was also a man who held to his code of honour. He tied one hand behind his back during the combat with the wounded king. Buan looked on. She stood straight and silent, her face without expression. No cry passed her lips, no more than it had on the night Athairne had raped her.

The fight was short. Conall sawed Mesgegra's head from his body. Then, still standing in the bloody water, and facing Buan where she stood on the green bank of the Liffey, Conall took the head and held it high. He went down on one knee.

'My lady, the spoils of war,' he said, smiling, offering her the severed head.

Buan looked into her husband's dead eyes and let out a cry that could be heard from one end of the Liffey to the other, and she collapsed and died.

She was buried in the mound close to Clane, her husband's head clasped in her arms. But before that, Conall Cearnach took the brains from Mesgegra's head and brought them to the north, where he made a ball of them with lime. This became a great weapon, and he used it with a slingshot to kill many of the enemies of Ulster.

He paid no heed to the prophecy that Mesgegra would avenge his own death. The brainball was stolen by Connacht man Cet. Cet was Conall's uncle and had tried to kill Conall when he was just a baby by placing his foot on the child's neck and pressing down. It was said that was how Conall was left with a crooked neck, and he never forgave his uncle for the injury. That was also why he grew his hair, to try to hide his affliction. Cet was still filled with hatred for his nephew Conall, and for King Conchobar, so he shot the brainball into the head of the king as he slept by a river. It did not kill Conchobar then, but it lodged in his head and exploded, they say, when he heard the story of the Crucifixion, so angry was he at the death of Christ. But there are those who say that it was the monks writing the story that added this part of the tale, for Conchobar was not known for having a kind or gentle heart.

In the end, Conall was killed by the men of Connacht, in revenge for the death of Ailill, their king and the husband of Queen Medb, who had encouraged Conall to murder him. They say the death of the Ulster warrior took place at Ballyconnell, in Cavan, at the ford of another river, that of the River Gráinne.

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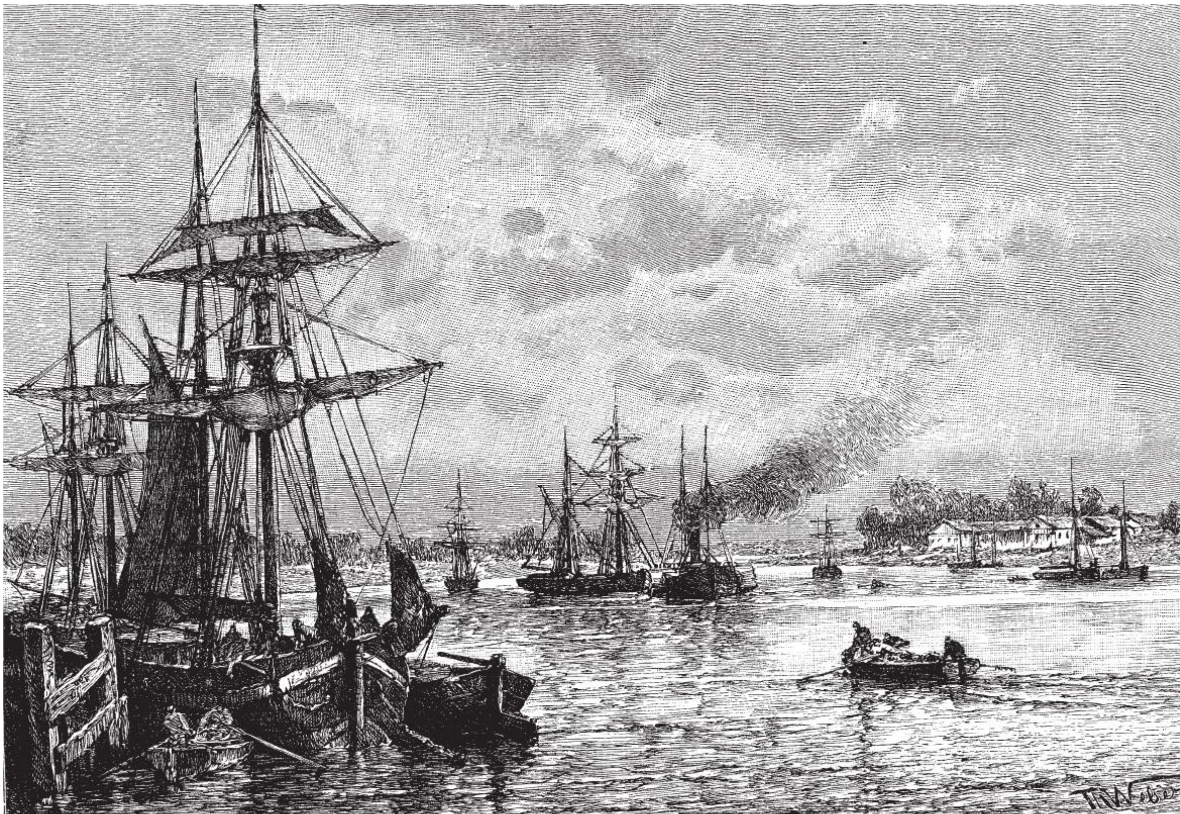
Ballyhubbock Bridge over the Slaney in County Wicklow.

The Slaney

‘Loch Garman of the bright port, Branching, broad haven of the ships, Assembly-plain of the light boats.’
Eleventh-century poet Eocha Eolach

The Slaney rises to the southwest of the Liffey, but takes a very different route to the sea, travelling 117 kilometres through the counties of Wicklow, Carlow and Wexford and reaching the sea at Wexford. With the Slaney, our journey will take us against the flow, upriver from the port of Wexford – called *Loch Garman* in Irish. The harbour at Wexford is used only by trawlers and pleasure boaters, as the depth and frequent silting of the bay cannot cater for very large sea-going vessels, which dock further south at Rosslare. Yet, for many centuries, Wexford was a thriving port town and one of the shortest and busiest sea crossings between Ireland and Britain. The large estuary of the Slaney is made up of sloblands. The name *Waesfjord* comes from a Viking term meaning ‘inlet of mudflats’. It was difficult to build bridges on such shifting ground and there were no bridges across the Slaney in Wexford until the late eighteenth century.



A nineteenth-century depiction of Wexford port.

Originally, the estuary marshes and mudflats covered a much larger area, and it was not until the nineteenth century that they were drained. The north and south slobs and the surrounding area are now the Wexford Wildfowl Reserve. It is a paradise for overwintering birds and has been estimated to be the home of thousands of Greenland White-fronted geese. Wexford town bears few traces of its early medieval foundation as the trading post for the Vikings or the walled city of the Normans. It is a comfortable, prosperous and mainly nineteenth-century town, fiercely proud of its 1798 rebellion history; the first Irish republic was declared here by Beauchamp Bagenal Harvey. However, between the Vikings and Normans of medieval times and the Republicans of 1798, another most unwelcome visitor came to Wexford. His name was Oliver Cromwell.

Oliver Cromwell.

The violence of the 1798 battles along the Slaney in County Wexford is legendary. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the ferocity with which the New Model Army of Oliver Cromwell treated the town of Wexford, two generations before 1798.

The Cromwellian campaign in Ireland was short but extremely brutal, and Cromwell is probably the greatest bogeyman in Irish folk memory. In 1997, Robin Cook, then British Foreign Secretary, invited then Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern to visit him in his office. When Ahern entered the office, he noticed that there was a portrait of Oliver Cromwell on one wall. He immediately stated that he would not stay in the room until the portrait of ‘that murdering bastard’ was taken down. Nothing could show more clearly the feelings of Irish people towards Cromwell, for while Cromwell has a mixed reputation in England, in Ireland he has always been cast as an unredeemed villain.

Cromwell – or even his army – could never have been in every townland and village that has a story about the atrocities they committed; he inherited the bad deeds of countless villains before and after him. Cromwell is depicted as a demon in the pay of Satan; sometimes he was seen as Satan himself. He buries treasures on river-banks and when the monks were killed by his army (monks that had, in most cases, disappeared a century before Cromwell arrived), they too were recorded as having hidden their treasure on the banks of the river, or in the river itself.

Cromwell’s view of the Irish was somewhat similar to the one they held of him. He saw them as murderous wretches and himself as the instrument of God’s judgement. His scorched-earth policy and his relationship with Parliament has seen him described as a military dictator, and no one can doubt his belief in his cause, in his conviction that his deeds were the will of God, the God who brought him such success in the repression of the Papist Irish, whose rebellion in 1641 had cost so many lives.

In its simplest terms the 1641 Rebellion was a Catholic uprising against the settlers from Scotland and England who had been granted lands in Ireland. It was violent and most savage in the north of Ireland. Some estimates give a death total of 10,000 settlers, and it was viciously sectarian. The newspapers of the day made much of the slaughter of Protestant families by the rebels, and there were pleas for help from

Britain by the settlers. But across the Irish Sea they had their own problems. The dispute around Charles I and his distrust and dismissal of Parliament and its powers eventually led to the beheading of the king. At the time of the Irish campaign, Oliver Cromwell was not yet Lord Protector, but he was already a powerful force. Ireland was in chaos, with more than eighty per cent of the country controlled by those who did not accept the new regime. Those who fought against English rule were by no means a united group; there were countless splits and divisions between old English Catholic families and Gaelic lords. The Catholic, non-Royalist faction managed to come together in the Confederation of Kilkenny in 1642, a parliament in all but name.

In 1649, Cromwell landed in Dublin to retake the island of Ireland. He marched from Dublin to Drogheda, where he sacked the city. The Sack of Drogheda has gone down in history for its ruthless brutality. Less well-known, but equally brutal, was the Sack of Wexford.

The attack on the town began just after sunrise in autumn 1649. Wexford, under siege, was in negotiations with Cromwell when soldiers began the breach of its walls, their entry facilitated by the surrender of Wexford Castle. The violence continued for nine days, and it seems as if very little effort was made to control the mayhem inflicted by the soldiers.

The town, in addition to supporting the rebel government and the king, was seen as a haven for the pirates who plied their trade on the Irish Sea, a fact which gave the conquering army further justification for the massacre. One of the accounts tells of how at least 300 people, including women and children, were drowned when they tried to escape the soldiers by taking a ferry across the Slaney's mouth. It had been thought that the army could use Wexford as its headquarters during the approaching winter, but Wexford was so devastated by the troops that they moved on, leaving a burning, broken wreck of a town. Cromwell wrote to the English Parliament:

> We intend[ed] better to this place than so great a ruin, hoping the town might be of more use to you and your army, yet God would not have it so; but by all unexpected providence, in His righteous justice, brought a just judgement upon them … The soldiers got a very good booty in this place … I could have wished for their own good, and the good of the garrison, that they had been more moderate …

Cromwell declared that the sacking of Wexford should be followed up by the re-settlement of the town by loyal English subjects:

> The town is so now in your power … And it may be wished that an honest people would come and plant here; where are very good houses, and other accommodations fitted to their hands …

This brings us to the second reason Cromwell came to Ireland. The campaign was not only intended to bring the rebellious Irish under the control of the Commonwealth, but also to acquire land that could be used to pay the Commonwealth army and reimburse those who had given loans to fund its campaigns.

During the late seventeenth century, an estimated three-quarters of the land held by predominantly Catholic Irish people was confiscated and redistributed to Protestant Englishmen. Almost at a stroke, the proportion of the land of Ireland held by the former fell from three-fifths to one-sixth. The infrastructures of many Irish towns and rural areas were destroyed during this period, and the famine and disease that followed may have been helped along by Henry Ireton, Cromwell's successor, who burned crops during his military progress through the country. Cromwell said proudly that he was leaving Ireland – or at least the fertile parts of it east of the Shannon and in particular the five counties bordered by the Barrow on the west and the Liffey to the north – a 'clean page' for a new history. The population of Ireland dropped so dramatically that even some of the Cromwellian soldiers who were granted land petitioned that they should be allowed to keep the Irish on their estates, as there were not enough tenants to work the land.

The towns were still as death, the land unworked, the houses and barns in ruins. New settlers came, granted land in return for military service or for financial aid during the massive campaigns. Many settled in the Slaney valley.

If we travel upriver, through Enniscorthy, with its thirteenth-century castle, through lands that last saw rebellion in 1798, the Slaney does not have a strong flow; it seems almost relaxed as it makes its way past Clonegal and Bunclody. Further upriver at Baltinglass, the town marks the division between the Slaney as river of the lowlands and that of the highlands, for in the distance we can see the Wicklow Mountains, where the Slaney surfaces high up in the North Prison of Lugnaquilla. Ancient glaciers carved out the North Prison, a dramatic concave shape scooped

out of the mountain. Lugnaquilla is the highest mountain in Wicklow. Legend has it that Fionn Mac Cumhaill, leader of the Fianna, hurled the Mottee Stone, a huge glacial boulder, from the top of the mountain to land near Avoca.

The river skirts Baltinglass Hill, with its forts and cairn, including the Rathcoran Hill Passage Tomb. In the town itself on the banks of the Slaney there are the remains of a Cistercian Abbey.

The valley of the Slaney in Wicklow is very rich in history, and nowhere is this more obvious than on the edge of the Glen of Imaal, upriver from Baltinglass. Here, the bed of the river is rocky and stony, the flow faster and more urgent. At the southern extremity of the Glen, there is an ancient structure of legendary significance. Sited on the ridge that travels along the top of Spinans Hill, with its highest peak at Brusselstown Ring, are the remains of an Iron Age hillfort which has been identified as the site of the battle of Dún Bolg. This battle was fought in the late sixth century. Brandub, a lesser Leinster king, defied King Áed by refusing to pay the Bórama or Borumha – the traditional tribute of cattle due to the high king – no doubt as revenge for the fact that his son had been killed by Áed. War broke out, and Áed was besieged in the hillfort of Dún Bolg. The trickery used to defeat Áed does not reflect well on Brandub or indeed on St Aidan of Ferns, his advisor. Brandub, after some failed siege negotiations, pretended to send food to the besieged army and hid his soldiers in the bags that were supposed to contain it. Like the Greeks in the Trojan War, once inside the fort, the men came out, fully armed, and massacred the inhabitants. The high king was killed. Hence the hill became known as *Bhaile an Bhrioscmhálaigh*, or the place of the broken bags, eventually anglicised as Brusselstown.

The extent of the fortifications along the top of the ridge makes it perhaps the largest Iron Age fort in Ireland. Brusselstown Ring itself is the smaller, older inner circle perched high within the ramparts on Spinan’s Hill and dating from the Neolithic period. The Iron Age section, covering 41 acres, dates from the fourth century. It continued to be important as a line defence for Leinster, with a second major battle fought there in the late ninth century.

It is a location where it is easy to imagine such battles, for the fort is a wild and forbidding place, where fearsome winds come at you from all sides as you reach the top. It’s not a high hill, but it is a rough scramble,

through shoulder-high bracken which hides the deep gaps between rocks, so at stages along the way it's a stumble rather than a climb. The jumble of rocks that covers Brusselstown probably formed part of the original fort. I lost a cardigan in those ferns during my last climb. Either the bracken ate it, or the creatures of the hill took it as tribute; for according to schoolgirl Susan Case's report to the Folklore Commission, the fairies 'resort Glen Imaal very much', guarding hidden treasure. An attempt was made to dig up this treasure which is hidden close by at Castleruddery Stone Circle, but the sudden onset of violent thunder and lightning put the fear of God into the treasure hunters and they ran away. The Brusselstown climb gives wonderful views, northwards towards the peaceful Slaney valley and the blue line of the Wicklow Mountains and southwards across the plains, past Baltinglass Hill and as far as Mount Leinster.

View of Brusselstown Hill from the Slaney river valley.

Turning off from the N81, en route to Spinans Hill, you pass Castleruddery Stone Circle, a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age construction. It is overgrown and visually not very dramatic, as many of the stones are buried deep in grass and brambles, but it was a site which was hugely important to our ancestors. Castleruddery Stone Circle is unusual in that there is evidence of a circular ditch, 61 metres in diameter, located outside the inner circle. The inner circle at Castleruddery, 30 metres in diameter, is made up of twenty-nine stones, some of them incised with cup markings. Two massive quartz blocks mark what was probably the entrance to this sacred space. Large quartz blocks are in evidence in other places in the Glen. Less than two kilometres upriver, during the last century, a large, shining block was unceremoniously moved from its original spot from the centre to the side of a field as it interfered with ploughing. With ironic justice, the Electricity Supply Board later erected a pole in almost exactly the same place.

There are hawthorn trees everywhere and in May the Castleruddery site is transformed into a mass of white blossom. This was an important ritual landscape. Looking south-east from the circle we can see Castleruddery Motte. Beyond this is Spinans Hill with the hump of Brusselstown Ring, and further east is the distinctive rounded shape of Keadeen. Castleruddery Motte, a circular hump beside Ballyhubbock Bridge, has been identified as a Norman motte and bailey, but some form of structure is likely to have predated the coming of the Normans. This is a good spot for a settlement, close to a fording place on the river and the ancient ecclesiastical settlement at Donaghmore just across the river, which is said to date from the time of St Patrick. Castleruddery Motte may be the castle that the name of the townland Castleruddery (the castle of the knights) comes from, though some claim there was a castle on the site of what is now Castleruddery House, further west. Or indeed, the name may come from the vanished castle at Castlesallagh, further east, where the river bends into itself as it makes its way through the townlands of Castlesallagh and Coolamadra.

There are no traces left of Castlesallagh Castle, which once stood close to the river, but it was the castle where the Talbot family held sway until the late seventeenth century, before backing the wrong side in the Williamite wars and losing their land. From then on the history of these

townlands is no longer the story of kings and great lords and battles, but of farmers quietly tilling the land and raising sheep and cattle, though Michael Dwyer, a rebel hero of the insurrection of 1798, hid in Wicklow's Glen of Imaal after the failure of the rebellion and managed to avoid capture for many years. He was one of many folk heroes who sought refuge from the authorities in wild places. In one escapade, on nearby Keadeen Mountain, where Derrynamuck cottage can still be visited, his staunch ally Sam McAllister left the cottage to draw the fire of the encircling troops, giving his life so that Dwyer could escape.

On another less romantic occasion, Dwyer took refuge under a large pig in a pigsty and poked the animal so that it snorted in the face of the pursuing Yeoman, scaring him away. Dwyer was given refuge by families throughout the mountains of west Wicklow, sometimes with the help of his Church of Ireland neighbours – a minority which still forms a significant part of the population here. The lands in this area were settled by English Protestants sometime between the Cromwellian Plantation in the 1650s and the Williamite wars at the end of the seventeenth century. In some cases, the lands were forfeited from those who had taken the losing side; in others, the population had been so decimated by wars that the land was laid waste. The names of these settler families are still current in the area. Farmers all, they share the same problems as their Catholic neighbours and are just as entrenched in the peaceful landscape.

The records held in the churches at Dunlavin and Donaghmore go back to the very early part of the eighteenth century. John Hanbidge, for example, born in 1664, came from Cirencester to this part of the Slaney valley at the end of the seventeenth century and died in 1718. The family name is still current in the Glen, as are the Fentons, Jacksons, Moodys, Collins, Hawkins and many more. John Jackson was a friend of Michael Dwyer, and they are said to have saved each other's lives.

BRIDGES

The bridges that cross Irish rivers, replacing fords and ferries, are often very beautiful structures. Many have survived from the eighteenth century and are wonderful examples of stone workers' and engineers' skills. Bridges have a symbolic aspect, dividing and connecting the two sides of a river. Often crossing a river requires a sacrifice; something must be given up in order to reach the other side.

There is a sense of peace in these townlands by the river, a peace that masks a particularly sad story. Some have exploited the isolation of this area for personal profit. Towards the end of the twentieth century, between Spinans Hill and the Slaney, huge masses of waste were found, all dumped illegally. Some of the waste included medical material, syringes and dressings. It was described at the time as the largest illegal dump ever to come to light in Ireland, and forty million euro is the estimate of the profit made by the companies doing the dumping. Some of the debris had fallen into a watercourse, the small Carrigoyle which feeds into the Slaney. The poison from this waste could also have entered the aquifer system – and this in an area where many communities use their own wells. Years later, the clean-up continues at a glacial pace, but at least, at the time of writing, the Carrigoyle seems to be in pristine condition. The Slaney has suffered from further pollutants in recent years and its stocks of salmon are severely depleted, and salmon is listed as a vulnerable species.

And so back to the source. The Slaney flows from its glacial hollow, westwards, small and swift through a rocky and stunningly beautiful landscape, and down into the Glen of Imaal. The Glen is named after the tribe the Uí Máil, descended from the family of the legendary high king Cathaír Mór, who were dominant here for centuries, eventually being displaced by the Ó Tuathail, the O'Tooles. Despite being so close to Dublin, the Gaelic tribes such as the O'Tooles of Imaal and the O'Byrnes of Glenmalure, to the east of Lugnaquilla, held out against Norman and then English power until into the sixteenth century.

Our Slaney journey ends with what is surely one of the strangest stories associated with an Irish river. Early in his reign, Cathaír Mór had a dream. He dreamt of a green hill with a tree of golden fruit on its summit and lovely music coming from its branches. Beside it was a very beautiful lady, dressed in many-coloured garments. The woman was 'pregnant and her womb ever-full', for eight hundred years, and when she gave birth the child was huge, a monster, who would not let his mother pass him. Indeed, he tried to fight her. And in the end, because the lady could not go past her son, she had to travel through him, coming out the other side of him, an action which almost seems like another birth.

When the king woke he went to the druid Brí to ask what his dream meant. The druid interpreted the beautiful hill as Cathaír himself, looking

on the scene of the creation of the Slaney estuary. The lady is the River Slaney, and the child is Loch Garman, the sloblands and lough where the river meets the sea. The lady pushes through the marsh and becomes part of the estuary, and so the river is drowned in the sea, the mother in the child. Eocha Eolach is recorded as the poet who sang the poem which tells this story:

Eocha Eolach to whom it was easy,
Found the science of Senchas,
For Loch Garman beyond in his land,
While lighting up poems for a great king.

THE STOLEN CROWN

This story tells of how the Slaney estuary was formed. Cathaír Mór was a king of Leinster who became high king for a short period in the second century. He figures in a number of legends, including the Song of the House of Buchet. Buchet was the hospitaller of Cathaír, and his hospitality knew no limits.

It was said that Buchet's laughing song was: 'Welcome! Be happy, and I will be happy along with you!' At his gatherings, fifty warriors made music along with fifty maidens, and fifty harpers played to the guests from evening until morning.

The party had to end sometime. Buchet was eaten (and drunk) out of house and home by Cathaír's numerous sons – all thirty-two of them – and left destitute. Eithne, Cathaír's daughter, was a foster child of Buchet, and looked after her now poverty-stricken foster parents on a tiny farm near Kells, County Meath, putting aside the best of the milk and wheat for them. Cormac Mac Airt came upon her doing this, and as a reward for her kindness he abducted her. She became his queen, with her bride-price the restoration of her foster father's fortunes. She also gave birth to Conn of the Hundred Battles, the king who was instrumental in the death of her own father. Cathaír Mór is reputed to be buried on Ballon Hill, near the Slaney in County Carlow, the site of a number of important burials. Bronze Age pottery and the remains of funerary chambers were excavated at the site in the nineteenth century.

It was Samhain, the beginning of the winter season and the time of the great meeting at Tara. For those summoned to the festival by the high king, during these three days, there was no tolerance for any misdemeanour, great or small. Everyone respected the sacred nature of the meeting, where laws were made and announced to the people, where chief met chief and parlayed, even if as soon as the feast was finished, they would be happy enough to cut each other's throats. There was horse and cattle trading, and daughters and sons were traded too, part of the alliances made between the petty monarchs of the many tribes.

But as well as the serious business, there was dancing and laughter and storytelling. The history of Ireland was recited, along with Cathaír Mór's noble ancestry, his many great qualities, his victories in battle, his care for his people and his prowess between the sheets. This singing and music and storytelling might have been the most serious business of all, for what country can exist unless it comes together through its music and its stories? And

overlooking it all was Cathaír. He had fought hard and killed many to gain the prize of the high kingship. Beside him, applauding the harpists and the singers, the storytellers and the poets, was his beautiful queen. We know she was beautiful and that she had golden hair, but we do not know her name. She was not his only wife, for what single woman could have borne Cathaír over thirty sons and at least three daughters? But she was the acknowledged sovereign, the one who wore all the jewels of the kingdom, and the golden torcs, crowns, rings and arm bracelets suited her well. Most beautiful of all was the gold diadem and the collar of thin beaten gold that the queen wore throughout the festivities, its gold no more golden than her hair, its delicate moonlike beauty no more lovely than her face.

Yet, as the queen smiled and drank the mead that flowed so freely, surrounded by the warriors and ladies clad in gold and grey-blue, in scarlet and purple, in green, crimson and indigo, there was someone who looked on with an envious eye. Garman the Rough had come from the banks of the Barrow, and was only at the feast under sufferance, for he did not have the breeding nor the deportment of the nobles who surrounded him. He was there for a reason.

On the morning of the last day of the festivities, a great cry was heard coming from the queen's chambers. Then there was the sound of lamenting from all the women, while the queen herself sat with an empty casket in her hands, her face turned to stone with shock and horror. For the casket was empty and no one could say what had happened to the golden diadem.

Cathaír's anger was terrible to see, and worse to listen to. He roared at the waiting maids. He roared at his wife. He roared at his guards and his hounds and his druids. He roared so much that it was some time before one of the youngest servants had the courage to come forward and tell her tale. We don't know her name either.

'I was late retiring,' she said, blushing furiously. 'And when I came in, everyone was asleep. But I thought I saw a figure leave the queen's chamber. At the time, I thought nothing of it, but I think that must have been when the diadem was stolen.'

'And did you recognise who the figure was?' queried Brí, the wisest of Cathaír's druids.

The girl nodded eagerly. 'It was Garman, Garman the Rough. I'm sure it was him, with his wild hair and shaggy cloak. I swear I could even get his smell.'

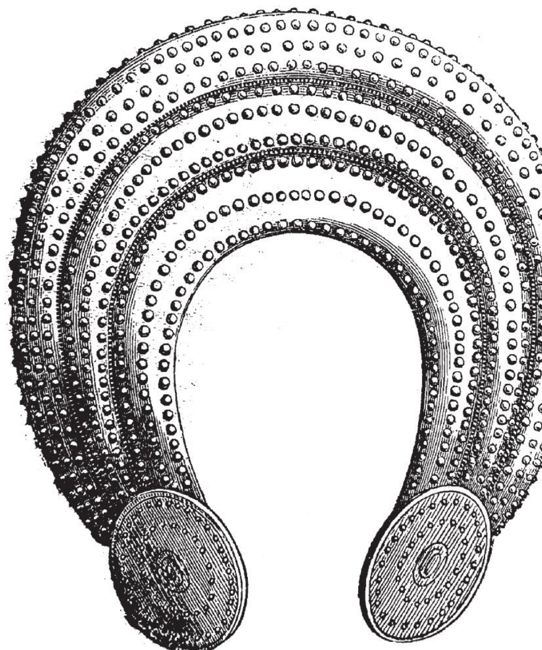
Cathaír let out another roar. 'Find him! Find him for me! I will get the crown back and I will see him dead, for he has broken the peace of the great feast of Tara, when all men should sleep safe in the knowledge that they and their possessions are under the protection of the high king!'

So, the hunt began. It went on for many days, with Garman running before and the king's men close behind, their hunting hounds and spears at the ready. They ran through the fertile fields of Meath, stripped of their crops and with the cattle killed or taken indoors for winter, through the bogs of Kildare and then over the Blackstairs and through the red and gold forests that bordered the beautiful Slaney river. They ran until they reached the coast, where the river met the sea.

Some say the spears of the king's men killed Garman, and he fell into the water, and the fountain of Cóelrind rose up and spread all around him. Others say he slipped while fleeing from the teeth of the hunting hounds. What all agree on is that the waters rose up over the fugitive, pulling him down into its brackish depths. And the waters spread and spread and became a great lake, joining the river and sea in a place of salt marsh and sand, full of the sad cries of waterfowl. The inlet where the thief drowned is now known as Loch Garman, and the whole area surrounding it has taken the name. But left on the rock where he fell was the queen's diadem, its gold glinting in the pale sun.

The prize was brought back to the king. He took it and placed it on the queen's head, and he also took the golden torc and placed it around her neck. The gold was as bright as

ever it was, as bright as the sun, the shape of the moon. The queen’s face was blank; she had not smiled since the day the diadem had been taken from her.



And as Cathaír fitted the collar around the slender white neck of his queen, he whispered something in her ear. The words were a hiss. ‘There,’ he said. ‘Your crown is back on your lovely head, your neck is held by my golden collar. And now, my dear, you can explain to me why the serving maid did not find it strange to see a man leave your chamber in the darkest hours of the night.’

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The River Barrow at St Mullins, County Carlow.

The Three Sisters

The Barrow, the Nore and the Suir

‘As they bring down along with them clear waves, fruitful soil, and fresh green fields, they collect in the country around this city a multitude of charms.’
Nineteenth-century travel writer Johann Georg Kohl, *Travels in Ireland*

The Barrow, Nore and Suir rivers are known as the Three Sisters, not because they have the same source, but because they join together into one, just before they finish their journey to the sea. The Nore flows into the Barrow close to New Ross and around 17 kilometres later, the two rivers unite with the Suir. The three, combined in the common name of the Suir, then flow through Passage East into the estuary at Waterford. The confluence of the three is called Cheekpoint in English and in Irish has another name, *Cumar na dTrí Uisce* – the 'Coming Together of the Three Waters'.

In one version of the origin of the rivers, the Barrow bursts forth from the Well of Connla, along with six other rivers. In others, all three rivers began to flow on the night the legendary high king Conn of the Hundred Battles (Conn Cétchathach) was born, which would place their origin in the second century. The three rivers are, of course, much more ancient than that, but much of the landscape they flow through is relatively young in geological terms, having been laid down at the time of the Second Ice Age.

The confluence of the rivers is said to be the place connected with the first invasion of Ireland. Legend has it that Cesair, the daughter, niece or granddaughter of Noah, depending on which source you go by, was not allowed entry into the Ark and instead built her own ship. In fact, she built three, but two did not survive the high seas that took her to Ireland. As a counterpoint to the two of every animal requisitioned for his voyage by Grandfather Noah, she brought three men and fifty maidens with her in her own vessel. In some of the accounts, she also brought the first flocks of sheep to Ireland. We are not told how the voyage went, though we can imagine that it must have been a difficult one, with severe cabin fever and bickering among the maidens, not helped by the noise of what must have been unhappy, possibly sea-sick, certainly smelly sheep. While most accounts give the landing of Cesair as at Bantry Bay, in some versions she continued along the coast from there to what is now Cheekpoint. Landing at Cheekpoint would have given her easy access to the interior of Ireland through the three waterways leading north and west, through some of the most fertile land in the country. Fertility soon became quite an issue with Cesair, as she initially divided out the maidens who travelled with her between the three men on board. Two of

them died, and the other man, Fintan, when offered all fifty maidens, did not feel up to the task and fled. He made sure he was not drawn back into Cesair's plans by hiding in a cave and shapeshifting into an eagle, a salmon and a hawk. He lived for thousands of years before venturing to become human again.

THE BARROW

'the goodly Barrow which doth hoord great heapes of salmons in his deepe bosome'
Sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser

The longest of the three sister rivers, and the second longest river in Ireland, the Barrow takes a relatively direct course from north to south. It derives its name from *bearú*, which comes from the word for bubbling or boiling. Boiling indicates the presence of fire in or under the water; the fire of the cauldron of inspiration, the bright flame that can destroy as well as illuminate. The Barrow seems to have held a significant place in the lore which connects rivers with poetic revelation. Ptolemy identified the river in AD 150 as the Birgo. The eleventh-century poet Eocha Eolach describes it as 'the surface speckled Berba', and like the magic wells of the legends, it contains special powers in the bubbles of water that catch the light. There are no thermal springs connected to the Barrow, but there is a legend that explains the bubbling. It is said to have been caused by the death of Meiche, the monstrous son of the Mórrigán.

View of the Barrow.

Meiche was born with three hearts, and nursed a serpent in each one, serpents who, it was said, would one day consume all of Ireland. Mac Cécht (a possible variation on the healing god of the Tuatha Dé Danann, Dian Cécht) slew him and burned his hearts, then threw the ashes in the Barrow, which until that day had been known as the *Berba*, the Silent One. The ashes caused the water to froth and bubble, and that is how the Barrow got its name, *Bearú*. This strange story has been interpreted as a kind of parable as to how a healer might sacrifice a person infected with disease so that the disease could not spread. The burning and disposal of the ‘serpents’ might reflect this. The repetition of the number three, three hearts and three serpents, might also hint at a Triple Goddess connection;

the Mórrigán was one of the Celtic warrior goddess triad of Badbh, the Mórrigán and Macha. Mac Cécht was also one of a triad of siblings. The ‘serpent’ motif also reflects the flow of the river, coiling back into itself as it makes its way through the landscape.

Bearú has been associated with the pan-Celtic god Borvo, whose name also means ‘boiling’ and who was associated with healing thermal springs. He was linked with Apollo, the god of healing, by the Romans. In one image he is portrayed as a warrior seated beneath a horned serpent. The association of the serpent and the healer is a very ancient one, based on the Greek healer Asclepius (still seen on the caduceus, used as a symbol for the medical profession) and hints at an older Irish story that is now lost. There was a feminine version of Borvo, Bomana, who was a Celtic cow goddess and she links the Barrow with the river of the great cow, the Boyne.

The ancient bridge over the Barrow at Graiguenamanagh.

The ‘goodly Barrow’ rises in the Slieve Blooms, a lovely and underrated range of small mountains with magnificent views of the surrounding counties. After it rises on the heather-covered, boggy moorland above the Clamp Hole waterfall at Glenbarrow, it makes its midland journey south through Portarlington, Monasterevin, Athy, Carlow and long stretches of flat and sometimes featureless countryside. The Barrow has always been a busy river, linking the fertile counties of Laois, Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford and Waterford. In Tudor times it was considered the border between the safe Pale lands of the east and the wilder lands of the Gaelic chiefs who still held sway in Carlow. Like its sister rivers, it has castles and tower houses, monasteries and hermits’ cells on its banks. It travels through the frontier towns of Athy and Carlow and then at Leighlinbridge passes under the oldest extant bridge in Ireland. Nearby, tiny Old Leighlin was an important ecclesiastical centre in medieval Ireland. It retains a strange atmosphere, with its ancient church and graveyard, its holy well and tree still festooned with offerings – everything from rosary beads to phone chargers.

The other great ecclesiastical centre on the Barrow, now hardly more than a scattering of houses and a wealth of monastic remains, is St Mullins, a place originally known as *Rinn Ros Broc* – ‘the wooded headland of the badger’. There is a Greenway along the Barrow from St Mullins to Athy, where the Grand Canal links the river with the Shannon. St Mullins is where the river becomes tidal.

A pattern (religious devotion) is still held at this spot every year in July, celebrating the gentle saint who founded his monastery here. This is also where the saint is buried, among the ancient stone walls, the holy well and the quiet mounds, beside what is described in his *Life* as ‘the stream-pools of the Barrow’. As well as a saint, Moling was a poet, a diplomat, an intermediary between kings, and a miller, a prophet, a teacher and a builder. He established a ferry service on the river, rowing people backwards and forwards with his own hands. His hospitality was famous, especially in his care for those in need, such as the poor mad King Suibhne. He was also a great friend to the wildlife of the river valley.

One animal, a fox, was something of a shifty character, an incorrigible thief of everything from honeycombs to holy books. In one story he ate a hen belonging to the monks, but sneakily replaced it with one he stole

from a nearby monastery. However, Moling was wise to his tricks and ordered him to return the hen, which the fox duly did. Another tale has Moling winning a jumping competition with one of Ireland’s legendary leaping hags.

St Mullins in the 1790s, drawn by George Petrie.

Later, St Mullins was raided by the Vikings on more than one occasion. In folklore, it is said that Cromwell sacked the village, although in real life he was never anywhere near it. During the plague of the early fourteenth century people came from miles around to immerse themselves in the Barrow at St Mullins. The healing power of the river had not been forgotten even then. But whatever healing power it had must have been gone from it by the time of the Great Famine, when it was said you could walk across the bodies of the dead from one side of the river to the other at New Ross.

Upriver from St Mullins is the small town of Graiguenamanagh. The stretch from here to Borris is one of the most picturesque parts of the Barrow valley, for along here the banks are steep and wooded, with huge crags emerging from the sea of green undergrowth. There are magnificent views to the east of the Blackstairs Mountain and Mount Leinster, and the rounded top of Brandon Hill on the Kilkenny side of the river gives a feeling of an enclosed haven. Brandon is a well-marked and not-too-strenuous climb, which will bring you to more magnificent views, across towards Inistioge on the Nore. The Hill was the haunt of the infamous James Freney, an eighteenth-century highwayman, and the well that you pass on the way up is supposed to be the location where he hid much of his treasure.

The eighteenth century was a time when there were periods of peace and plenty, short periods of relief from the trauma of the previous century. There is a particularly peaceful atmosphere in this stretch of the Barrow and in the town of Graiguenamanagh. The local heron sits on the weir and watches the world and the fish go by.

THE HERON AND THE CRANE

Herons are common throughout Irish rivers, and their distinctive, leggy appearance makes them almost a talisman in the towns and villages they frequent. Large birds, they can seem ungainly at takeoff, and their hunched pose when watching for prey gives them the appearance of guardians, patrolling the river as they cluster in heronries. They are given local names such as Long Andy and Big Mary – the weir at Graiguenamanagh has a guardian heron called Bertie.

In Irish folk tradition, eating the flesh of a heron was taboo, although the oil that could be extracted from these birds was used to treat rheumatism. In many cases, it was specified that the heron must be killed at the full moon, and other accounts told of how killing a heron brought bad luck. The flight of the heron, up or down the river, was also sometimes used to forecast weather.

On Scattery Island, on the Shannon estuary, tradition has it that the heron who lived there would go to an otherworldly island in the west to hatch her chicks. It was said that the foot of a heron gave a sweet sound to a fiddle as it contained within it the sound of the sea.

Egrets, beautiful white birds of the same family as herons and cranes, first settled in Ireland in 1997, spreading eastwards from Cork, and they are now a feature of the Irish bird population. They are wetland birds and are mainly found in the estuaries of rivers, all along the coast. The small yellow bittern, the *bonnán buí*, a variety of heron, is now hardly ever to be seen in Ireland.

The heron’s much larger cousin, the crane, is a creature steeped in myth and legend. In Irish stories the two are often confused, as the word for crane in Old Irish is *corr*, which is also the word used for heron. Cranes became extinct in Ireland in the seventeenth century, although efforts are now being made to re-introduce them.

The crane is the tallest flying bird on the planet; it can be up to 130 cm tall and have a 240 cm wingspan. As wading birds, they are equally at home in water, in the air and on land. All over the world, stories and art have been created about this strange, beautiful bird. The mating ritual of the crane, the crane dance, has been the subject of many portrayals in art. The crane also carries souls to the western heavens in China. The Greeks portrayed cranes on funerary monuments, and in Ahenny, County Tipperary, a high cross depicts a crane leading a funeral. The Gallo-Gaulish bull god Tarvos is portrayed with three cranes on his back. The bag created by Manannán Mac Lir, which held the gifts of inspiration, was made from the skin of the magical crane he killed. Three cranes also guarded the house of Midir, the king of the Sídh and son of the Dagda. Cranes were harbingers of prophecy but could also be used to curse. We have already seen how the poet Athairne adopted the pose of the *glám dícenn* to satirise his enemies; this was a curse so powerful it could cause physical harm to the recipient. In Christian lore, St Brigid's bird was the crane, and right up to Tudor times, cranes were kept as pets by the Irish.

Bord na Móna (the body responsible for Irish peat bogs) has begun to rewet the sites that were harvested for turf, making them perfect habitats for this bird. Breeding cranes have been reintroduced to boglands in Offaly, the location a secret to protect the birds from harm.

The Barrow valley was called the *Vale Salutis* ('Valley of Salvation') by the monks who founded Duiske Abbey, which stands at the heart of the town of Graiguenamanagh. Here the monks found refuge from what they described as the wastelands surrounding it. These Cistercian monks were sent from England in the thirteenth century, agents of civilisation and English and Roman control. The Order was wealthy, breeding sheep, fishing for eels and tending the fertile river valley right up to the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. The Abbey has been sensitively restored, with simple white-washed walls and great timber beams. It houses a stone statue of a nameless recumbent knight.

Barges on the River Barrow.

Walking the small lanes around Graiguenamanagh, we can still get a sense of how the town might have been in the eighteenth century, with its

woollen mills, the courthouse, the small but fast-flowing Duiske river, the old pubs and a lane with an ancient well, incongruously leading up to a very modern Aldi. One can imagine its market and fairs and the river acting as a constant diversion, filled with cargo boats and the noise of the workers associated with the shipping trade. There was a thriving water trade, for the Barrow had been canalised in places in the eighteenth century to improve navigation. There was also a strong, united community associated with the trade, full of stories of the different boats and not without humour (one man's boat was nicknamed the Diver as it sank so often). Crossing the eighteenth-century bridge and watching the dippers flit underneath its stone arches, we come to Tinnahinch, where there is the ruin of a Butler Castle and the remnants of grain stores, hatcheries and a mill.

Away from the river things were probably a little more genteel. The shell of Brandondale House and other still-inhabited houses along the Barrow testify to a prosperous land-owning community. This community of merchants and landowners was rich and important enough to have its own Assembly Rooms in the town, where balls were held in the manner of a Jane Austen novel, no doubt sufficiently rustic to earn the displeasure of any Mr Darcy. Certainly, those who attended were very young. Catherine Kennedy was fifteen and her sister Ann fourteen when they went with their widowed mother to stay with friends in Carlow and visited the Graiguenamanagh Assembly in the spring of 1779. They had been spending a lot of time with their cousin, Garret Byrne of Balline House, located close by between Borris and Ballymurphy, and his friend James Strange from Ullard. It is more than likely that there had been some flirting between the couples. How their mother would have felt about this is not recorded, but she might have been looking rather higher than local squireens for her daughters, who had inherited a sizable legacy of £2,000 each from their grazier father, Patrick Kennedy of Waterford. They were also very pretty girls.

At the April Assembly, the two young men showed up late. The girls grew tired of waiting for them and danced with other partners. They may have snubbed or mocked their admirers when they finally arrived. Garret and James were furious. Some days later, accompanied by a group of male friends and by Garret's sister Anne Byrne, they abducted the two girls from the house of James Neale of Graiguenamanagh, where they

were visiting. That Graiguenamanagh Assembly had a lot to answer for, leaving the two girls ruined and their captors, who after some time were discovered and arrested, tried and hanged in 1780. There was public unrest at the severity of the sentence; James and Garret were locals, while the women involved were not. The girls do not seem to have pleaded for any clemency, and Ann, in particular, was determined to see the abductors punished. At the trial, the letters that were produced, purporting to show that the girls were complicit in their abduction, were shown to be the work of Anne Byrne, Garret's sister, while the others were written under duress.

After the abduction, there seems to have been a series of slightly panicked horse rides back and forward across the Barrow, with the abductors hiding the sisters in various locations. The two men finally decided to flee to Wales, with Strange and Byrne still holding the two girls captive. They were caught just before they sailed. There is an account of the abduction by John Edward Walsh, a respected barrister, in his 1847 book *Sketches of Ireland Sixty Years Ago*. Some of his facts seem to contradict the accounts of the time, and he undoubtedly exaggerated when he claims that Strange and Byrne turned up to abduct the girls with a hundred men. But he does seem to have access to detail not available elsewhere.

The Kennedy abduction was not an isolated incident – these were wild times. Abduction of heiresses worked on the principle that if the girls were 'ruined' – no longer virgins – they would never find a husband and so they might as well marry their abductor. While it may be true that in some cases the girls involved were complicit in their 'abduction', it was not true in all cases, and certainly not in this one, although it seems that Catherine was less inclined to fight for conviction. Ann, the younger sister, had been hit in the face with a pewter pot by the violent and unstable James Strange and was determined to seek justice. The girls' courage should not be underrated; in many cases, abducted girls either accepted the forced marriage or resigned themselves to a life of quiet disgrace, without pursuing a case against the men who had ruined their lives. Without a strong male figure to fight for their cause, the daughters of widows were seen as particularly vulnerable.

Despite the attempts made to gain clemency – Garret's sister Anne even paid a certain Henrietta Battier to write a poem to Lord Crofton

pleading for mercy – the sentence of death was carried out. Perhaps it was decided to make an example of these young men and so stem the tide of further kidnappings. Garret and James, along with Garret's brother Patrick, who was complicit in the abduction, were hanged in Graiguenamanagh in December 1780. This was the last death sentence meted out for abduction in Ireland.

And Ann and Catherine? When they travelled to court to testify, their carriage had to be protected from the mob of supporters of the young men. Even in later life, according to Walsh, they could not leave their home without being hissed at. Both married, although neither marriage was a particularly happy one. Catherine turned to food and smoking for comfort and her husband believed he was haunted by Garret's ghost, while Ann married a Mr Kelly and ended her days 'sunk in want and degradation'. The trauma of their teenage years had certainly left its scars.

The River Barrow looking south from Mount Garrett Bridge, County Kilkenny.

THE NORE

'The next, the stubborn Newre, whose waters grey, By fair Kilkenny, and Ross-ponte board.'
Sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser

The 'stubborn Nore' (*An Fheoir* in Irish, or *An Eoir* as it was in old Irish) follows a course from high on the slopes of the Devil's Bit mountain in Tipperary to the sea at Waterford, travelling through the counties of Laois and Kilkenny and joining its sister rivers the Barrow and the Suir north of Waterford. The actual beginning of the river is, as is often the case, disputed, though there is now a marked trail called the Source of the Nore at Clonakenny townland. Other sources give its starting point in the nearby townland of Borrisnoe.

The bridge over the River Nore at Inistioge.

According to folklore, the twin peaks of the Devil's Bit were formed when the devil took a bite out of the hill and spat the rock out to form the Rock of Cashel. The Nore travels eastwards and then loops towards the

south, flowing through the heart of the ancient Gaelic kingdom of Ossory (*Osraighe*), a much-coveted district because of its good land, and a kingdom which acted as a buffer between the rival powers of the kings of Munster and Leinster. Up until the mid-sixteenth century, when Barnaby Fitzpatrick gave up his claim to be King of Ossory, the area was ruled by the Fitzpatrick sept. Barnaby was quite the character. He surrendered his lands to the Crown as part of the Surrender and Regrant policy, and had them returned, along with an English title (he was made a baron) and a change of name from Brian to Barnaby. He was the father of many children by a variety of wives and mistresses, including first cousins (not unusual at that time), half-sisters (less acceptable), and Margaret, the daughter of Margaret and Piers Butler, Earl of Ormond.

The boundaries of Ossory were originally, like all Irish kingdoms, a moveable feast, and are connected to the dominance of a people and a ruler rather than a strict geographical location. It is now mainly known as an Ecclesiastical See, made up of parts of Laois and Kilkenny. The Suir marks its boundaries, while the Nore flows through its heartland.

Ossory was famous for its werewolves, the men and women of the district being particularly prone to this malady. Laignech Fáelad, a brother of one of the ancient rulers of Ossory, could change himself into a wolf for battle. In some versions of the history of Kilkenny, it is his descendants who became the werewolves of Ossory. Actual wolves were common in Ireland until almost the end of the eighteenth century, and the Irish wolfhound was bred to hunt them. The last wolf was killed on Mount Leinster, having created havoc among the herds of sheep on the mountain. Interestingly, the natives of Ossory were also famous for their sheep-rustling activities.

Gaelic warriors often wore wolfskins and, in the Irish versions of lycanthropy, their wolf skin seemed to be detachable, peeled off when they transformed back into humans. Gerald Cambrensis has a wonderful story of two Ossory natives meeting a cleric in the woods of Meath. The wolf approached a cleric to ask him to give a final blessing to his dying wife, and, when the cleric was reluctant to do so, the wolf stripped off his wife’s muzzle to show the ancient woman beneath. The legend which explains this tendency to ‘go wolfing’ among the inhabitants explains how either St Natalis or St Patrick put a curse on the inhabitants of Ossory. Patrick/Natalis laid the curse because he was furious at the way

the Ossory natives howled in derision when he tried to share the word of God with them. As a result, at some point in their lives, each one was forced to spend seven years as a wolf. St Patrick, who seems to have found preaching to the Osraighe a thankless task, is also held responsible for cursing the stones of the River Dinan, which joins with the Clough before flowing into the Nore above Kilkenny. This small river gives its name to the boggy wilderness of Fassadinin, which was once a haven for the wild Irish. In one story, the Dinan river is originally a giant worm, transformed into a river; anyone who follows its sinuous course will see why.

The Nore's course is 140 kilometres long, just 40 kilometres less than the Suir's, but it has nothing like the number of large prosperous towns along its banks. Perhaps this is because it is not as easily navigable as either the Barrow or the Suir. Little has been written about its upper course, although one visitor noted that in days gone by the village of Ballyragget was notable for the number of young men who propped up the street corners of the town, hour after hour and day after day. However, it has more than its fair share of some of the most charming towns and villages in Ireland along the stretch between Kilkenny and Cheekpoint. The wooded river valleys that surround Inistioge and Thomastown, the sense of a slow-paced and comfortable way of being, have a particular charm that sometimes feels more English than Irish. This is a part of the country that was, like Wexford, settled early on by Norman families. While it is probably too much of a generalisation to say that for several centuries the Normans – who very quickly settled into native ways – lived in relative peace with their Gaelic neighbours, this area knew nothing of the devastating battles of the north of Ireland or of counties like Clare and Limerick.

At the heart of Ossory lies the city of Kilkenny, often described as the medieval capital of Ireland. There are other towns in Ireland as historic as Kilkenny, but none where the built heritage of streets and buildings has been preserved with such care. The centre of Kilkenny stands as a tribute to the generations of local people who did not allow the small lanes of the city to be bulldozed during the on-going destruction of Irish heritage that was such a big feature of the development of Ireland during much of the twentieth century.

The buildings of the city were at times the victims of its river rather than of human development. The city suffered many floods throughout its history. The first destruction of a Kilkenny bridge by the Nore was in the fourteenth century, and the current St John's Bridge was built to replace the one destroyed by further floods in 1763.

In the early twenty-first century, flooding became more serious and frequent and alleviation works were begun. So much material of archaeological interest was found that excavation costs played a significant part in the works project, running massively over budget. Mills, landing stages and the remains of bridges were found, all adding to the wealth of heritage in this already heritage-rich city.

At the city's heart, the Nore is overlooked by the massive bulk of beautiful Kilkenny Castle, standing guard over the city and attack from the river. The castle has its origins in the first Norman settlement, when Strongbow built a wooden structure on the Nore at its ford. In 1260 a stone castle was built. This structure has been remodelled and rebuilt through the centuries. Three of the original towers remain. From 1391, it became the home of the Butlers, whose family history has been inextricably linked with the history of this part of Ireland ever since. The Butlers, the Desmonds and the Fitzgeralds were the great Norman families, and the Butlers of Ormonde had significant links to the aristocracy of England – one of Anne Boleyn's grandparents was a Butler. The family name comes from the ceremonial role of the head of the family at every coronation of an English king – that of pouring the wine. Three cups are included in the Coat of Arms of the Butler families.

Though the family's political power gradually decreased, it still held onto the castle for six hundred years. In the seventeenth century, the castle became the headquarters of the short-lived Irish Parliament of the Catholic Confederation of Ireland, but Kilkenny was taken by Cromwell's army in 1650. By the twentieth century, the building had become run-down and neglected, as the Butler family no longer had the resources for its upkeep. The 6th Marquess of Ormonde sold the castle for a symbolic £50 to the Kilkenny Castle Restoration Society and it now belongs to the people of Kilkenny.

Kilkenny Castle looming over the River Nore.

Quite apart from the nobles and aristocracy of Kilkenny, from its early days Kilkenny had a thriving merchant and banking community.

The late sixteenth-century Rothe House and its gardens, close by the River Nore in the city, are well worth a visit to gain a sense of Kilkenny in its heyday. If one wants to go back to an older and darker past, Kyteler's Inn is closely associated with the family of the subject of one of Ireland's rare witchcraft trials, Alice Kyteler. We shall look at the story in more detail later, involving as it does a histrionic bishop and a very shrewd businesswoman who may also have been a murderer. The legal tussles between the bishop and merchant became a long series of attacks and counter-attacks, accusations and counter-accusations, with the great and the good of Ireland dragged into the affair. In the midst of it all, Alice made her getaway to England, and with a distinct lack of sisterly solidarity, she left her servant Petronilla of Meath to be brought before the courts. Petronilla was tried, tortured and burnt to death.

As always, the one who paid the price was at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the scapegoat for whatever crimes had or had not been committed by her rich employer. At least Petronilla's daughter Basilia, another one of the accused, escaped to England with Alice, and Petronilla

now has her name remembered in the restaurant attached to Kyteler's Inn.

Other magical creatures associated with the Nore include mermaids. The river is tidal to Inistioge and monks found a mermaid caught in the weir close by. They promptly killed her, but we can remember her in the beautiful carving of the mermaid which is set into the wall in Inistioge Churchyard. If Kilkenny is the crown of the Nore, tiny Inistioge is its jewel. This has been named one of the prettiest villages in Ireland, an estate village attached to Woodstock House. The lovely estate gardens can still be visited and are in the process of restoration, but the house, like many others in Ireland, is one of the casualties of the Civil War. The Tighe family were associated with the estate for many years, and were considered good landlords to their tenants, especially during the time of Lady Louisa, who died at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Another famous Tighe was the eighteenth-century poet Mary Tighe, whose work, published under the name Psyche, was greatly admired by John Keats, who mentions her by name in his poem 'To Some Ladies'.

According to accounts in the Schools' Collection (part of the National Folklore Collection), the Nore was also inhabited by a giant who lit a candle on a rock in the river, which killed everyone who saw it. A young warrior (in some versions a member of the Fianna) was given a magic cap called Regan's Cap, and with it pulled over his eyes so as not to see the light, he climbed up the rock and managed to kill the giant.

The Inistioge mermaid.

This river was noted for its wealth of fish and its banks were home to many holy men and women. St Fiachra, the patron saint of gardeners, lived in a cave on the banks of the Nore, as did the famous ascetic Aonghus the Culdee, who spent hours in the river with his hands upraised, praying. Birds flocked to feed him (easily enough, as it seems he lived mainly on watercress) so he did not have to interrupt his prayers. At Aghaboe the monastery of the De La Salle brothers has a Bed of Aonghus on their grounds. The banks of the Nore are dotted with ancient, tiny churches, like that of Cloonamery, and even more ancient cemeteries and burial grounds. The northern Nore valley holds a hundred ancient burial sites, eighty of them located in the river valley between Ballyragget and Kilkenny. The Heritage Audit of the Northern River Nore notes the importance of the river location of the tombs, suggesting that the river was seen as sacred. Close to the Nore at Ballyragget, Ballyragget Castle, once a favourite dwelling of the Great Countess of Ormonde, Margaret Butler, was, during Tudor times, of huge importance

in the defence of the Kilkenny Pale. It is an imposing building, unfortunately not accessible to the public.

More recently, the Nore banks were the home of some rather less saintly characters than Aonghus and Fiachra. One such was Freney the Robber, the famous eighteenth-century highwayman from near Inistioge, who we have already encountered in connection with his hidden treasure on Brandon Hill on the Barrow. His brief career as an outlaw is immortalised in his autobiography. He was eventually pardoned, and the poacher turned gamekeeper took a job as a Customs Official in New Ross.

The Nore's greatest treasures are of natural beauty, the most significant of which is the rare freshwater pearl mussel, the *Margaritifera durrovensis*. Efforts are being made to reintroduce the mussel stocks to the Nore, so we can only hope the condition of the river will make for a happy breeding ground. Pollutants have had a detrimental effect on the salmon stocks for which the Nore is still famous. Traditionally, the saints Patrick and Moling met at the confluence of the Nore and the Barrow, and Patrick, the greater saint, chose the salmon for the Nore, while Moling (who fell asleep during the meeting, which isn't surprising given his heavy workload) was left with the shad. The fact that St Moling lived at the beginning of the seventh century and Patrick in the fifth does not seem to have caused any difficulty in their encounter. Fishing on the Nore, like its sister rivers, was often done from flat-bottomed boats called cotts, and the rivers had their own distinctive style of cott. All over Ireland there are variations in these fishing boats depending on the river, the most distinctive being the Boyne coracle, a kind of curragh made from hazel rods covered in hide.

A final musing on this river: Why did the sixteenth-century English poet Edmund Spenser describe it as the 'stubborn Nore'? Because it was more difficult to navigate than its sister rivers? Or perhaps because of the way the Old English and Norman families continued to hold sway, creating a block to the colonisation plans of the Tudor monarchs?

River Suir at Ardfinnan, County Tipperary.

THE SUIR

'The gentle Shure, that making way, By sweet Clonmel adorns rich Waterford.'
Sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser

The River Suir, like the Nore, rises on the slopes of the Devil's Bit Mountain near Templemore in County Tipperary. The meaning of its name is unclear, though some say it comes from one of the Irish words for sister, *siúr*. The river flows first in a southerly direction, and then eastwards, forming one side of the rough circle that it makes with the other two rivers. Passing near The Rock of Cashel, it flows through the pastures the kings and prelates of this massive fortress looked down on from their eyrie, a huge limestone outcrop in the surrounding plain. Cashel was a superb defensive location and is one of the most impressive historical sites in Ireland. Looking out from the Rock of Cashel on a clear day, one can see the landscape of Ireland stretching out in all directions. The complex of buildings includes examples from every era of medieval Ireland, with a High Cross and round tower cheek-by-jowl with Romanesque and Gothic structures.

In the distance is Slievenamon, the fairy mountain, where Fionn Mac Cumhaill, leader of the hunter-warrior Fianna, once pursued a woman of the Sídh. He had reached the entrance of the fairyland when the door slammed, and his thumb was caught in it – an alternative reason for Fionn's great wisdom as distinct from the more common Salmon of Knowledge tale. Another story tells how the women of Ireland raced to the top of Slievenamon to see who could claim Fionn's love. The connection between the mountain and magical females continued well into the nineteenth century. It was the home of huge multi-horned witches who came to torment a lone woman one evening because she was spinning after dark, as recorded by the writer and folklorist Lady Jane Wilde.

Historically, the Suir was the great trade route from the east into Munster. On its winding journey, which changes direction numerous times, the Suir travels through many ancient Gaelic kingdoms, areas which now encompass parts of the counties of Tipperary and Kilkenny. Its course is mainly through lush valleys and past early settlements, and it is joined by numerous tributaries, including the Clodiagh, Aherlow and

Nier rivers. Just before Carrick-on-Suir the river becomes tidal, and, downstream from Barrow Bridge, it joins with the Barrow and the Nore.

The list of monastic foundations along its course includes Athassel Priory – the largest medieval priory in Ireland, with striking views of the Galtees and Cashel – and tranquil Holycross Abbey. Both are fine examples of the great surge of monastic building in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ireland. Many of these monasteries and abbeys were aimed at establishing Norman dominance in this part of the Irish landscape, but Holycross, a Cistercian foundation, was built on land donated by the O'Briens, the kings of Thomond. It was left in ruins after the Cromwellian wars but was sympathetically restored in the 1970s and now acts as a parish church.

A little further down the river is Athassel Priory. It was founded by the Augustinians in the thirteenth century, and although it is now in ruins, it is awe-inspiring. Some visitors have reported that they have felt an uncanny atmosphere here. Walking through the priory, it is easy to trace its original layout and to identify the many changes made to its buildings before it ceased to function as a religious site. Parts of the gate lodge, cloisters, stone staircases and carvings remain, and there is an impressive altar tomb, possibly that of Walter de Burgh, 1st Earl of Ulster. The priory site contains de Burgh graves from as far back as the twelfth century as well as more recent, local graves, but unlike many other religious foundations, there is no surviving town or village around Athassal. The priory is left to dream of its past glories, as the river flows quietly by.

Holycross Abbey.

The number of ancient monastic foundations along the Suir is equalled by the number of tower houses and castles, including those at Clonmel, Cahir and Carrick-on-Suir. Cahir in particular is very well preserved and gives a clear idea of the layout of a large defensive castle of the fourteenth century. It also shows the power held by the Butler family. Its enormous walls were thought to be impregnable, and they successfully protected its inmates until 1599, when the castle finally fell to the Earl of Essex after a three-day, heavy artillery siege. Throughout all the changes brought by history, Cahir remained in the possession of the Butler family until 1961, when the last heir died. The larger settlement of Clonmel (in Irish, *Cluain Meala*, the ‘Honey Meadow’), like the other towns of medieval origin along the Suir, had its walls and castle attacked and damaged during the Cromwellian wars, although terms were reached with the army and the town was taken without bloodshed.

For those not part of the religious or political elite of the Suir valley, farming was their lifeblood, while other industries such as milling are directly connected with the presence of the river. The rich stores of

salmon in the Suir resulted in salmon weirs being constructed as far back as the early Middle Ages. A 26-kilo salmon, caught in 1874, still holds the record as the biggest rod-caught salmon in Ireland.

The River Suir at Carrick-on-Suir.

Traditional local activities in the Suir valley included basket weaving, using the willow wands from salley trees, and clog-making, using the *fearnóg* (alder trees) which grow on the banks of the river. Perhaps the young people who competed in the inter-county dancing competitions which were held on the bridges of the Suir in times past wore these clogs. It’s a pleasant change to think of a bridge as the site of a dancing competition rather than a bloody battle.

Beautiful Ormond Castle just on the edge of Carrick-on-Suir is an Elizabethan manor house, rather than a fortress. It is the only major unfortified dwelling surviving from the Tudor period in Ireland. The town itself has a nineteenth-century market town feel to it, and, like so many Irish towns it seems (at least on a cold day in February) as if it has turned its back on the river that used to be its lifeblood. In the nineteenth century, horse-drawn boats travelled from here to Clonmel, carrying cargo unloaded from the steamboats that could not go further upriver.

Nowadays, there are just a handful of pleasure boats on the water and the semi-derelict warehouses and ghost signs above the businesses lining the streets make for a slightly melancholy wander. Carrick is also very definitely a Tipperary town rather than a Waterford one, although there are two churches across the bridge on the Waterford side of the river.

Carrick was the site of a strange interaction between Irish folk belief and the law of the land when Mary Doheny of Carrick was brought before the courts in 1864. Mary's husband was blind and she seems to have taken on the role of breadwinner for the family. Her way of doing this was a novel one; she became an intermediary between the living and the dead. Her profession of Fairy Doctor cum medium resulted in her being charged for swindling numerous local individuals, most notably a constable called Joseph Reeves. The Reeves family first made contact with Mary when she began to treat their son, William, who had epilepsy. William died, but Mary claimed she had made contact with him and with other dead members of the family. These people were living in a kind of semi-alive state, guarded by the fairies. To survive, they needed tea and milk and bread and sometimes tobacco. There seems to have been the implication that if the dead were cared for well enough, they might one day be able to come back to the land of the living.

As a final twist, there was the promise of William inheriting some wealth, through the good offices of a recently deceased landowner who was friendly with William's father, who was still looking out for his family from 'the other side'. One strange aspect of the case is that so many people swore that Mary had shown them the figures of their beloved dead. Reeves swore that he had seen the figure of his father-in-law standing in a field with a stick in his hand. He said: 'I don't think that William Mullins is dead now; but he was dead. I have been sending him

food for the last four months since he came to life. I sent bread, butter, and tea once in each of the twenty-four hours.'

The importance of providing food for those trapped in a fairy fort was given extra credence by the ancient belief that humans should never eat fairy food if they wanted to return to the human world. The tradition goes back to some of the earliest Irish sagas; food is often used to tempt mortals to come to fairyland. In the tale of Connla and the Golden Apples, a fairy woman comes to Connla and throws him an apple, and for a month Connla takes no nourishment but that. When she reappears, Connla follows her. Many years later, he returns home in a magical currach, but when he sees the length of time that has passed, he sails away, never to be seen again. The fairy apple gives him immortality but loses him his family and friends.

Mary brought the Reeves family members to a number of isolated sites: the Knockroe passage tomb, hidden in the valley of the Suir's tributary, the River Lingaun, and the fairy fort of Ballydine rath. Letters were left at specific places for their loved ones. Mary seems to have been powerfully convincing in her role as intermediary with the dead, and a number of other families in Carrick also supplied her with food for their dead friends and relatives. There were three trials and Mary was sentenced to twelve months' hard labour in Clonmel jail. She is thought to have ended her days in Clonmel, still poverty stricken but also perhaps still curing cattle and finding lovers for young girls. Her story is mainly forgotten now, but she has the distinction of having had a ballad written about her misdeeds, which is held in the National Library of Scotland.

But after all her magic spells,
Poor Mary she was nabbed quite handy
And locked up in the Clonmel cells,
Where she'll get skilly instead of brandy
Twelve months for to exert her skill,
They gave unto this precious deary,
To learn her how to tread the mill,
For they're wide awake in Tipperary.

Waterford in the nineteenth century.

The Suir is the origin of Waterford's long history as a river port, the gateway used by Viking longboats making their way inland through the network of routes created by the Three Sisters. It's not surprising then that the folklore of the river includes numerous accounts of Viking treasure buried in its valley and attacks by Viking soldiers. Equally, given the devastation caused by the Cromwellian conquest during the seventeenth century, Cromwell and his army figure greatly in local tales. The Folklore Commission also records tales of fairies on their way to play hurling matches borrowing cows to ride across the river; of the Red Earl, Richard De Burgo, who died of thirst when the waters of the Suir retreated from him as punishment for his misdeeds; of the Wizard Hare of Gurteen and of the infamous Witch of Granagh.

The ruins of Granagh (sometimes known as Granny) Castle stand on the banks of the river in County Kilkenny, a little north of Waterford. There is layer upon layer of evidence of human settlement in this area. It is the site of a Neolithic encampment and is very close to the major archaeological finds at Woodstown, which include the grave of a ninth-century Viking warrior. Granagh Castle was built in the thirteenth century

on the site of an older fort by the ubiquitous Le Poers. It later passed into the hands of the even more ubiquitous Butlers.

Around the turn of the sixteenth century, the castle was one of the many extended by Piers Butler and Margaret, Countess of Ormonde. Margaret, one of the Fitzgerald dynasty, was an imposing woman (she was described as manlike and tall) with a strong character, who was well versed in the politics of the day. She has gone down in legend as the murderer of seven bishops and in history as a builder of castles and as the founder of Kilkenny Grammar School. She is said to have hung rebels from the window of Granagh Castle. Described by her contemporary Richard Stanihurst as ‘A Shure friend and a bitter enemy’, Margaret is the source of the many stories about the witch who was said to live in the castle. In real life, Margaret began her life as a pawn. She was very young – twelve or thirteen – when she was wedded to Piers Butler; although she was lucky in that at least she knew her husband, who had been fostered in her father’s house. Her father, the Earl of Kildare, was described as the most powerful man in Ireland at that time and Margaret was seemingly his ‘fairest daughter’. Like many of the Irish women of Norman descent, she is lauded as bringing English ‘civlitie’ to her housekeeping. She certainly had expensive tastes, employing weavers from Flanders to create rich tapestries. But she did not confine her activities to running the household or interior decoration; she was as heavily involved in the political world of the day as her husband. All this luxury and politicking needed money behind it, and Margaret was slated by some commentators for her avarice. If the Butler family had a right to an income, she was there to the forefront to defend her rights and collect the money. It is said that she cursed a landowner who would not give up his inheritance to her, and all sixteen of his sons died. She and Piers were also a very political pair, conscious that it would help their position to create links with the Irish kings. Her eldest surviving daughter, also called Margaret, was married to Brían Óg Mac Giolla Phádraig, the hereditary king of Osraighe – later to be known as Barnaby Fitzpatrick, 1st Baron of Ossory. The marriages organised by Piers and Margaret included both Old English and Irish notables and resulted in a network of connections that consolidated the power of the Ormonde Lordship. Daughters were indeed pawns in this system of family linkages, but if they had enough nous to move around the board and remove the

opposition they often became the equivalent of queens, rulers of their kingdoms.

In one story, with parallels to the story of the giant and the Nore, the Granagh witch puts a lighted candle on a rock in the Suir river every night. Those passing on boats have to take only one look at the candle to die, until a young boy, whose father had been killed by the light, braves the witch and extinguishes it. The witch, in a fury, jumps from the window of her castle and is killed on the rocks in the river below.

In another story, a young priest passing in a boat makes the sign of the cross at the witch, who is leaning out the castle window cursing the voyagers. Horns grow on her forehead, and she is unable to pull her head back in through the window. She finally dies of hunger and thirst, and the horns have to be sawn off before she can be taken from the castle for burial.

The castle was sacked by Cromwell in 1630 and only the ruins remain, old grey stone close to a busy road and against the backdrop of the Thomas Francis Meagher Bridge – an impressive architectural structure that Margaret would surely have approved of. It seems a far cry from witches and murders and even further from great feasts and walls hung with fine tapestries. But Margaret was long dead by the time of the destruction of her castle. She is buried beside her husband in St Canice’s Cathedral in Kilkenny, where a black marble effigy covers her resting place. She lies there peacefully, her hands joined in prayer, guarded by two small angels. Her effigy wears the traditional headdress of the time, with two peaks rising like horns from the base, one on each side of her head.

This chapter on the Three Sisters seems to have inadvertently but perhaps appropriately taken a very female tone. We have seen powerful women like Alice Kyteler and Margaret Butler and resourceful ones such as Mary Doheny, but the ones that stay with me most are the two young sisters, Ann and Catherine, who, like most girls that age, just wanted to have a little fun. As I pass by the Assembly Rooms, located on one of the narrow lanes off the main street of Graiguenamanagh, and now hardly more than a ruin, my heart goes out to the two girls, younger even than Jane Austen’s giggling Lydia Bennett, and possibly just as silly and ignorant, who through no fault of their own suffered unbelievable trauma at the hands of the young men that they had trusted. They are part of the

hidden stories of women in Irish history, sometimes the victims of gods and princes, sometimes of the Church, sometimes of wild young men with pistols and horses. The 'lovely girls', as their chronicler Walsh described them, were not protected from harm by their youth, their innocence, or their loveliness. All we can do is salute their courage and remember their story.

MAGIC AND MAD BISHOPS

This story is based on the fourteenth-century witch trial of the wealthy Kilkenny merchant and money-lender Alice Kyteler. Alice engaged in moneylending, an activity which could have made some local people resentful of her power. She had been married three times and three times widowed. She began to look as if she might be on track for a fourth widowhood, as her husband, John Le Poer, was ailing and eventually died. It has been suggested in more recent times that he displayed many of the classic signs of arsenic poisoning. Le Poer's children were afraid that his possessions would be added to Alice's already considerable wealth, so they brought an accusation of witchcraft to the zealously reforming Bishop of Kilkenny, Richard Ledrede. The outsider Ledrede was not popular among the Kilkenny elite, and his attempts to bring Alice before an ecclesiastical court were hampered by her many friends in high places, including the seneschal of Kilkenny and Roger Outlaw, the Acting Justiciar of Ireland and influential Prior of the Hospitaller Order. The charges Ledrede brought against Alice and her associates were detailed and colourful:

> That in the skull of a robber they placed the intestines and internal organs of cocks, worms, nails cut from dead bodies, hairs from the buttocks and clothes of boys who died before being baptised; that, from this brew they made potions to incite people to love, hate, kill and afflict Christians.

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I was only a child when it happened. Those things which happen to you when you are a child stay with you all your life. The good things: the pictures in my head of my mother, Petronilla, rocking me and singing. The swans on the Nore outside our window overlooking the river. The bad things stay too, the picture in my head of my mother tortured and burnt until all that was left was a smell of burning flesh and some charred bones, which the authorities would not let her friends take away. As if they might resurrect her by her magic.

I did not see her burning, for Dame Alice had taken me away to England by then, but news of it came to us there, and there were plenty of the good people of Kilkenny ready to tell me all the details when I came back to the town, many years later.

I came back with Art, for we had been friends since before the horror and when we met again we found our friendship had become a kind of love. For me, love is a risky thing; it causes too much pain. Art was the child of one of the group of people accused of witchcraft

by that pig-ignorant, arrogant, mad bishop, Richard Ledrede, who came over from England with a nose so intent on smelling out heresy and witchcraft that he found it even in those places where there was nothing to smell.

And, although I am not quite so sure, according to my husband there was no real witchcraft. He says that those wealthy Kilkenny burghers just liked to imagine that those they feared and envied had special powers. Alice and her son William and even my own mother, Alice's servant Petronilla, came to their attention. It was said that they rubbed ointments on themselves and that they could fly above the rooftops of Kilkenny; they took pills and potions and saw strange visions. And Alice was indeed the mistress of the pill and the potion, those that could cure and those that could kill. But she seemed so respectable, and such a fond wife to all the husbands who somehow faded away under her care. As I said, I was a child, and I did not think to ask my mother what went on in Alice's head. But then no one knew that except Alice, and now it is too late to ask either her or my mother anything. Did they really call up spirits and worship the devil? Did they fly in the moonlight? Or was Alice just a woman with a good knowledge of poisons and a taste for the good life?

At first Ledrede was a bit of a joke to us all in Kilkenny, nobles and merchants, servants and clerics. I remember Dame Alice and my mother giggling about his English notions and the fact that his family had nothing like the wealth or breeding of our great families. One of the first things he did was to replace the words in the bawdy choruses that were our favourite songs, even for those who sang in the church choir. But the words he replaced them with were crude and twisted, all the worse for dealing with sacred subjects. Songs about sucking the milk of the Virgin's breasts. He was someone whose mind worked in a peculiar way, a mind you would not want to inspect too closely. He also had a will of iron and a fierce belief in his own righteousness. His sermons were fire and brimstone and he spoke of us, the people of Kilkenny, as wolves howling in the night of evil, of poisonous serpents and adders and toads.

So when the children of John Le Poer, Alice's latest husband, who was currently looking very pale, with his fingernails falling out, came to him to accuse Alice Kyteler of witchcraft, he must have thanked heaven for the happy day.

Dame Alice had friends in high places in the land, and it was not so easy to have her tried and condemned. Indeed, the bishop himself ended up in jail, a circumstance which only seemed to make his resolution stronger. His accusations were vile. He accused Alice of having carnal relations with a demon who appeared to her as a cat or shaggy black dog; of using her sorcery to murder some of her husbands and to infatuate others, with the result that they left all of their possessions to her and her son.

But Alice managed to make her escape, and at my mother's pleading, she took me with her to safety. And while we heard reports of the horrors happening in Kilkenny that November, my mother was the only one to die. All the others had money, or someone powerful enough to protect them.

Ledrede claimed my mother's confession (they tortured her to the stage where she would have confessed to anything) and death as a great victory for Mother Church. Much good it did him; he was never liked in Kilkenny and spent most of his life fighting one court case or another, with his fellow bishops or with the lawkeepers of Ireland. He escaped for a while and spent years at the papal court in Avignon, immersed in his various lawsuits. I imagine they tried their best to send him away back to Ireland, but his long absence gave me the opportunity to return to Kilkenny under a new name. I am Sarah Mills now, not Basilia, daughter of Petronilla of Meath. I have a fine house by the river, where I can watch the swans, even feed them from my window. I love to see them float on the water, their reflections mirror images of their great beauty. My mother loved them too. Sometimes I

pretend that they might have put her ashes in the water, and the thought makes me happy, though it is unlikely that the gentle Nore is her resting place. Bishop Ledrede is buried in great splendour in the Cathedral with a fine stone monument covering him. He holds his mitre in his hand and as always his long, stern face shows an expression of disgust, as if he has a bad taste in his mouth. The bad taste of Kilkenny. Now and again, mostly around All Soul's Eve, I make my way up to the Cathedral and spit on him.

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Gougane Barra.

The Lee and the Blackwater

‘And the sabbath rang slowly In the pebbles of the holy streams.’
Dylan Thomas, ‘Fern Hill’

The Lee and the Blackwater are both very beautiful rivers. Flowing east and then south from their sources in the west, they end their journeys to

the sea at two very different port towns, Cork city and Youghal. In medieval and early modern times, these historical towns were both important players in terms of wealth and political clout, yet somehow Youghal never knew the growth of its western neighbour and is a quiet town. This is all the more surprising when we consider that the Blackwater is a much longer and bigger river than the Lee, without the labyrinth of streams and islands that have sometimes made navigation of Cork's river a complicated task. Perhaps its lack of growth was caused by the fact that the town was caught between the might of Waterford on one side and Cork on the other. It sometimes seems as if a town which is located on a river dividing two counties is less likely than others to grow into a city.

Back at their sources, however, the rivers are much more alike. The Blackwater rises in the Sliabh Luachra area in Kerry, the Lee in the Shehy Mountains on the Kerry border. They travel through wildly beautiful and beautifully wild landscapes and both their river valley communities have preserved a rich cultural heritage. The stories of these rivers include those of rapparees and writers, scholars and singers, sinners and many early Irish saints. The Blackwater can lay claim to St Carthage of Lismore and our familiar friend St Moling, born near the source of the river in Sliabh Luachra. The Lee is forever famously associated with the patron of Cork, St Finbarr – bishop, hermit and lover of the wilderness at Gougane Barra, the valley where it sometimes feels as if the earth, sky and water still ring with the music of the 'holy streams'.

THE LEE

'I always stop when I am crossing over the Lee to listen to her music.'
Pat Walsh, visually impaired musician and historian

The River Lee begins its journey high in the rocky Shehy Mountains and travels eastwards through post-glacial submerged forests and deep-shaded wooded valleys, until it reaches the sea at Cork city.

The Lee is the pre-eminent symbol of Cork. Its name features in two of the best-known anthems of the city, ‘The Bells of Shandon’ and ‘The Banks of My Own Lovely Lee’. It is a river that ends in an estuary which is a welter of islets and inlets. It is also a river which rises up and causes disastrous damage to the communities along its course, in floods which are becoming more and more frequent during the twenty-first century.

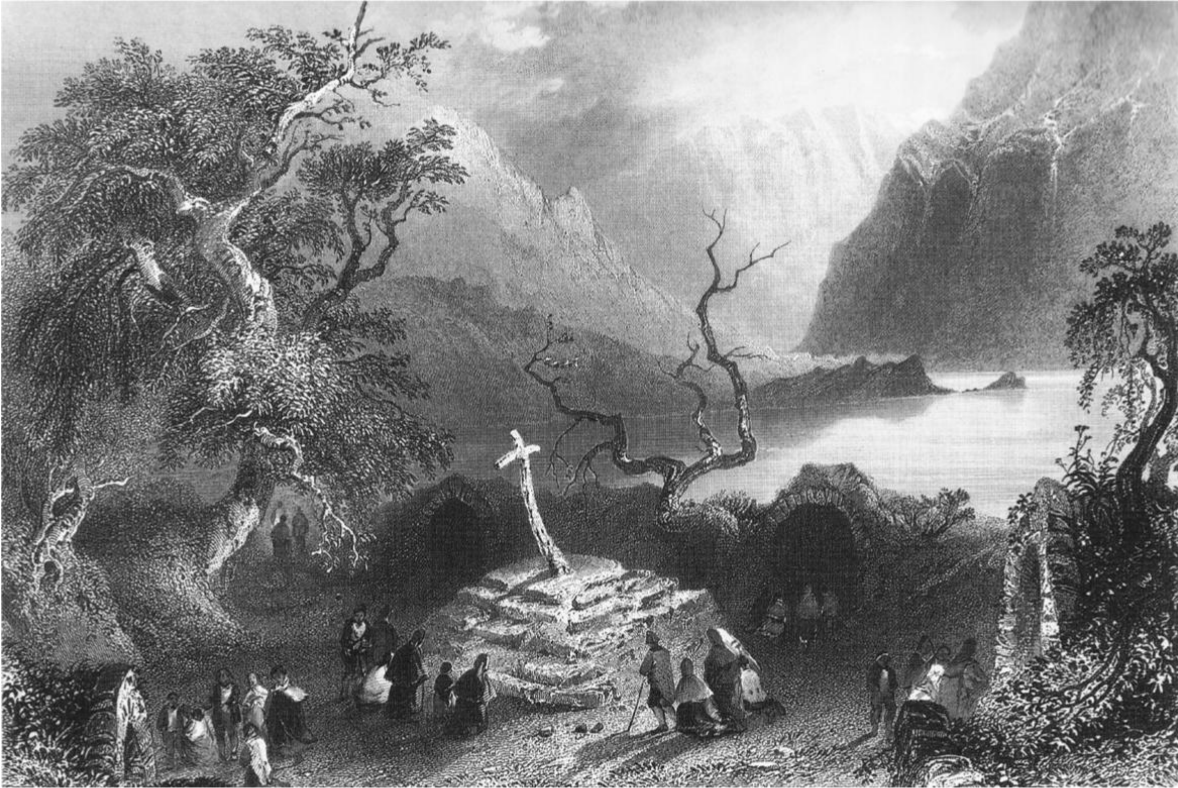
View of the Lee at the Gearagh wooded valley.

The stream that is considered the source of the Lee flows, along with others, into the lake at Gougane Barra. The lake and the valley of Gougane Barra – St Finbar’s valley – are stunning sights at every time of the year, from icy blue January days to the height of summer, when the birds sing and the bees buzz through the wildflowers. There is a particular purity and stillness in the air in this circle of hills, with the quiet lake at its centre, which seems to act like a Tibetan singing bowl, reverberating with something otherworldly – a kind of grace dissolved in this particular place. Perhaps part of this atmosphere is due to the hermits who have made their home here through the centuries, tending fruit trees and hives and looking after the many people who came here, seeking

peace in nature and in the almost palpable spirituality of this remote valley.

If Gougane Barra still gives the feeling of remoteness, when St Finbar reputedly settled here in the late sixth century it must have been wild indeed, with wolves and wild pigs as well as the much less threatening wildlife of the present day. The valley was scooped out of the mountains by a huge glacier, which then moved, at around twenty-five cm a day, downhill, leaving a lake of meltwater behind it and an expanse of scraped, exposed rock that makes cultivation impossible and results in a wildly beautiful landscape. The high mountains surround the lake on three sides, a lake that sometimes seems supernaturally still, though according to legend it was once the home of a monster, a giant serpent who harassed the local population and interrupted Finbar's ministrations to his people. When the monster snatched a vessel of holy water from his hand, the saint had had enough and in punishment, Finbar banished the *péist* to Lough Allua. The monster then gouged a furious course towards the sea, all the way to the serpentine mass of islets that make up Cork Harbour. And thus the Lee was formed. In some versions of the legend, the River Lee takes its name from this monster, connecting it with the Irish phrase for lying down. The monster lay down at the edge of the lake and thus the Irish phrase *ina luí* – lying down – gives us the word Lee.

St Finbarr eventually also left Gougane Barra and made his way to the south, guided by an angel along the river to the great Marsh of Munster, where he founded another monastery, the beginning of the settlement that eventually became Cork city. The patron saint of Cork, St Finbarr was so holy that he was brought up to Heaven to be consecrated a bishop, as even the pope was not worthy to anoint him. Like St Colmcille, one of his hands was so bright with grace that he had to wear a glove on it, and the sun did not set for two weeks after his death. The first account of the saint's life dates from the thirteenth century, long after his death and – whisper it – there are those who claim he never set foot in Cork.



The Stations of the Cross at Gougane Barra in the late nineteenth century.

At Gougane Barra, nothing, apart from the name, remains of Finbarr's hermitage, although the ruins of a much later oratory can be seen. These date from the end of the seventeenth century, when a priest called Denis O'Mahony built his retreat on the tiny islet in the lake. Connected to the mainland by a short causeway, this is indeed a retreat within a retreat, a veritable Lake Isle of Innisfree. Fr O'Mahony tended to his hive of honey bees, planted fruit trees and constructed terraces, a sacristy, a kitchen and an oratory. He lived here for twenty-eight years. Gougane Barra remains a site of local pilgrimage right up to the present day. The early nineteenth-century writer Thomas Crofton Croker visited Gougane Barra for the St John's Day pattern and gives the following vivid account of the festivities in 1813, where he heard women keening for the first time:

> As night closed in, the tent became crowded almost to suffocation, and dancing being out of the question … a man … began to take a prominent part in entertaining the assembly by singing Irish songs in a loud and effective voice. These songs were received with shouts of applause … [they] were rebellious in the highest degree. Poor old King George was execrated without mercy; curses were also dealt out wholesale on the Saxon oppressors of Banna the Blessed [an allegorical name for Ireland]; Bonaparte's achievements were extolled, and Irishmen were called upon to follow the example of the French people … We

> left this scene … and turned towards the banks of the lake, where whiskey, porter, bread and salmon were sold in booths or tents resembling a gipsy encampment … Above the entrance of each was suspended the name of the owner, if he happened to possess a license; when this was not the case, a jug, a bottle, or pipe were displayed to indicate that spirits and porter might be had within, and not unfrequently were added a piece of ribbon, and an old shoe, the first to distinguish some popular party, the latter emblematic of dancing, to which amusement the lower orders of Irish are immoderately attached.
>
> The women invariably selected their partners, and went up to the man of their choice, to whom they freely presented their hand. After the dance was concluded, the men dropped a penny each, or, such as were inclined to display their liberality, something more, into an old hat which lay at the piper's feet, or in a hollow made in the ground for the purpose. The piper, who seldom makes a moment's pause, continues playing, and another dance immediately commences.
>
> *Researches in the South of Ireland*, Thomas Crofton Croker

The Catholic Church tried to suppress such debauchery, and it may be that the building of the neo-Gothic chapel on the island in the nineteenth century was partly inspired by the wish to bring back a more spiritual element to the pilgrimage site. By 1900 there were tourists scattered among the local women dressed in the voluminous West Cork hooded cloaks, doing the stations around the site and recorded by the photographer Robert French.

In a further re-sanctification effort, there was an attempt made to lure the Carthusian Order to come to the valley in the later nineteenth century. Fr Hurley, parish priest of nearby Inchigeelagh, wished to re-establish a monastery on the lake, and to this end, representations were made by the Cork diocese to the Grande Chartreuse Mother House, inviting the monks to set up a daughter house in Gougane Barra. The French monks visited the spot, but it seems the weather was particularly unkind on the day they arrived, and they decided to opt for a foundation in the more clement climate of Parkminster in Sussex. It's an interesting thought that perhaps Chartreuse liqueur could have been made in the hills of west Cork instead of *poitín*; the Cartusian Order, with its emphasis on a hermit-like existence, would certainly have been well matched with the spirit of early Irish Christianity.

But Gougane Barra has always managed to be comfortable with both the sacred and profane. An alternate version of the origin of the River Lee has St Patrick cursing an inhospitable woman. At the moment he leaves her house, she is condemned to continue doing whatever she is doing for eternity. That happens to be urinating, and the stream became the Lee. In the mid-twentieth century, local characters such as Tim

Buckley, the famous ‘Tailor’, and his wife Ansty (Anastasia) demonstrated this earthiness. They were the subjects of a book written by Eric Cross, who visited the couple and collected the stories and maxims of the natural philosopher and his excitable wife. The Tailor was a bawdy character and seemed to spend more time telling stories than working.

The Ireland of 1942 took offence at some of the (very mildly) risqué tales told by him and the book became a cause célèbre. It was banned by the Irish Censorship Board and there were outraged speeches in the Dáil about the portrayal of the ‘Irish peasant’ as anything other than innocent, clean living and hardworking. The couple were boycotted, and three priests from the local parishes arrived at their house, forcing the Tailor to burn a copy of the book in front of them.

Reading the book now, it is hard to see what anyone could find objectionable in its earthy but gentle wisdom. In more liberal circles, *The Tailor and Ansty* was feted, with Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, key figures in Irish theatre, visiting their house in preparation for the dramatic version of the book staged in the 1960s at the Gate Theatre. To the authorities of Church and state, the book was seen as a throwback to the nineteenth century portrayals of the ‘pig-in-the-parlour’ Irishman, a libel on rural Ireland and its people. The scandal is remembered as one of the keynotes of the restrictive and hypocritical tendencies that were so evident in the early years of the Irish state.

The stone that marks the couple’s grave, which is on the island in the lake, has a Shakespearean epitaph carved on it: *A star danced and under that was I born.* The context is interesting, as it is said by witty Beatrice, the sparring partner of the equally witty Benedick in the aptly named play *Much Ado About Nothing.* A single star also figures in ‘The Silence of the Valley’, a short story written by Seán O‘Faoláin. Gougane Barra was a place much loved by him and his wife, fellow writer Eileen. She asked to have her ashes scattered over the still waters of the lake.

We come out of the valley, along a road winding through mountains, past the line of glacial lakes that make up Lough Allua. This was a standout spot for rebel Cork, and the people here have long memories of the Irish Civil War. When visiting Inchigeelagh at New Year at the end of the twentieth century, we came upon a bed and breakfast that was hedging its bets as regards the 1921 Treaty, with equally huge framed and fly-spotted pictures of both Éamon de Valera and Michael Collins, one on

each side of the long, gloomy hallway. The man who opened the door bore an uncanny resemblance to Norman Bates, and when he went back into the house to check with Mother as to whether there was room for us we looked at each other and almost ran away. To our relief, our host returned to tell us that Mother had vetoed our custom.

In the early twenty-first century, another battle was fought here, this time against a wind farm. It finally ended when a ruling was made that the mountain above the valley at Curraglass, overlooking Gougane Barra and the beautiful Pass of Keimaneigh, could not be developed. The Pass is said to have got its name from the days of the Fianna, when Fionn hunted a deer who made a tremendous leap from one rock to another, right across the gap in the mountains.

Further downriver, we come to two man-made dams at Carrigadrohid and Inniscarra. There is a legend that Inniscarra gets its name from the Irish word for hindquarter. In the sixth century St Senan, one of the more irascible Irish saints, drowned a rich man's horse here, as the animal had been put out to pasture on the land the saint had claimed. The unfortunate creature was left with its head in the water and its hindquarters sticking up.

These are beautiful places with still lake waters and the imposing ruins of Carrigadrohid, yet another castle seized by Cromwellian troops. But the creation of these man-made dams destroyed most of the area known as the Gearagh, the wooded river valley. The Gearagh (*An Gaorthadh*) was created when the massive glacier upstream melted and drowned the native forest, as well as dispensing rocks and gravel to form a mass of tiny islands. Originally, this whole area would have been made up of marshy islands covered in trees. In 1954, the Electricity Supply Board cut down huge numbers of ancient oaks and flooded the area to build dams for hydroelectric power and reservoirs for drinking water. The river itself was drowned and the creation of the two dams prevented salmon from going upstream, divested the river of the freshwater pearl mussel and brought ecological havoc onto what was the last post-glacial alluvial wetland in western Europe.

It is hard to know what to describe it as; is it a marshland, a multitude of streams, a forest bounded and often immersed in water? The Lee is broken into a confusing maze of streamlets which made parts of this area as inaccessible as the Shehy Mountains. It was famous for the outlaws

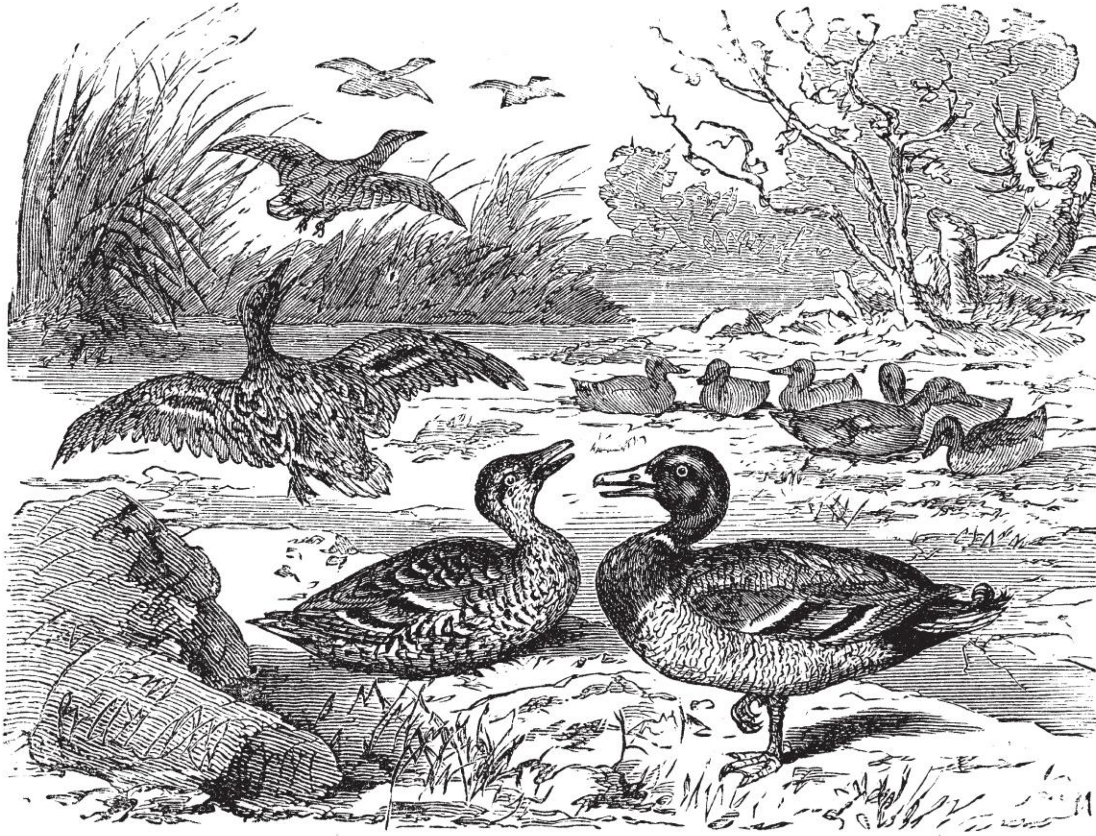
who took refuge there and the *poitín* makers who knew the secret ways that led to their stills. In the 1930s, there were still stories current about Seán Ruad an Gairaig – Red Sean of the Gearagh – the famous nineteenth-century outlaw, or rapparee, as such anti-establishment figures were called in folk memory.

These semi-submerged forests are amazingly fertile places, both in terms of vegetation and wildlife, and they act as natural sponges during periods of flooding. Moths, butterflies, bright blue dragonflies, damselflies and other insects less kind to humans, such as midges, are everywhere. As well as ancient oaks, the Gearagh trees included hazel and holly, birch and hawthorn, willow and alder. Some of the stumps, like mutilated bodies, can be seen rising like ghosts from the water during those times when the lake at Carrigadrohid is low. At times like these, the landscape takes on a strange, otherworldly quality. The lake floor, an expanse of dry mud, cracked and bleak, appears like the surface of the moon.

What remains of the Gearagh has had walkways made, linking some of the islands, crossing over its wetlands and its crazy-paving pattern of streams. The area is now a centre for hikers. During very wet periods the trees grow out of the flooded areas and the wetland wildlife flourishes. The Gearagh is a paradise for many types of waterbirds, including ducks, those denizens of every river habitat from large cities to wild countryside.

THE DUCK

Water birds, from the various varieties of ducks to moorhens, coots and grebes, are a very important part of the Irish birdlife population. Nineteen species of duck can be found on our rivers and along the coast of Ireland. There is something comforting and domestic about a flock of ducks swimming towards humans for food; so many of us have memories of going to feed the ducks in our childhoods. The duck was also once a staple of many an Irish farmyard, along with geese and hens. Ducklings, fluffy yellow, are bright targets for predators such as otters and stoats.



The most common species of duck in Ireland are the wigeon, teal, mallard and tufted duck. Of these four, only the teal has increased in population since the beginning of this century. The rest are in decline. Among some of the rarer species of duck, the decline has been even more disastrous.

While ducks are not numerous in ancient legends, they were important solar symbols in early Celtic society; the goddess Sequana rides on a boat in the form of the duck and there are a number of Iron Age European torcs which display ducks, a spoked solar wheel and rings. Bronze Age vessels also show ducks. Poets, according to *Cormac's Glossary*, the medieval glossary and encyclopedia of Irish lore, wore cloaks that were made of the skins of birds, decorated with mallards' necks and their crests.

Later, the bird appeared in Christian legends, such as that of St Colman's duck, who survived being placed in a pot set to heat over a fire and was found swimming around happily in the water, which refused to boil. In Irish folklore, there are beliefs that a duck seen flying at night contains the soul of a dead person, and there are many folktales of how the soul of a giant is hidden inside a duck's egg.

From the Gearagh, the Lee makes its way westwards towards the sea, joined on its way by other rivers, most notably the Sullane and the Dripsey, themselves fed by numerous smaller rivers which form a system of veins or arteries connecting the southern part of the county. The Sullane was the river which the celebrated Irish musician Seán Ó Riada claimed as the inspiration for much of his work. At Cork Harbour, this

confusion continues. It is hard to know where the Lee ends and the sea begins, with so many inlets and islands. The river divides at the heart of Cork City.

Cork itself, like most of the great cities built on a river, has too complex a history to be covered in this book. We have seen that tradition claims that it was founded by St Finbarr, but the Danes and the Normans also had a major part to play in its establishment, and it grew to importance during the Middle Ages. As the major city of the southern part of Ireland during the early modern period, it was important for its imports from southern Europe, salt and iron ore, wine and brandy, and exports of bark for tanning from the great oak forests of the south of Ireland. Nowadays, it is the second largest city in Ireland, but its centre retains the compact and attractive nature of a smaller city. And like Dublin, its character is very much formed by the river that flows through it, dividing the city as the river itself divides, not with the straightforward north/south divide of the Liffey but twice – something subtler and more confusing for non-natives trying to find their way around.

The River Lee, a beloved feature of Cork City.

The centre of Cork is a low-lying island and the Lee floods the city at regular intervals. There are some areas of the city that are constantly

under threat of inundation. Sometimes access to the water is from low-lying land, sometimes from steep banks, notably at Sunday's Well, where fine nineteenth- and eighteenth-century houses, as well as smaller artisan dwellings, look down towards the river. There must have been something in the water in Sunday's Well and its environs around 1900 because that was the time when two lights of Irish literature were born there: the aforementioned Seán O'Faoláin and Frank O'Connor, best known for their mastery of the short story. In the inward-looking Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s, both spent long periods outside the country and they depended on publishers outside Ireland for their livelihood. Two lesser lights were also born in Cork at around this time. One of them, Patricia Lynch, is considered dated, but with an imagination fed on myth and folklore, she created some wonderful children's stories and in turn fed the imagination of generations of Irish children at a time when very few children's books were set in Ireland. Indeed, Patricia's imagination was so vivid that although she claimed to have been born in Cork, she may actually have been born in London and was christened Winifred rather than Patricia! Eileen O'Faoláin, who was definitely born in Cork, also wrote for children, and her retellings of Celtic myths were the first introduction many Irish children had to these stories.

The Lee, or the estuary version of it, winds around islands in one of the biggest natural harbours in Europe, until it opens out into Cork Harbour proper, forming shelter and berthage for ships at many points along the way.

One of these is Passage West, a pretty town nestled along the coastline on the west side of the channel that leads to Lough Mahon. Some would consider that Passage West is not really on the Lee but part of Cork Harbour, and it is a moot point. With its current population of just under 6,000 people, it has gone through many incarnations, including that of an important port for ships travelling to Cork. Originally, a sandbar just beyond the city blocked the inner parts of the harbour, so larger vessels stopped at Passage West and their cargo was unloaded there. Goods and passengers were brought by smaller crafts or by land into the city. Passage West must have been a busy, bustling place and the town prospered as a trading centre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This all changed when the channel allowing access to Cork was deepened in the mid-nineteenth century and Passage West became a backwater.

However, the town found new life as a popular tourist spot for Corkonians and others who wished to avail of the fresh sea air. A spa, a hotel and various other services were built, and it was a prosperous place when Queen Victoria paid a visit there in 1849. Sea bathing had become popular, and the Baths were an extra attraction.

But the extension of the railway line to Monkstown once again changed the fortunes of Passage West and it is a quiet place now. It is also a place rich in tradition, with the folklore survey of the 1930s recording many stories of holy wells with magical fish, headless coachmen and mills haunted by red-haired women. However, one of the most tragic stories connected with the village is one which actually happened.

In 1828, a ship entered the harbour at Passage West with a cargo of sugar and a number of murdered sailors on board. Captain William Stewart had set sail from Cork some months previously, delivering a herd of mules to Barbados. He had employed the muleteer Timothy Connell to look after the animals on the voyage out. Timothy was a young man with small children and it must have been hard to leave home, especially for what turned out to be a much longer voyage than planned. Months were spent in Barbados, but the ship finally set sail for home with a cargo of sugar, a crew of six and a passenger, Thomas Hammond, who had been sent to the West Indies in an effort to cure his tuberculosis and was now ready for home.

As the voyage progressed, the captain’s behaviour became more and more erratic. One theory is that an existing mental condition had been exacerbated by the strong rum Stewart had started to drink during the ship’s long stopover. He became convinced that God was talking to him and that the crew were plotting against him, an obsession intensified by the fact that Timothy and Thomas spoke to each other in Irish.

One evening, he called the members of the crew he suspected of plotting against him one by one into his cabin. He brutally murdered each one. By the time the ship, nearing Cork, was picked up by another vessel, there were only a couple of men and a cabin boy left alive, all of whom had been forced to help sail the ship home.

There was no question of Stewart’s guilt; he was found guilty but insane and spent the rest of his life in asylums. Most of this was spent in The Central Lunatic Asylum in Dundrum. A brief spell in Cork Lunatic

Asylum – he had family in the city – resulted in another death. Stewart attacked and killed one of the staff and was sent back to Dundrum. When not at the mercy of his illness, Stewart was considered a quiet and gentlemanly character, who formed such an attachment to one of the hospital's doctors that he spent months working on a macabre gift – a model ship laboriously put together from bones. The task was made all the more difficult by the fact that Stewart was not allowed a knife and so had to carve the bones with bone itself.

And what of the muleteer, poor Timothy Connell? His body lies in the churchyard in Passage West, with a monument recording his life and tragic death.

The Lee, that divided and multiform river, from its source of many springs in the mountains to the many inlets of Cork Harbour, is a river of marsh and bog and trees, of hidden islands and deep coves. The history it carries in its flow goes from ancient saints to mad sea captains, from ships made of bone to monsters to rapparees, from the advances of modern technology to stories as old as Ireland's first settlers.

THE BLACKWATER

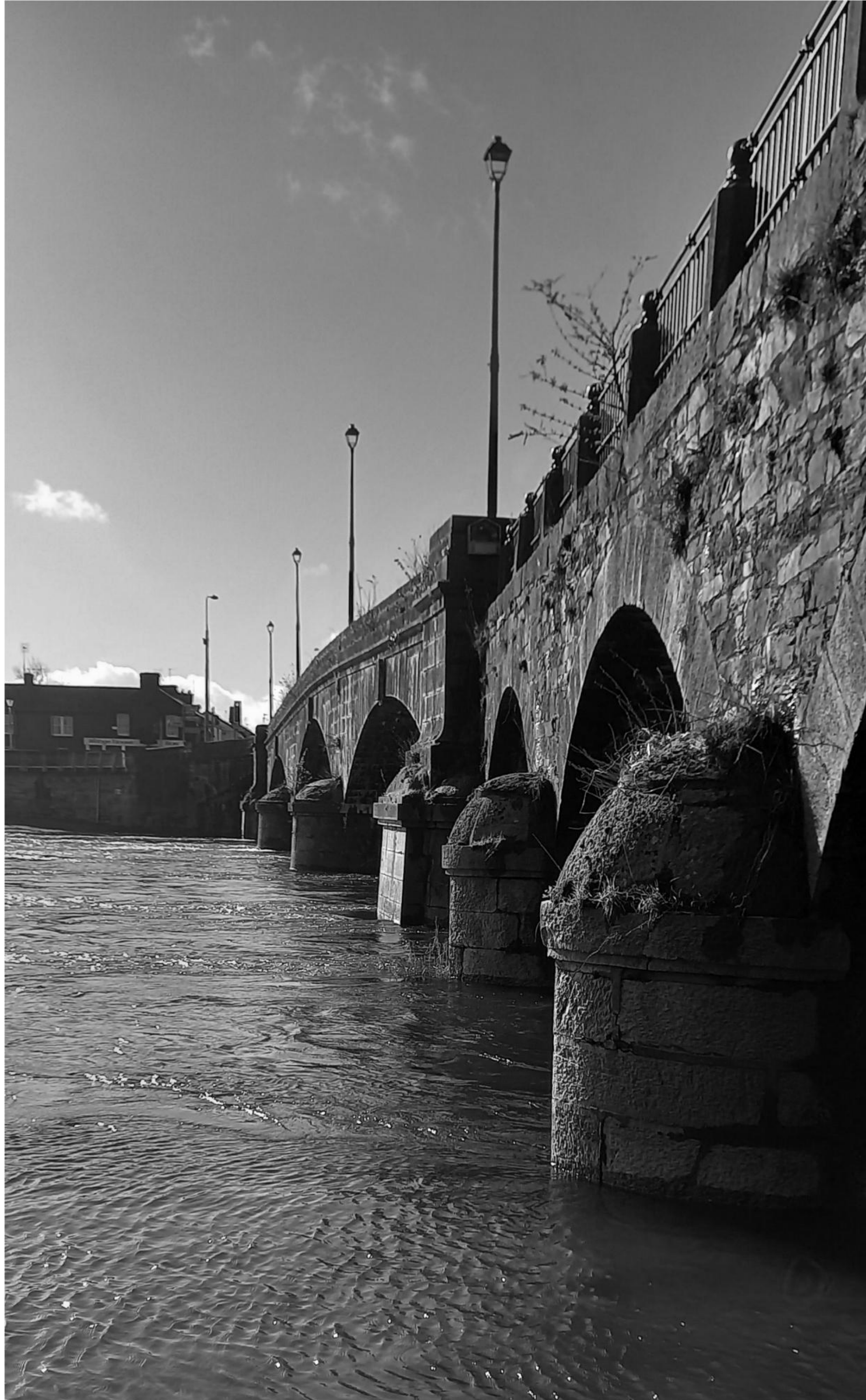
'Strong Allow tumbling from Slewlougher steep'
Sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser

With the Blackwater, we start with the name, a name which, unlike every other river in this book, has no Irish origins. Nor is it a translation of the original name of the river, which prior to the sixteenth century was known simply as the *Abhainn Mór*, the big river. It was sometimes also called the Broadwater at this time, which is closer to its original name. The river, or at least parts of its course, may also have originally been known as the Allo, a deviation on the Irish word *eala*, or swan.

Whatever its original name, the Blackwater is indeed a big river, one of the longest in Ireland, 169 kilometres long, initially making its way through mountainous areas and then through a wide river valley as it

flows through the counties of Kerry, Cork, Limerick and Waterford, to reach the sea at Youghal.

In many ways it is a river of two parts, beginning its life in the traditions of Gaelic Munster and ending it in a port town rich in a heritage that involves Viking, Norman and English elements. This change of culture is mirrored in its long journey from west to east, but towards the end of its journey to the sea, at Cappoquin, the Blackwater takes an abrupt turn to the south. The theory is that about seventy million years ago this river bed was where the River Suir travelled southwards to the sea and when the Suir gradually changed its course eastwards (over a very long time period) what is called ‘river capture’ – sometimes ‘river piracy’ – took place. The Blackwater took over the bed of the Suir. If the Blackwater had continued its course eastwards or if the Suir had continued southwards, with the Blackwater joining it from the west, who knows what effect that might have had on the history of Ireland, providing a link between the far south-west of Ireland and its eastern coast?



Bridge over the Blackwater at Mallow.

There is great variety in the landscapes of the Blackwater valley, from wild mountains and rushy heaths, to gentle pastures, great estates,

beautiful woods and a plethora of historic houses, castles and abbeys. On its very last section, the river flows through gorges cutting through rock, with steep-sided tributaries entering the river, which broadens out in places so that it almost seems like a lake. The Annals of Ulster record that the place where the river entered the sea was changed in AD 803 by a great cataclysm – perhaps an earthquake – and Whiting Bay, further to the east along the coast, is said to have been the original mouth of the Blackwater. This is a river which despite its serene appearance has had a somewhat tumultuous past.

The source of the Blackwater is in the Mullaghareirk Mountains in Kerry and there is a Trail Loop marked near its source. From there, the river flows along the southern borders of the district that is known as Sliabh Luachra (the Slewlougher of Spenser's poem), comprising elements of Kerry, Limerick and Cork. Sliabh Luachra is a bastion of Irish culture, an area with a rich tradition of music and dance, a heritage which is now internationally celebrated. This area of rushy, bad land was traditionally underpopulated and isolated, and thus held onto native traditions long after they had been lost to other parts of Munster. Two of the great poets of the Gaelic bardic schools came from here: Aogán Ó Rathaille, whose lifetime straddled the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, and the mid-eighteenth century Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin. Ó Rathaille was famous as a poet who lamented the loss of the old Gaelic Order, which had been devastated in the aftermath of the Desmond Rebellion at the end of the sixteenth century and the consequent Plantations and land confiscations. He is credited with bringing to birth the *Aisling*, those poems in which the poet dreams of Ireland coming to him in the guise of a beautiful young woman. She laments her servitude and hopes to be rescued by a champion from over the sea – the Stuart pretenders to the English throne. The people of Sliabh Luachra have also held onto an intense pride in the area's humbler traditions, with an active heritage group that publishes a regular journal, including the records of some ancient and idiosyncratic folk cures. Who knew that measles can be cured by a drink made from boiling a mouse in milk and sheep's droppings, and whooping cough by the leavings of milk drunk by a ferret?

Once it leaves this upland area, there is a very definite change in the nature of the Blackwater's course; it flows through fertile lands with hazy

blue mountains in the distance, green fields and later still, through ancient, beautiful woods, a faint echo of the time when this part of the country was famous for its great oakwoods. This river, like so many others during their middle course, has a sleepy air, but there were periods of great unrest in these quiet pastures and fields. The Rockite or Captain Rock agrarian protestors, along with the similar Whiteboys, were active here in pre-Famine Ireland, retreating to the Mullaghareirk hills after their attacks on the livestock and lands of the absentee lords who were the main beneficiaries of this rich land. The Boggeragh and Nagle Mountains are to the south of the wide river valley, the Ballyhouras to the north. On Corrin Hill in the Nagles there is a cairn, a mound that is the reputed burial place of Mogh Ruith, legendary husband of the Cailleach or Hag of Beara. Mogh Ruith was a blind druid who originally came from Valentia Island off the coast of Kerry. He was called on to help the people of Munster when the third-century high king Cormac Mac Airt marched on the kingdom and his druids magically dried up all the sources of water in the land. Mogh Ruith defeated the druids, and Cormac had to retreat, and as a reward the druid was given some of the best land in Munster. He was claimed as the ancestor of the Duggans, who were the dominant family in the area until defeated by the O'Keeffes. The O'Keeffes are remembered in more recent history along this stretch of the river, at the Cave of Gortmore, east of Mallow, where the seventeenth-century outlaw Donal O'Keeffe took refuge and killed the woman who betrayed his hiding place to the English.

At Mallow, the Blackwater has become a wide and stately river. The town is beautifully situated on the river, which is well looked after here, with parklands surrounding it and trails laid out. The two castles which are situated in the park – the sixteenth-century ruin and the later country house – add to the loveliness of the place, as does the herd of rare and somewhat elusive white deer. Tradition has it that the first herd was presented to the owners of the castle by Queen Elizabeth I. Much more in evidence are the blackbirds, thrushes and robins that form such an integral part of riverbank life.

Mallow was the centre of rich tillage lands, and the former wealth of the town is evident in the elegant three-storey houses that line Thomas Davis Street, their arched entrances still leading to the mews at the back where the stables used to be. The unusual oriel windows in some of these

houses, giving a view out onto the street, were built during the period when Mallow had a brief history as a spa town – they were designed for the fashionable visitors to see and be seen. There was a spa house built close to the original warm spring, but 'taking the waters' went out of fashion, and Mallow's prosperity was also hit by the massive decline in the grain trade at the end of the nineteenth century. Now a strange mix of elegance, sensitive restoration and the dilapidation that is evident in so many country towns, it retains an old-fashioned charm, not unlike that of its sister Blackwater town further down the coast at Youghal.

Mallow Castle.

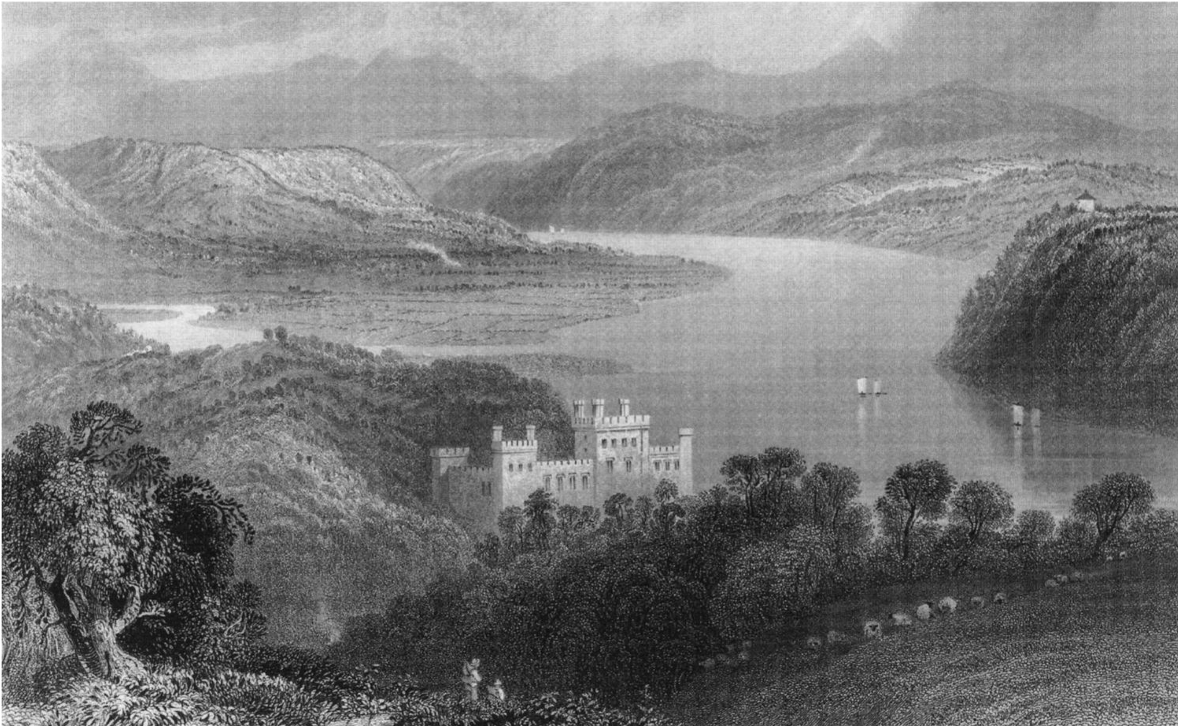
After Mallow and Fermoy, great houses are very much in evidence, sometimes built beside the remains of a Gaelic lord's keep, testaments to the land redistributed to settlers after the Desmond rebellions and throughout the seventeenth century. While the initial Plantations in Munster in the mid-1580s were limited in scope, with pockets of settlement rather than full-scale land distribution, attempts to embed settlers from Britain continued for decades and after the Cromwellian wars of the following century, much of the best land of Munster was owned by non-native landlords. Many of them, such as the 1st Earl of Cork, Richard Boyle, saw both great wealth and great reversals of fortune. After the defeat of the Gaelic lords at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, Boyle's real rise to wealth and power began. He purchased Walter Raleigh's estates and took up residence in Lismore Castle, County Waterford, where his son, the chemist and philosopher Robert Boyle was

born, one of the fifteen children his father had with his second wife. His first wife, Joan, had died in childbirth. Richard Boyle is the epitome of the Elizabethan adventurer-courtier, up to his neck in intrigues in Court and possibly dubious financial shenanigans, while exploiting his Irish estates to the hilt and making a vast fortune out of the wood and wool of the south of Ireland. He died in 1643, during the 1641 rebellion, driven off his lands to take refuge behind the walls of Youghal. His heirs did manage to regain their lands, and the title of the Earl of Cork has continued to the present day, though the vast estates are no more and the link of the family with Ireland has become a tenuous one. The impressive Boyle monument in the Collegiate Church in Youghal gives the viewer a strong sense of the first Earl, his head pillowed in his hand, a shrewd, lively figure observing the world go by rather than a man sunk in divine rest.

The most famous stretch of the Blackwater, and arguably the most beautiful part of its course, is from Lismore onwards. Lismore, a famed monastic settlement in early Christian Ireland, is the site of a castle still in the possession of the Duke of Devonshire. The Devonshire family made good use of the resources of the river that flows beneath the castle walls. In the nineteenth century, there was an extensive salmon fishery at Lismore, exporting fish to Liverpool. It was estimated that as many as 800 salmon could be caught at one time. Still famous for its salmon stocks, in the mid-twentieth century, the Blackwater was considered the best salmon river in Ireland, and over the previous centuries many legal disputes are recorded over the rights to fishing the river. Other fish such as brown and sea trout and freshwater mussels were also abundant in the Blackwater; records describe the people who lived between Cappoquin and Lismore harvesting the mussels in the low waters to use as spoons. The Blackwater had its own form of ‘cott’, or small fishing boat, and visitors remarked that the fisher was ‘not infrequently a rosy-cheeked peasant girl’.

Both Lismore and Cappoquin have preserved a peaceful and green demeanour. Lismore has a Church of Ireland Cathedral and rows of lovely stone cottages. It was from Lismore that one of Ireland’s most intrepid explorers, Dervla Murphy, took off on a bicycle to India in the early 1960s, beginning a career which included solo travels to the Near

and Far East, Africa and South America, recording her journeys in her own inimitable style.



Lismore Castle, County Waterford.

After Cappoquin and its abrupt turn southwards, the river changes its nature once again. Where the Finisk enters the Blackwater there are islands in the river, and on the banks at the townland of Lefanta, remains of blades and tools dating from eight thousand years ago were found, reminding us of how long Ireland has been inhabited and the important part rivers played in succouring its first peoples. The stretch of Blackwater from Cappoquin to the sea has been described as the Irish Rhine, with not so much hyperbole as you might imagine, as the numerous castles on the steep, winding banks make for a beautiful landscape. In the nineteenth century, before silting up changed the nature of the river, this was a transport hub to the port of Youghal, carrying coal from Wales and timber from the surrounding area. The goods travelled by river from Youghal to Cappoquin and by canal to Lismore. The Lismore canal, like so many in Ireland, is no longer in use. Ireland has a great many canals that were abandoned when rail took over from water as the main mass transport method. Many plans were set aside and many canals

were left unfinished. But one can see the fascination that the idea of 'joining up' waterways held and those canals that are left have become havens of wildlife in their own right. Some of these canals have been given new life. The Shannon-Erne Waterway is one that has been revitalised in recent times, providing a tangible link between the Northern Ireland and the Republic.

At Ballynatray, we are very close to the final stretch of the river, where it flows into the sea at Youghal. The river widens here, and the woods planted by the owners of the Ballynatray Estate in the early nineteenth century add to a feeling of deep peace. There are remains of a monastery and a keep as well as the fine, still extant 1795 house. An ancient monastery was founded in the sixth century on Dairinis Island in the river and was replaced by Molana Abbey, built by the Augustinian Order. Close by, there are further remains at Rincrew, which has traditionally been recorded as a priory of the Knights Templars but may be just the remains of an ancient manor. These are part of the lands which were granted to Walter Raleigh and sold by him to Richard Boyle. They eventually passed to the Smyth family, who held them for many years. The house was restored at the end of the twentieth century to something of its former glory.

Ballynatray House is closely connected with a story of elopement and royal indiscretion. Penelope Smyth, the daughter of the house, met a certain Prince Carlo at the home of the ambassador to the Bourbon Court in Naples. Prince Carlo, Prince of Capua, was the younger brother of King Ferdinand of the Two Sicilies. He was a young man who seems to have made the most of this position to cut a romantic swathe through the beauties of the day. He did, however, remain faithful to the very beautiful Penelope, even though his marriage was not recognised by his brother, the king, and he lost nearly all of his estates as a result. The couple married at Gretna Green and also in at least three other places, probably in an attempt to legitimise their union, but their later history was one plagued by debts and the mental illness of their only son. When the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies collapsed in 1860, Penelope, who had outlived her husband, was granted a royal residence by Victor Emmanuel II, the king of what was now a unified Italian state. She died near Lucca in 1882, and her children erected a memorial tablet for her on the walls of St Mary's Collegiate Church in Youghal.

Youghal is a town which suffered much during the twentieth century, when it had lost its status both as a prosperous port and as a garrison town. Many of its distinctive and very fine tall houses, balanced precariously on the hill above the strand, were neglected almost to dereliction. The fact that it had become something of a backwater did mean that it preserved much of its character and there are still many fine buildings to visit.

Myrtle Grove, which may or may not have been where its owner Walter Raleigh entertained his poet friend Edmund Spenser, is a private residence, but one can still visit the town walls, St Mary's Collegiate Church and the remains of no less than three religious houses: Dominican, Franciscan and Benedictine. Tynte's Castle was granted to Sir Robert Tynte, the man Elizabeth Boyle, widow of Edmund Spenser, married after Spenser's death. Spenser's family remained tied to Ireland for generations, though Spenser himself had to flee his castle at Kilcolman near Doneraile in Cork and his other lands at Rennie on the Blackwater. By a curious twist of fate, Spenser's eldest son Sylvy married into the Nagles, an old English family of Catholics. Generations later, a branch of this family would produce Edmund Burke, the noted eighteenth-century Parliamentarian, and his cousin Nano Nagle, founder of the Presentation Order of nuns.

The sense of the past haunting Youghal is palpable, especially when the sea-fog rolls in. The town has the feel of an eighteenth-century port, but in some places one can slip back even further in time and the town has some uncanny aspects to its history.

In the seventeenth century, Florence Newton was accused of bewitching a maid who refused her food. Her experience at the hands of the law bears a much closer resemblance to traditional witchcraft trials than Alice Kyteler's, though it did have some unusual aspects. One of Florence's demon familiars seems to have been a greyhound, and she used a kiss to curse her victims. Mary Langdon was the woman who accused Florence of cursing her. The maid displayed all the signs of a victim of witchcraft, as it was understood at the time. She had seizures, saw the devil and spit out pins, needles and horse nails, as well as wool and straw. Florence, committed to jail, supposedly also killed her jailor by kissing his hand through the bars of her cell, and threatened with the water test of ducking, she would undoubtedly have been convicted of

witchcraft had she not died during the trial. Another Youghal witch appears in a tale that concerns a woman who lived at Moll Goggin's Corner, close to the strand at Youghal. She drowned sailors by calling to eggs to hop out from a frying pan, and one by one each sailor drowned.

The gentle beauty of the Blackwater valley softens the losses and savage disruptions that have been part of its history, not just loss of the old Gaelic Order but also the tragedies that have affected more recent inhabitants. The comfortable, cultivated lives of the descendants of the settlers who built the great houses on Blackwater land were disrupted forever by two tragic events in history: the First World War, with its loss of so many young men, and the exodus that happened as a result of the War of Independence and the Civil War. The shells of these beautiful houses, burned to the ground or simply left to decay during the 1920s, are as much a part of the history of this valley as the ruined towers and abbeys of the old Gaelic Order. These 'Big Houses' – the majority located in Munster – were left by families who feared for their property and even their lives, or those who could not live with the drastic changes that were happening in Ireland. The privileged world they lived in is very far away from the fictional worlds of short-story writers Frank O'Connor and Seán O'Faoláin; Elizabeth Bowen, the descendent of an English adventurer, wrote the novel *The Last September* as an elegy to the families that were driven out of Ireland. William Trevor's Lucy in *The Story of Lucy Gault* is a child victim of the violence of this time. Lucy's family has the military, Protestant and landowning background that makes it a target for attack during this period, but Trevor is too subtle a writer to make us feel anything less than compassion for all the characters involved in the tragedy. Trevor spent most of his childhood in Munster and the description of the town in Lucy's story, Enniseala (the name perhaps a nod to the '*eala*' – one of the Blackwater's original names), is clearly based on Youghal and gives a vivid sense of what the town was like at this time. Both writers convey to us the deep sense of loss felt by many of the Anglo-Irish exiles from the brave new world of the Irish Republic, as they left their homes behind them, feeling as homesick and heartsick as any of the other thousands of Irish emigrants who ended their lives far from the banks of their beloved rivers.

THE FAIRIES' TUNE

This story is an adaptation of one recounted in the National Folklore Collection. The fairies, it seems, loved the secrecy of the Gearagh region on the Lee and did not take it well when humans wandered through it and stole their music. James McCarthy told this tale to Denis Buttimer of the townland of Deshure in Kilmichael Parish in Cork.

'There are not so many people that can say they heard the music of the fairies.'

The man who spoke was stooped over his pint in the Irish bar in the Bronx, with his legs dangling from the barstool, inches above the floor. A small man in a green jacket, fraying at

the cuffs. He had latched onto me as soon as he heard my Irish accent.

He didn't quite ask me if I was from the Ould Country, but I cringed when he started to speak. He had a thick Mayo accent and one of those West of Ireland faces that looks as if the wind had spent decades hollowing his cheeks and sculpting his chin to a point as sharp as a pickaxe. Not many of his breed left, even in 1980.

I shifted on my barstool, but I was alone too and whatever bullshit this guy was going to impart couldn't be worse than going back to the tiny apartment, currently sublet to a shedload of my personal demons.

'Yeah?' I said neutrally.

The old man nodded.

'I can see you don't believe me, but it's the God's own truth. I used to play the fiddle myself, before the arthritis got too bad. I can still keep a grip on a pint though!'

He laughed, a laugh that turned into a cough, and I noticed his hands, deformed with swelling, his fingers crooked forever into half-moons.

He looked meaningfully at his rapidly emptying glass and I called the bartender over.

I said nothing, but I nodded too. There was nothing going to stop him telling me this story, so I might as well settle down and listen.

'It was back in 1922, maybe '23. They had big music competitions then, musicians from all parts of Ireland who had come over here during the bad times would meet together and compete for prizes. They were great nights, all the young girls dancing and the best of music. I was never good enough for the competitions, but I loved to go and listen to the great ones.

'And one night, I remember the heat was so bad and the hall so steamy it felt like we were underwater, and there was sweat pouring down the musicians' faces as they played, faster and faster. With the drink and the heat and crowds and the music it was all a bit mad and the fiddlers that night played as if they were possessed. In the end, the judges could not decide a winner between an oul' lad from Cork – his name was Michael O'Connell but they called him Mickie Cainin, I don't know why – and another, younger fella. I think he was from Cavan. So they decided they could do a play-off with a tune of their choice.

'The young lad went first. There was no doubt he was a master of the instrument, and he played a tune that none of us had ever heard, full of twists and turns and runs you would think were impossible. I remember O'Connell's face when he got on stage, he had been as cool as you like all through the competition, but now he looked dead serious, even frightened. I said to the girl next to me, part of a crowd from Cork that was beside me in the hall: "The nerves must be getting to him at last!"

'She was a pretty girl, black hair and eyes, a smiler and laugher who seemed like she knew how to have a good time.

'But now her face was serious. She shook her head. "No. I think he's going to play the fairy tune."

'I had no time to ask her what she meant, for O'Connell began to play. Jesus, I never heard music like it before or since. I never will again, unless by some miracle I make it to heaven. They say there are three kinds of music – music to make you joyful, music to make you sleep and music to make you sad. This music was all three in one. Everyone in that hall was under the spell of that music for as long as it lasted. And then it stopped, and for a moment I'm damn sure everyone in that hall thought their hearts were broken and they would never be happy again, unless the music continued.'

He paused.

I tried to keep the cynicism out of my voice as I said, 'And never was piping so sad, and never was piping so gay. Right?'

He took another sip from his pint.

‘Everyone was so caught in the music that they didn’t even think to applaud for a couple of moments, and then it broke out, wave after wave of clapping and shouting and stamping of feet. There was no question as to who the winner was.

‘When O’Connell was given his medal, the judge asked him to play the tune again, but he shook his head.

‘The dark-haired girl turned to me and nodded. “He’s right not to. He took enough of a risk playing it the first time.”

‘“What do you mean?” I asked her.

‘“Mickie learned that tune from the fairies. He was coming home, late one night, from Macroom from a wedding he had played at, and he went through the Gearagh. Have you ever heard of the Gearagh?”

‘I shook my head.

‘“Ah, you’re not from Cork. It’s a strange place, a wilderness the Lee goes through on its way to the city. Trees and water and boggy patches everywhere. I’d never go there without someone who knew the paths, because you could end up being sucked down into the marsh if you took a wrong step. They say the fairies love it, for they are left in peace there. Anyway, Mickie knew the paths and was making his way home by the light of the moon when he heard the most beautiful music coming from the trees. Mickie could play any tune himself, just by ear, so he was soon able to pick it up and join in. And then he heard voices telling him that because he had played that tune he would be taken by the fairies. Mickie made his way home, as fast as he could, but any time he walked that path he could hear the fairy voices threatening him, telling him he should enlist in their ranks. So, in the end, he came to America to get away from them. But I’d say he feels he still has to be careful. That’s the first time he’s played it since that night, I’m sure of it.”

‘I was a bit of a smart guy then, so I said to the girl, “I guess the fairies are gonna come on stage and take him away then.”

‘I’ll never forget the look on her face. It was like I’d dishonoured her grandmother. But she said nothing, just turned away from me. And that was the end of that conversation. But I heard afterwards that O’Connell did refuse to play the tune again, though there were many who offered him big money. The *ceol Sídhe*, the fairy tune, went with him to his grave.’

The old man finished his pint, dropped some coins on the counter and shuffled off the barstool. Boy, that guy was tiny. ‘I’m away off now,’ he said.

‘Thanks for the story,’ I said.

When he had left, I asked the bartender what his name was. I’d never got it during all of our conversation.

‘Never saw the guy before in my life,’ he said. The coins clinked as he scraped them off the counter into the cup of his hand.

I walked out of the bar. Turned up my coat collar and made my way back home. The wind from the East river was howling. To have heard fairy music: that would have been something.

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The Shannon as it widens in the shadow of King John's Castle in Limerick.

The Shannon

> '*The spacious Shannon spreading like the sea*.'
> Sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser

If the Liffey is Dublin's spiritual source, the Shannon is Ireland's. How do you encompass the spirit of this great river, the river that flows

through ten of Ireland's thirty-two counties and all four provinces, the river that, flowing from north to south, formed the greatest division in Ireland? That division was originally between the kingdoms of Meath and Connacht and later, from the time of Cromwell when the dispossessed were herded across the river into the rocky lands of the west, between good land and bad land, the rich man and the poor man, the Gaelic and English tongues. Yet if the Shannon divides east and west, it also links north and south, connecting the hills of Cavan with the cliffs and beaches of Kerry and Clare. It was one of the great transport routes of early and medieval Ireland. Those who travelled up and down the river could be trading or visiting one of the great monastic settlements. Or they could be making raids on their neighbours, Gaelic chiefs and Viking plunderers alike. The Irish chiefs, constantly battling to extend the boundaries of the Tuath, used the Shannon as both a defence and as a passage for attack.

Nowadays, since the re-opening of the Shannon-Erne Waterway, the Shannon is one of the most tangible links between Northern Ireland and the south. The river is 360 kilometres in length, the longest river in Britain or Ireland, and approximately a third of the water in it is salt water, as it flows into its huge estuary with Clare on its north side and Limerick (and the northern tip of Kerry) on its south.

The Shannon is said to rise at a place called the Shannon Pot, a pool in the marshy Cuilcagh Mountains in Cavan, where cracks in the karst rock which underlies the landscape let the dark water bubble up from far below. A giant eel or *péist* reputedly lived here. Perhaps the true source of the Shannon is further up the mountain or even across the border in Fermanagh. As is so often the case, where a river begins is as mysteriously undefined as where it ends. The name 'Shannon Pot' links our river to the mystical cauldron which, in Irish myth, is the source of inspiration and knowledge. Like the Boyne and some smaller rivers such as the Inny, myth also links the river's inception to the actions of a female, in this case Sinann, the granddaughter of Lir, deity of the sea.

There are other theories of the origin of the Shannon's name – some say it comes from the phrase for Old One, some from Old Áine, Áine being a variant on Anu, one of the goddesses of the Tuatha Dé Danann. If the river's name does come from *sean abhainn*, old river, it is true that the Shannon, even in its upper courses, sometimes seems to move with

the slowness of age. This is because for much of its journey to the sea, on the upper part of its course, it flows along flat land surrounded by drumlins, fields and trees, marshes and bogland. In winter, it stretches out its arms in its callows, the water beds that form on low-lying land on either side of the river. Along its course, the waters also pool out into large lakes, embracing islands in Lough Allen, Lough Ree and Lough Derg.

There are countless stories of the beasts and monsters which inhabit the Shannon as it makes its majestic way southwards. An illustrated map would show a huge range of mythical creatures and magical tales. Here we have the ubiquitous treasure hidden by monks from Cromwell, guarded by magic cranes or fierce cats wearing golden chains; here are mysterious horses which come from the water to help a poor farmer, then race back into the water when they are ill-treated. Here, a rock-throwing giant; here is the witch burning a candle on the water, the light of which kills all who see it; and here is the Wise Woman, Biddy Early, throwing her magic blue bottle into the Shannon estuary before she dies so no one else can avail of its powers. Here is St Berry, making his way over the waters in a stone boat, and here a blue water dragon with a horse's mane and a group of fairies with ears like dogs. Here is a black woman riding a white bullock and a group – should it be a shoal? – of mermaids sunning themselves on rocks in the estuary. Some of these estuary mermaids have been captured and at times wounded by those fishing for eels, though one got her revenge by blinding the fisherman, striking him in the eye with her comb. As recently as the 1920s, people have sworn that they saw the legendary iron-clawed monster of Scattery Island, the Cata.

One of the richest sources of legend is Lough Ree, the Lake of the Kings. It lies north of Athlone at the very centre of Ireland. It was the home of a *péist*, a giant eel or some kind of dragon. Satan confronted St Patrick here. Dotted with islands, Lough Ree is also said to be the site of a drowned monastery. Those who went onto the lake to seek this monastery never returned. The warrior queen Medb storms in and out of these stories, with, as always, relatives, lovers, handmaidens and husbands suffering from the collateral damage caused by her temper. She was reputedly killed by Furbaide, the son of her sister Clothra, while bathing in a pool on the island of Inisclothran (the island is called after Clothra) in Lough Ree. Furbaide was taking revenge for the murder of

his mother by Medb while she was pregnant with him. Medb's murder of Clothra had been another revenge killing; this time against Medb's ex-husband Conchobar, who was the father of Clothra's child. Yet another violent death causing yet another cycle of revenge, as is so often the case in Irish legends. But rarely is the weapon used as bizarre as it is in this tale. Medb's death was caused by a flying missile, shot from Furbaide's sling – a gigantic piece of cheese. Why cheese? Was this version of her death an attempt to make this fearsome woman a figure of ridicule rather than respect? A way of taking away her power? Is it a simple mistranslation of an older text? Or is there some lost significance here that we will never know?

The remains of a medieval settlement and a ruined castle (currently inaccessible to the public) at Rindoon is just a short distance from Lecarrow, a stopping point for many of those making a voyage on the Shannon, and home of one of the friendliest pubs in Ireland. Just south of Lough Ree is Athlone, a town lying almost at the very centre of the country, a bastion of the midlands which has known its own share of battles and dark deeds. At Athlone, we feel the Shannon divide most strongly – even the landscape seems to change to wilder, rougher land as we pass over the bridge from the midlands into Connacht.

Pleasure boats and fisherpeople are the main users of the Shannon waterway these days, and even as far back as the nineteenth century the river was never as heavily utilised as might be expected from such a large and long waterway. The lands around it did not become large centres of trade or industry and were too boggy and unproductive to support human enterprise. There are parts of the river basin that are unrelentingly flat – the river only drops about thirty feet over 182 kilometres from Leitrim to Killaloe. There is a much sharper landfall after Killaloe, a feature that was harnessed for power in the twentieth century. For many years there had been calls to make the Shannon and the bogs around it more productive. In 1755 work began on the river and efforts were made to drain the bogs as far back as 1811. The Grand Canal, linking the river to Dublin, was a brave attempt to harness its power as a trade route by allowing barges to travel from Dublin to Limerick along the water.

During the Famine period, there are accounts of starving peasants clinging onto the tow ropes of such barges, desperate to reach a port where they could escape the nightmare that Ireland had become. More

recently, the famous Guinness barges continued to operate until the early 1960s. In 1839, the author Caesar Otway saw the Shannon landscape as one of the solitary hopelessness of bog, the silence broken only by the pipe of the curlew and shriek of the heron. In the nineteenth century both the river and the Irish race were described by many as undeveloped, lazy, meandering, uncultivated, surrounded by a morass of bog in which logic is submerged and enterprise sinks. Some of these descriptions continue well into the twentieth century. The Shannon was described by William Bulfin in his 1907 *Rambles in Eirinn* as 'the unharnassed, idle, beautiful Shannon'. All this was due to change very shortly. The Ireland of mists and bogs and fairy lights was about to be lit by a very different kind of power.

The building of the Ardnacrusha hydroelectric dam just north of Limerick in the late 1920s was hailed as one of the great early projects of the new Irish state. The Irish government called in French and German engineers for their technical knowledge so that it became an international project. It was a massive construction project for its time and considered to be a huge success, bringing Ireland into the modern world.

The river's keeps and castles, churches and abbeys continue, link by link along its course southwards, jewels on a chain of sometimes decayed and ruined beauty, dreaming by the silver waters. None of these monastic settlements are as atmospheric as the ruined Holy City of Clonmacnoise.

As Athlone developed from a fording point to a garrison town and grew rapidly with the expansion of English power in Ireland, twelve kilometres down the river a previously much more imposing settlement had begun its journey into near oblivion. In 1552, Clonmacnoise saw the last of the many attacks it had suffered through the centuries. It was sacked by English forces coming from Athlone and rapidly declined into a deserted, ruined place – a jungle of overgrown stone ruins visited only by those coming to bury their dead or on pilgrimage on St Ciarán's Pattern Day in September.

By the nineteenth century, in *The Shannon and its Lakes* the writer R. Harvey described this stretch of the Shannon with horror: 'If ever there was a picture of grim and hideous repose, it is the flow of the Shannon from Athy to Clonmacnoise.' To his mind, the ceremonies at Clonmacnoise itself were a picture of raw superstition.

The ecclesiastical settlement of Clonmacnoise reaches to the sky beside the River Shannon.

He was not the only one to be horrified by Clonmacnoise. In 1839, Tipperary-born writer Caesar Otway, writing in the *Dublin Christian Examiner* in an article entitled ‘A Tour in Connaught’, described the ancient ecclesiastical site as ‘a metropolis of superstition, with swarms of mourners seeking the graves of their deceased relatives and individuals scraping the holy clay, devotees crawling point to point of the reputedly sacred circle’.

This is a long way from the origins of what was once a centre of learning, spirituality and art. One does not have to subscribe to the theory that the Irish saved civilisation to appreciate the importance of such a place at a time when Rome had fallen and its empire had disintegrated. The great monasteries of Ireland were places where learning flourished and classical texts were copied out by monks, preserving records which might otherwise have been lost. Clonmacnoise and Clonard are among the most famous of these. These are also the men – and undoubtedly some unacknowledged women – who began to record the stories about

Ireland which preceded Christianity, the myths and legends which form so much of a part of the Irish identity and continued to do so for centuries. The twelfth-century Book of the Dun Cow, *Leabhair na h-Uidre*, the most famous production of Clonmacnoise, contains the earliest known version of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. It was reputedly written on the hide of St Ciarán's favourite cow. St Ciarán the Younger, the founder of Clonmacnoise, started on his search for knowledge with the theft of a cow and a calf from his parents' farm, his mother having refused to give him one to finance his studies. Ciarán was one of the young men who made their way around Ireland seeking wisdom through the teachings of different masters, an almost Zen-like pursuit of the way to enlightenment. They carried the knowledge they gathered from monastery to monastery. Ciarán was an interesting saint; in his short lifetime, he performed many miracles, including bringing animals back to life, defeating robbers and, perhaps most unusually, saving a woman's self-respect along with her hair. It seems that the high king Áed had two wives, Muireann and Murne. Muireann was the favoured wife, partly because of her long curling, golden hair. In a jealous rage, Murne pulled at the hair, and it came away in her hand, leaving Muireann as bald as an egg and exposed as having worn a wig. She prayed desperately to Ciarán, who granted her wish. Her head was miraculously covered in golden locks, longer and more luxuriant than ever.

Ciarán died young, but his sixth-century foundation Clonmacnoise became a major centre of learning, not just in Ireland, but in Europe, with scholars travelling hundreds of miles to study there. It was also a centre of commerce and of communication and even political intrigue. Kings and rulers came to parlay, and craft workers travelled to the holy city on the banks of the Shannon to make beautiful artefacts such as the Clonmacnoise Crozier, now on display in the National Museum of Ireland.

Clonmacnoise was located close to two key routes, the River Shannon (flowing north to south) and the east-west ancient highway of *Slíghe Mhór* (the Great Road), which followed the glacial ridge of the Esker Riada. This central location meant that the settlement lay within the sights of more than one local king willing to fight for control over such a prestigious foundation. At different stages in its history, it was associated

with and controlled by the rulers of both Mide, or Meath – on the east bank – and Connacht on the west bank.

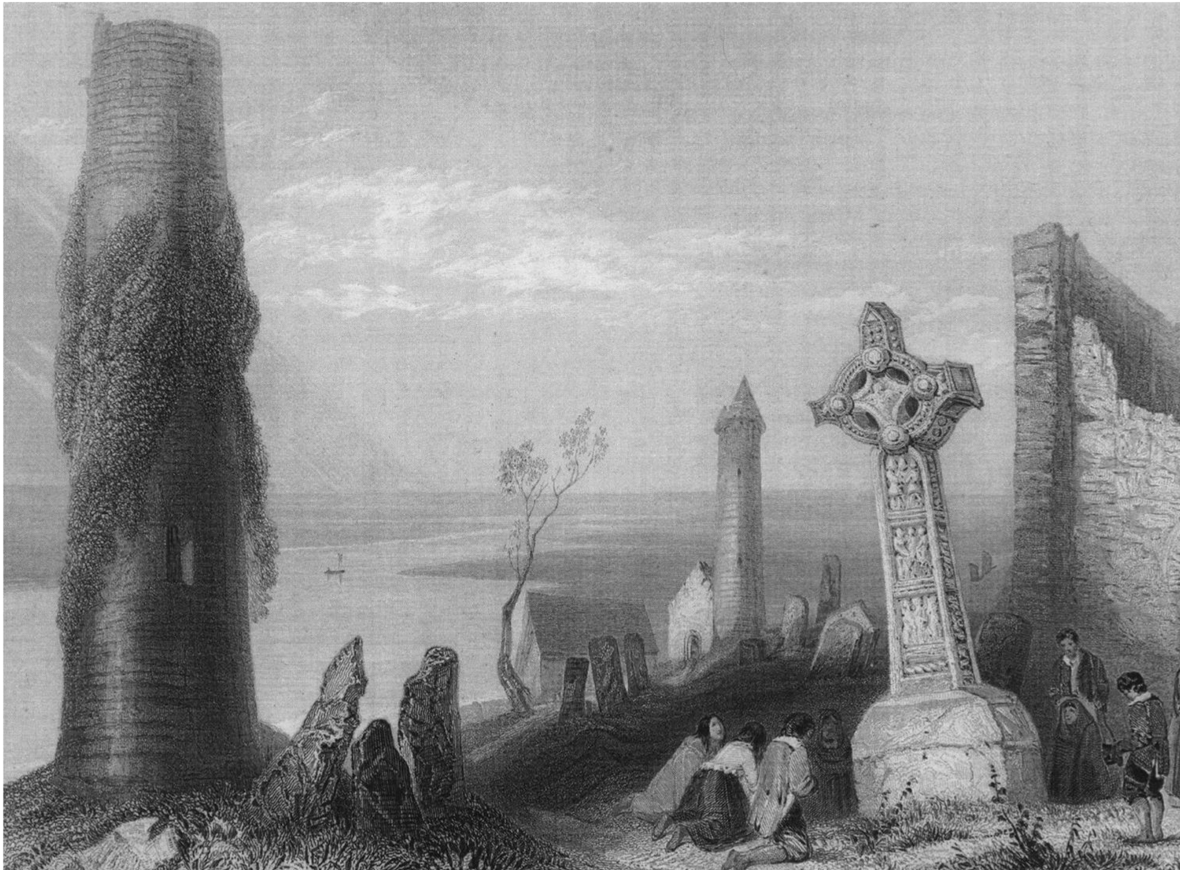
The complex of ecclesiastical buildings is located on the east bank of the river, in Offaly, though the discovery of the remains of an ancient wooden footbridge seems to indicate that the community also accessed the western side. Well into the 1960s, the state neglected the site, and anyone who visited Clonmacnoise came armed with bill hooks in order to fight their way through the briars, nettles and thistles which covered the site.

Clonmacnoise now has an excellent Exhibition Centre and is very well looked after. It is an impressive site, and in its heyday, it must have been stunning, with a myriad of buildings spanning a large area. The small lay population lived slightly apart from the main complex of buildings. Within the monastery compound, there would have been the refectory where the monks gathered to eat, the kitchen and the scriptorium, where the beautiful illustrated manuscripts that have come down to us from this time were created; there would also have been barns, mills, weirs, a smithy and individual huts for the monks. And churches: Clonmacnoise had no less than nine of these along with two round towers and three high crosses; the North Cross is probably the oldest monument and has a strange, cross-legged figure surrounded by animals carved on it, which some have identified as being connected with the Celtic god Cernunnos.

Although it seems a peaceful place now, through the centuries Clonmacnoise was the victim of fires, of plagues, and of raids, by Irish chieftains, Vikings and Normans, all greedy for the wealth it held. Imagine Oda, the wife of the Viking chieftain Turgesius, sitting on the High Altar and prophesying, as she is reported to have done. Turgesius, who had his headquarters on Lough Ree, drowned in the Shannon soon afterwards. We do not know what Oda’s fate was after his death.

Clonmacnoise, for all its fame as being the preserve of holy men, also sports a very female and very pagan figure in the Nun’s Church. Here is an unusual example of a sheela-na-gig – a carving of a naked woman – for instead of the usual pose of her hands reaching down to open her vulva, she has her legs raised behind her head. She is a very discreet sheela, small and difficult to identify, and is located on the left side of one of the inner chancel arches of the church. She may be a guardian of

the females who used the church, seen only by them. These sheelas are something of a mystery still, most likely linked with ancient fertility figures, but very often found in the sacred space of churches. In the Nun's Church, there is something a little wild about the decoration. The remaining carvings are mainly chevrons with a semi-circle of animals biting on a band. The church was located close to where the lay population of Clonmacnoise lived, and while the role of nuns in medieval Ireland is not well documented, we can take it that healing and care for the poor and travellers are likely to have been part of that role. Women as well as men visited Clonmacnoise and even lived there. One of these was Uallagh, Chief Poetess of Ireland, who died in 937 and is buried in Clonmacnoise. She was hailed as one of the most learned women in Ireland.



Nineteenth-century engraving of Clonmacnoise.

But the Nun's Church is chiefly associated with a woman called Dearbhfhorghaill, better known as Dervorgilla, who restored it, some say,

in expiation for her sins. These same critics say she was as scandalous a character as any sheela-na-gig. She is mentioned in the various *Annals*, but with some very different interpretations of the motivations behind the events of her life.

The facts are straightforward enough. Dervorgilla was born around 1109, the daughter of the King of Mide or Meath, the fifth, central province of Ireland and one that played a key role in politics, containing within its boundaries the royal site of Tara, the traditional seat of the high kings. When she was about twenty she married the ruler of Breffni, the kingdom made up of what is now Leitrim, Cavan and a somewhat moveable feast of parts of Sligo. Despite its small size, the kingdom was important as it bordered the royal kingdom of Mide. Its king, Tiernan O'Rourke (Tighernán Ua Ruairc) was consolidating his power and this was very much a dynastic match.

We know nothing about the couple's relationship. What we do know is that in her early forties Dervorgilla was brought away, with her cattle and furniture, to the kingdom of Leinster by its king, Diarmuid Mac Murrough (Diarmait Mac Murchada). He was forty-two. It was hardly the passion of youthful love that motivated this event, despite the fact that Giraldus Cambrensis, chronicler of all things scandalous in Ireland, portrays Dervorgilla as a Cleopatra. Like Helen of Troy, like all women, fickle and faithless, according to his interpretation, she was abducted because she wanted to be – and thus became responsible for the coming of the Normans to Ireland. In some versions Dervorgilla arranges to meet Diarmuid herself, at a crannog dwelling, all set to go with her cattle and household goods. This is the basis of the highly romanticised version of the tale by Thomas Moore, where the faithless Dervorgilla empties a bag of feathers into Lough Ree as a sign to her lover to come and fetch her. Other chroniclers interpret things differently. Those written at Clonmacnoise make Dervorgilla an innocent victim, abducted by Mac Murrough to abate his carnal and adulterous lust. The question as to why Dervorgilla went with Diarmuid has never really been fully answered.

One possible scenario is that Dervorgilla went to Leinster because a marriage with Mac Murrough would bring more wealth and create a useful dynastic link for her family in the endemic power struggles between the kingdoms of Ireland. Perhaps she felt more loyalty to her birth family than to that of her husband – her flight with Diarmuid

certainly would have been a block to Breffni's expansion. Another version stresses the fact that Breffni was about to be invaded, and Melaghlin (Maelseachlain), Dervorgilla's brother, asked Mac Murrough to take his sister (and her not inconsiderable wealth) out of the path of the invading army. It is also possible that although she originally went to Leinster as a refuge from the violence of the wars in Breffni, over time she became more of a hostage than a refugee in Mac Murrough's court. Hostages, though treated well, led a precarious existence – they could be blinded or killed if their patron did not keep their part of whatever bargain had been struck. Whatever the outcome, in less than a year, the merchandise was shifted; she was returned to Mide, along with her cattle, by the high king. Later, in 1166, Diarmuid was dethroned by Tiernan O'Rourke. He was given no support from the high king, who fined him for his abduction of Dervorgilla. So, he looked to the Normans of England for support. With their help, Mac Murrough reconquered Dublin in 1169 and remained in control there until his death in 1171. The Normans came, and in their train the claim of the English king, backed by Pope Adrian, of the right of the English Crown to be acknowledged as the overlord of Ireland. The last High King of Ireland, Rory O'Connor, abdicated and died just a few years after Dervorgilla did. He is buried in Clonmacnoise.

Abductee? Lover? Probably neither. Dervorgilla seems a political pawn as much as anything. There is evidence that she was a woman of some willpower, as she managed to hold onto her personal prestige and wealth in the years after the scandal. She was present at the consecration of the first Cistercian Abbey, Mellifont, in 1157 along with all the good and the great of Ireland, and, in her own name, gave a gift to the Abbey of sixty ounces of gold, a golden chalice and nine altar cloths. This gift was only equalled by that of the high king.

In later life, Dervorgilla retired to Mellifont Abbey, where she died in 1193. Some writers see her choice to die at Mellifont as a political one – supporting the ruling elite of Meath rather than that of Clonmacnoise. But perhaps the choice had nothing to do with politics; there had been a great fire in Clonmacnoise in 1180 during which the church she had restored and at least 105 houses were burnt down. Maybe it was no longer a comfortable place to live, or perhaps sheltered Mellifont was more attractive to her than the windy and wet banks of the Shannon. And

perhaps there was less chance of Mellifont being raided by Normans, the invaders invited into Ireland by her erstwhile companion, Diarmuid. She lived until she was eighty-five, having outlived her abductor and her husband. And despite the interpretation of her gift to Clonmacnoise as that of a repentant Magdalen, we have absolutely no evidence that she was either. So 'history' fills in the gaps in women's stories.

Before we leave beautiful Clonmacnoise, there is one last story to tell. One day, when the monks of Clonmacnoise were meeting together in the church, they saw a ship sailing over them in the sky. It was moving through the air as if it was sailing on the sea. The crew of the ship dropped anchor, and the monks took hold of it.

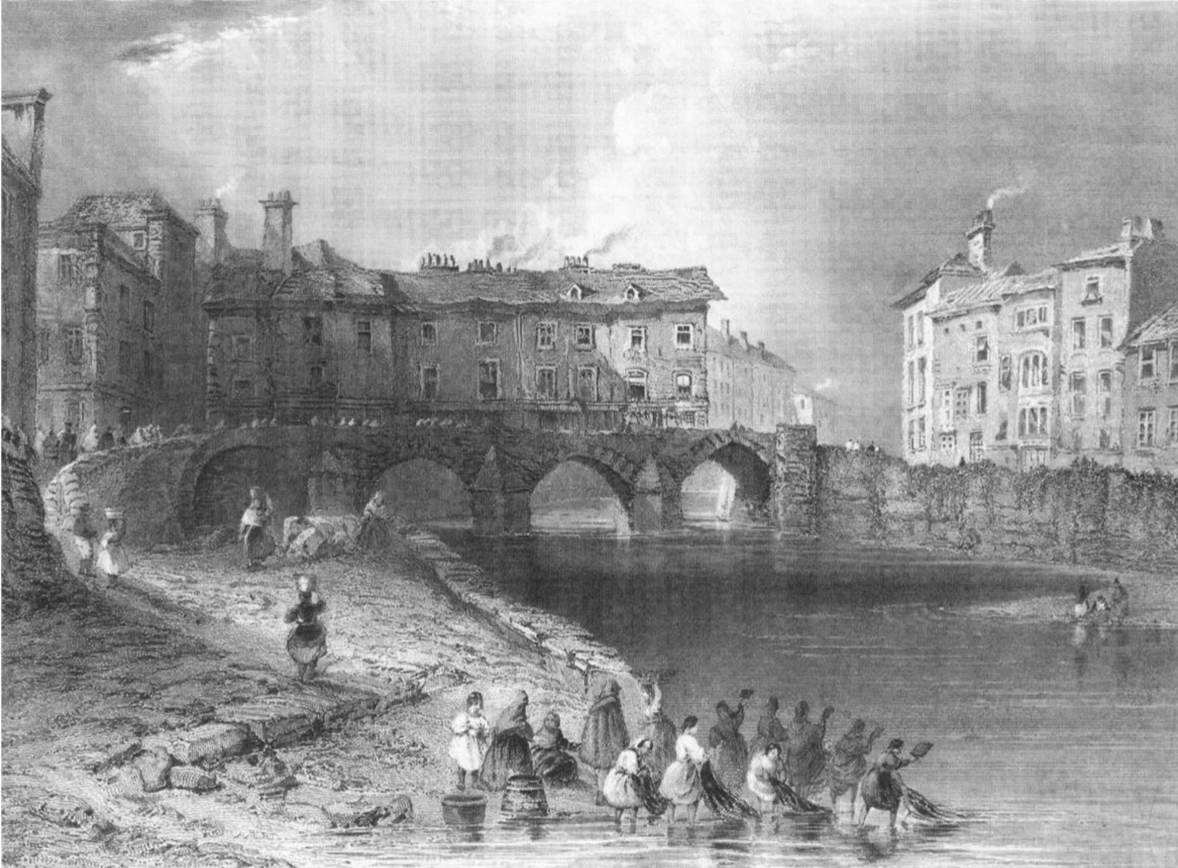
A man came off the boat, swimming in the air as if he was in water, and caught hold of the anchor, which was being dragged by the monks. 'For God's sake, let me go!' said he. 'For you are drowning me.' Then he left them, swimming in the air as before, taking his anchor with him.

Many ships now sail in the sky over the Shannon, landing at the airport which carries its name. The Limerick bank of the Shannon estuary has undoubtedly woken from its long sleep. For years now, the airport has been a major link between Ireland and the U.S.A. and also a centre of industry. The prosperity brought by industry has undoubtedly helped the growth in wealth in the city of Limerick, a place poverty-stricken and derelict up until relatively recent times. Now, with its museums and university and a thriving cultural life, it is a long way from the stifling misery of the city of the 1930s as portrayed in books such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes.*

This industrially based wake-up has heavily modified the lower Shannon. Fish stocks have been brutally diminished, as have the numbers of eels who previously made their way to Ireland from the Sargasso Sea and are now blocked or killed by the hydroelectric works along the river. There are fish passes along the Shannon, but many have not been maintained or renewed and are no longer fit for purpose. Hydropower, though a renewable source, damages the environment in many other ways and the success of the Shannon industrial scheme, the product of massive government investment, also means that many large industries have been polluting the mouth of the Shannon for decades. In March 2023 a group of activists applied to the United Nations to have the rights

of the Shannon as an entity be recognised, part of the worldwide scheme fighting for the recognition of the Rights of Nature.

The case brought to the U.N. by the Environmental Justice Network Ireland states:



Limerick in the nineteenth century.

> Ireland continues to breach the Water Framework Directive by allowing unlicensed abstraction to persist and untreated sewage to be issued directly into the river at several points. The Shannon Estuary, as Ireland's deepest port, is home to several large industries – and there is huge ongoing concern about the pollution of the estuary and the local environs from these said industries.
>
> *Building Towards Recognition of the Nature Rights of the River Shannon,* The Environmental Justice Network Ireland

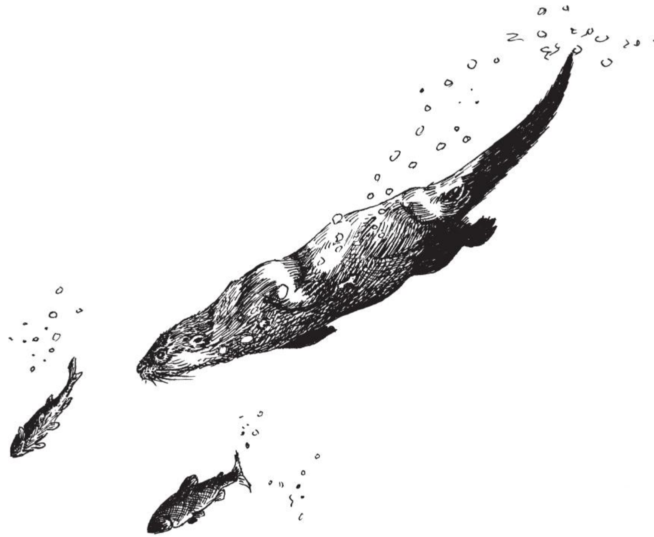
The raw sewage which flows into the river has also been recorded by the Environmental Protection Agency. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this illegal practice was still happening in twenty-six towns and villages in Ireland.

The Shannon may be made to work harder than ever. There are proposals to extract 500 million litres of water daily from it, to be treated to drinking-water standard and piped to Dublin, where local reservoirs are struggling to meet demand. At the time of writing, pollution is the current monster of the river, one created by humans. In the past, the most famous Shannon monster was the Cata. The Cata seems to be related to the Ollphéist, the Great Worm that haunted many Irish waters. In its form as the Cata, it was banished by St Senan to Scattery Island in the mouth of the Shannon. With a fiery breath, a horse's mane and a whale's tail, with claws that could tear iron to pieces, and with a smooth hump on its back, the creature sounds like a cross between the Loch Ness Monster and a Scottish water-horse. This monster was last seen in 1922.

THE OTTER

The Shannon was also the home of the Dobarchú. *Dobarchú* or *madra uisce* are the Irish words for otter, and the Dobarchú of the Shannon was a giant otter who devoured humans. There have been attested sightings of this King of the Otters right into the twenty-first century, and near Glenade Lake in Leitrim, at Conwall graveyard, there are the faint remains of an engraving of such a creature on the tombstone of Grace Connolly, who was killed in 1722 by a Dobarchú that came from the lake. A ballad was written about her husband's revenge on the monster and its mate, who came out of the lake in response to her mate's dying whistle.

But, in reality, otters are elusive rather than aggressive. Slippery as an eel, quick as a kingfisher, yet warm-blooded, they are very secretive animals – any studies have to concentrate not on sightings but on finding their spraints, or droppings, which they use to mark their territory. The first otter survey was carried out in the early 1980s, and between it and the second one a decade later it was estimated that there was a decline of seventy-five per cent in the otter population. The good news is that recent studies have found that there is now quite a stable population of otters in the country.



There is a wealth of stories about these beautiful animals. According to tradition, the otter can sleep with its eyes open. Its skin had magical properties, protecting soldiers who wore it, and footwear and gloves made from it were considered to have magical powers. In Irish legends, otters are also closely associated with faithful hounds, such as the lap-dog belonging to Princess Liban of Lough Neagh, whose story we will explore later in the book. When she became a mermaid, her dog became an otter. The last creature killed by Cú Chulainn was an otter who came to lap the wounded hero's blood. The early Irish saints had a more peaceful relationship with otters. Otters fetched psalters from lakes and brought fish to monasteries. However, in one case, when one of the monks took it into his head to kill the otter for his pelt, the creature dived into the water and was never seen again.

Humans have been cruel to otters; they were hunted up until the middle of the twentieth century (in 1974 the otter became a protected species), and otter hounds were bred specifically for the chase. There are accounts of otter hunts in the National Folklore Collection which note how fierce the animals were and how, when they bit, they did not let go of the victim until they heard a bone crack. Traps were often used to catch otters, even though the creature is no threat whatsoever to mankind. The modern Irish term *madra uisce*, or water dog, hints at how otters share something of a dog's playful nature. They are also efficient hunters – they move incredibly fast – and can swim upside down and sideways.

At its estuary's widest point, the Shannon has the appearance of a sea joining a larger sea, a space not enclosed like the harbours of Wexford or Cork, but opening out, embracing the western ocean, where if you are lucky enough you might catch a glimpse of a magical island that appears every seven years. While I was researching Celtic monks and Norman knights, dipping into the drowned city in Lough Ree, travelling down the winding waters of the history and folklore of the longest, widest, most emblematic river in Ireland, the song 'The Broad Majestic Shannon' by the punk band The Pogues was being played regularly. Their lead singer-songwriter, Shane MacGowan, had just died.

How strange, I thought, that punk, which seems so much a product of an urban world, was embodied in a man whose attachment to the Irish countryside and the River Shannon was fierce and unceasing. MacGowan's love of the river was such that he asked to have his ashes scattered on its waters. But the river shares some of the wildness of MacGowan and his music. Despite its long, quiet journey through the fields and bogs of inner Ireland, the Shannon, like Sinann in the following story, belongs to the wild ocean, to dissolution in the great waters, to the nebulous kingdom of the sea.

SINANN, GRANDDAUGHTER OF THE SEA

Boann, Eirne, Tuag, Ruad – all the drowned girls who become rivers or waves or lakes. Some are victims of those who love them, some are the victims of their own doomed love. Some, like Odhras, have dared to challenge the might of the Mórrigán and as a result are changed into a pool of water. Some just seem to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Some of them, however, are active participants in the story, venturing forth, seeking something, whether from simple curiosity or a deep quest for wisdom. Sinann is the girl whose quest goes furthest, in a story in which the original text is at once straightforward and confusing. Many questions are not answered. How is it that the six (finally seven) rivers flow in and out of Connla's Well at the same time, and how is it that the Well is under the sea, so in effect the water of the Shannon begins its flow back to the source rather than away from it? How are the mystical red bubbles on the water that hypnotise Sinann formed by the red nuts from the hazel trees that grow around the Well? Why do they bear flower and fruit and leaf at the same time? Why are they called the hazels of Buan – because the word can mean everlasting?

Most significantly, what is the link between the bubbles of light on the water and the path to true enlightenment that Sinann tried to follow? (In some medieval art, the soul is shown contained in a bubble.) Why are the hazel trees that surround the well 'music haunted'? And finally, is Sinann's sacrifice of her individual life a way of bringing the knowledge that Connla's Well holds to the community as a whole, spreading wide with the waters of the Shannon, rather than hiding and containing it in the enclosed space of a well?

We watched her, we, the old wise ones. We would have saved her if we could.

Did she think she would be able to surface again, if she followed the source of the bubbles, down and down again into the salt water? Did she struggle to come back to air and earth and find that water had her now? Or did she not care whether she came back to the world at all, so intent was she on her seeking?

Sinann was a lover of water, for she was a granddaughter of Lir of the Oceans. The *stretha imbas*, the stream of inspiration, was never stronger in anyone. Yellow haired, bright of face and keen of nature; she sucked knowledge from the world like a thirsty man drinks water.

'It is the *imbas forosnai* that I am seeking,' she told us. 'The illumination of the mind and the heart that only a handful of people have found. I want to see deep into the heart of things.'

We told her: 'Others have claimed to gain this vision. Some have said that if they eat the red flesh and sleep, they find it. Surely that is an easier way than making this long and difficult and dangerous journey.'

Sinann replied: 'Others may have found their way to the deep *imbas* by following that path, but this path is my path. Do not try to stop me.'

Many tried to stop her. 'Do not go too far,' they called. 'Do not go too deep.'

She went far and she went deep.

She travelled into the blue hills, on her right-hand side the fields were full of rushes filled with light, stretching to bog and sunset.

She travelled over those hills to the wide ocean, and she went down into the grey, foaming waters.

She found Connla's Well, where the salmon of wisdom swims. The salmon gains its knowledge from the nuts that fall from the nine trees surrounding the well. The salmon eats them.

But Sinann did not come to eat the nuts or the salmon. She did not come to drink the water. She came to see the red bubbles, those bubbles that frothed and foamed on the surface of the well.

And as she watched, light broke through the hazel branches, and Sinann was drawn further and further into the dazzling brightness of light reflected on water.

Then there was no going back. She was underneath, and she went willingly under, under the spell of the water.

* * *

Did she find the knowledge then? And was it worth losing her body for, her beautiful body, her fine mind, all the years of learning she had gathered into her short life?

There are those who say that she was not given the wisdom, that she had broken some rule and for that reason she drowned.

Others say that she is the very source of the river itself, for six rivers flowed from the Well of Connla, and seven after Sinann drowned. The Shannon, the greatest river, the longest, the widest; a third of it estuary, a third of it mouth, calling out her wisdom, mingling salt water with fresh. The salt water of her grandfather, the salt water of tears.

Now she is the broad majestic Shannon, queen of a kingdom wider and deeper than any human has ever known. She travels a long, long way, from dark mountains to the light of the sea. When the music of the river becomes the music of the sea, then you have reached the kingdom of the god who shifts his shape as easily as water. Sinann is free there, held in his boundless silver embrace.

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River Corrib.

The Corrib and the Moy

‘*The trout leaping in the sunshine spreads on the bottom of the river concentric circles of light*.’
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, notebook entry, 1802

Less has been written about the rivers west of the Shannon than those to the east, although they flow through some of the most dramatically beautiful countryside in Ireland, through wild mountains, endless bogs and rocky, rushy fields. It can be a bleak landscape, a cold and comfortless habitat for its humans, who crave shelter from the winds and the sky, but it is a part of Ireland where nature's sovereignty still seems to hold sway.

Where the rivers enter the sea, pouring into the wild ocean, there is a feeling of being at the edge of the known world – the next stop is thousands of kilometres away. Looking west into the sunset, these rivers are our direct routes to the endless Atlantic and the mythical island of Hy Brasil which rises from the waves every seven years. They are also our path to memories of the unsheltered, the thousands of people who left the port of Galway from the barren fields of western Ireland to begin the long journey to America. They were fleeing death and misery but surely still holding onto memories of the stunning beauty they left behind, perhaps even dreaming of returning one day. Very few made it back.

THE CORRIB

'Upon the brimming water among the stones Are nine-and-fifty swans'
W.B. Yeats, 'The Wild Swans at Coole'

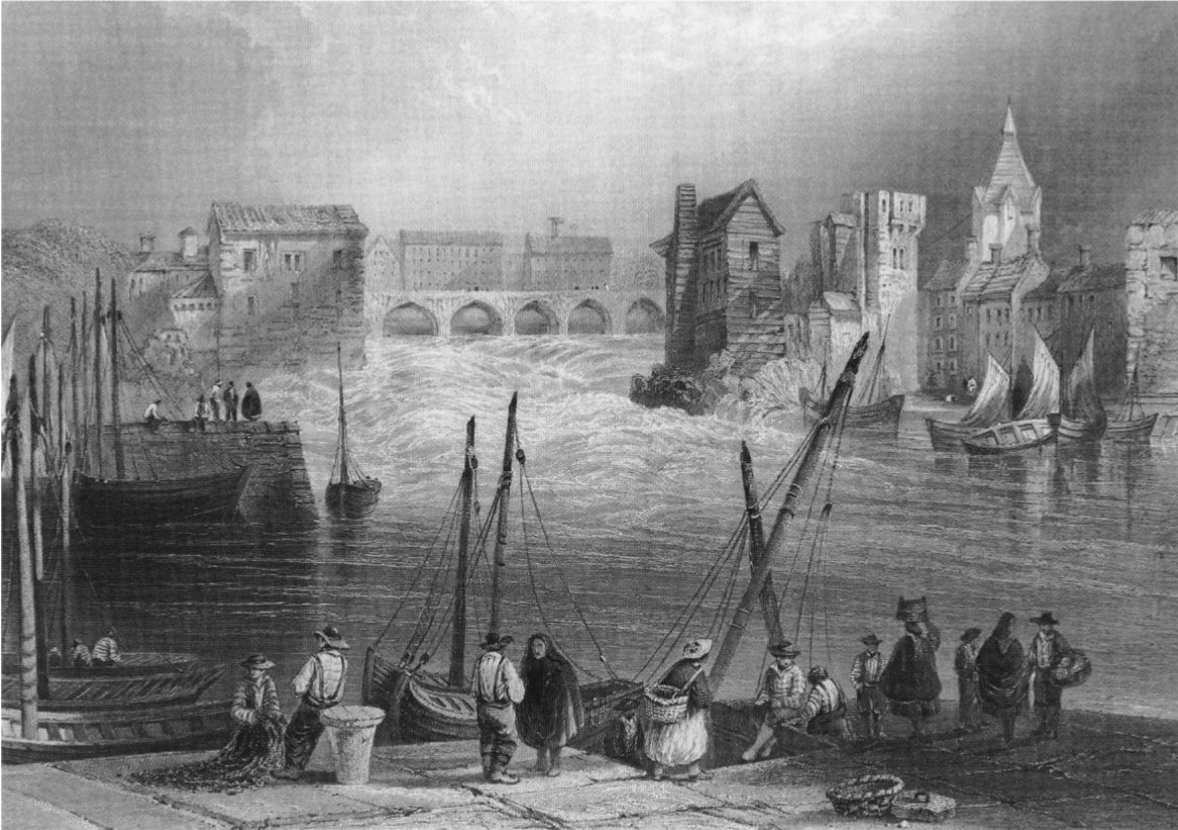
Because of the limestone base of the landscape, the water of the Corrib basin is mostly underground, tunnelling its way through limestone caverns and surfacing as trout-brown pools and lakes like Lough Mask, where the water flows in or out, unseen. It is possible that all this underground water – with outlets at Lough Corrib and Lough Carra as well as Lough Mask – eventually finds its way from Lough Corrib to the Corrib river, bringing a huge volume of water flowing down its very short course. The Corrib is only six kilometres long and it is an extremely fast-flowing river, loved by kayakers for the adrenaline rush it gives. Over the centuries, the volume of this flow has been used by mills and to create electricity, making Galway an early adopter of this form of power.

Where the River Corrib meets the sea in Galway city.

The river takes its name from Lough Corrib, a lake second only to Lough Neagh in size, but its other name is the Galway river. Some legends say that Galway got its name from Princess Gaillimhe, daughter of Bres, the king whose ancestry was half Tuatha Dé Danann and half Fomorian. Gaillimhe, like so many other princesses, drowned in the waters of the river. But Gaillimh also means 'Stony River', so the drowning princess story is unlikely to be of very ancient origin. The Corrib meets the sea at Nimmos Pier, and beyond Galway Bay stretches out into the Atlantic.

Even at its estuary at Galway Bay, the river flow is fast and furious, rushing over weirs. Although it has been cut and canalised, it still gives the feeling of the wildness of youth, a little like the city itself. This feeling of wildness may also stem from the fact that for a long time Galway was the only large urban centre on this part of Ireland's western seaboard. Despite recent sprawl, it is still a town that feels part of the countryside around it. It has its earliest origins in a twelfth-century fort built by the O'Connor tribe, which later fell to the O'Flahertys and which was captured by the Norman Richard De Burgo in 1235. In this period, the walls and the castle were built. As time went on, the city became dominated by fourteen families, the Tribes of Galway.

Galway is steeped in a history that is very different from the cities of the south or east of Ireland. It resisted English influence for many centuries after the population on the other side of the Shannon had succumbed to it. Although most of the families which made up the Tribes of Galway, who dominated the city for centuries, were of Norman origin, many spoke Irish and were well integrated with their Gaelic neighbours. The city was a busy trading centre during this period, orientated towards Spain and continental Europe rather than Britain.



Galway in the nineteenth century.

By Tudor times the city was still prospering, nominally loyal to the Crown and mercantile in nature, though constantly under threat from Irish neighbours such as the O'Flahertys and the famous pirate Granuaile, Grace O'Malley. Galway supported the Confederate Irish army in 1642 and was besieged by Cromwellian forces a decade later. After this point, the influence and prosperity of the city declined, a decline which increased after the Battle of Aughrim in 1691, as it had supported the losing side of King James.

Galway's decline was halted dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century. Between 1911 and 2023 the population of the city increased from 13,000 to over 84,000. It is one of the fastest-growing cities in Europe and it is also a very young city as students at the University of Galway form a large percentage of the population. Galway, with this student population and constant stream of visitors, can sometimes seem like party central, and its music and arts scene are both very vibrant.

To try to catch a glimpse of an older Galway, one might visit the area which, although officially part of the city, has always been seen as a place set apart, and was physically separated by Galway's walls and the river. This is the Claddagh, formerly a poverty-stricken fishing village which had its thatched cottages razed in the 1930s. If Galway was the city of the wild west, the Claddagh, just across the Corrib, and about as west as you can go before the Atlantic, was, in its day, different again. With a population of 3,000 in 1820, it was a very closed society, with much intermarrying and customs that had changed little for centuries. In the Claddagh, a whole tourist mythology developed around this community. Their aloof ways and refusal to engage or intermarry with Galway people, their unusual looks and bright red petticoats, the famous Claddagh ring and Claddagh king, the haphazard way the houses were built – all made the inhabitants of the Claddagh seem attractively foreign to visitors. In many cases, it blinded them to the miserable poverty these people lived in, a poverty which left them pawning their boats and nets during the Famine. Nineteenth-century author William Wilde, father of Oscar, wrote of his admiration for the 'blue-eyed, black-haired, barefooted colleens'. His description is loaded with the wealthy tourist's appreciation of picturesque poverty.

This tendency to romanticise the Claddagh was undercut in 1927 when a fierce outbreak of TB decimated its population. The thatched cottages were demolished and rebuilt. The houses constructed to replace these cottages still present a colourful front to Galway Bay and sell for prices the original Claddagh residents would have found unbelievable. The area retains a distinct personality and sunset on the Claddagh is still a special experience.

The Claddagh is famous for the flocks of mute swans that sail serenely on its waters, and otters and seals have also been spotted. There is a legend which says that the Conneely family had as an ancestor a seal woman, captured by a fisherman, and the tribe is reputed to be exceptionally good at swimming. Seals have been spotted upriver on the Corrib as far inland as the Spanish Arch, possibly chasing the salmon that have made their way upriver. Mermaids also feature in Galway traditions – you can find two on the exterior walls of the medieval St Nicholas' Collegiate Church, along with a dragon. Inside, all but one of the statues of angels have had their heads broken off by Cromwell's army, but there

are still lovely fragments, such as that of a running hare carved over a lintel.

Taking the route upriver to Lough Corrib, we move towards the magnificent, desolately beautiful scenery of Connemara, its mountains rising to the north and west. Lough Corrib itself is the place where the sea-god Manannán Mac Lir tragically killed the maiden Aoife as she flew above him in the shape of a crane. A battle was fought near here in which Manannán is said to have been killed and he lies where the lake waters rose up to cover him.

Manannán has another reputed resting place at the mouth of the Foyle, but he was a tricky, shapeshifting god, so perhaps he sleeps in more than one place. He was also closely associated with the Isle of Man. His other name was Oirbsiu, and this is where the name Corrib has its origin, in the Old Irish *Loch nOirbsen*.

As well as being the ruler of the waves and their galloping white horses, Manannán was also the king of a mythical land that heroes such as King Cormac visited. He could appear as a great monarch or as a humble beggar, or simply fade into the mist, unseen by human eyes, but wherever he appeared he was a bringer of wisdom. His crane bag, made

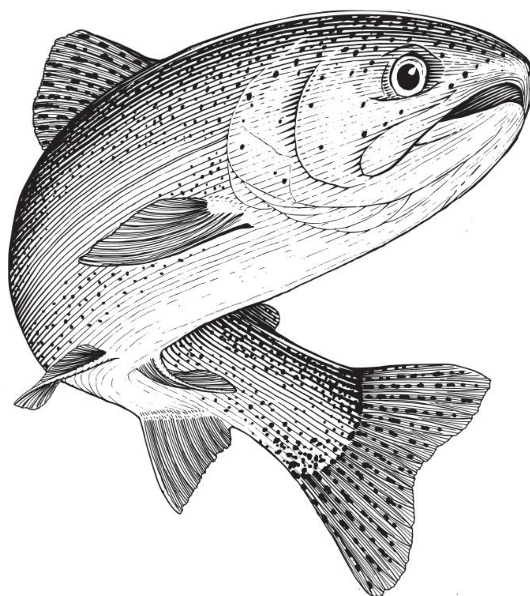
from the skin of Aoife, was the inspiration of poets. When the tide was in, it was said, the bag was full, but when it was out it was left empty. In it were placed the bones of a sacred boar, a magical knife, the belt and hook created by the smith god Goibniu, a pair of shears, a helmet, Manannán's shield and shirt and a belt made from a great whale.

Lough Corrib was traditionally home to one of the great *péists* or flesh-eating serpents, who wriggled its way underground through the tunnels of limestone, whistling eerily. It never seems to have been defeated by any of the battalions of Irish monster-slaying saints. An *each uisce*, or water-horse, also inhabited the lake. Water-horses are far more common in lakes than in rivers, but there are some associated with unnamed rivers in the Folklore Commission records. The water-horse was also far more common in Scotland than in Ireland. Known in Scotland as the kelpie, he appears in the shape of a young and handsome man, luring girls to their doom. Sometimes the girl is eaten, but sometimes she stays alive and has a child with the kelpie. There is even a song called the 'Skye Water Kelpie's Lullaby', where the water-horse has been deserted by the young woman and nurses his son, promising a speckled trout to his lover Morag if she will come back to him.

In Irish folklore the water-horse does not take human form and is sometimes a less ferocious creature. It can be used as a workhorse, but it disappears into the water when its bridle is taken off or unkind words are spoken to it. Sometimes, the horse is ridden, like the ones in the Nordic versions, but throws off the rider when he is spoken to. The shape-shifting Pooka (*Púca*) and the water-horse do seem to be quite closely associated. The small black horse, the crazy rides and the slight hint of malice are all part of the same pattern. The water-horse can also guard treasure hidden in the river. Whatever else, he is certainly a very hard worker. One water-mare gave the farmer who captured her a foal every year for seven years, until she was insulted by him and took off back to the lake, her seven foals trotting behind her. There are echoes here of the story of Macha, the prodigious runner goddess who lived and worked with her husband until he was foolish enough to boast about her strength and forced her to compete against the king's racehorses.

THE TROUT

Whatever else the Corrib hides, it is certainly the home of a thriving fish population, including monstrous versions of the giant ferox trout – a fish big enough to give nightmares to small children or even large adults. The trout, like the salmon, is very important in folklore. Holy wells often have a magic trout living in them and if it is ever caught the well loses its magical properties. Often, when the fisherman tries to fry such a trout it jumps from the pan and disappears through the door or up the chimney. In one story, a soldier caught a magic white trout, but when he put it into the pan it refused to cook. Ignoring this sign of enchantment, he decided to eat it raw. As he began to cut into it, there was a terrible shriek, and the trout leapt from the pan, transformed into a lovely young girl. The girl had mourned her dead lover so much she had been transformed into a fish. She begged the soldier to return her to the river, where she would continue to wait for her beloved. This may well be the origin of Yeats's 'glimmering girl', the fish who becomes human in his early poem 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'. On a more prosaic level, there are tales of coffins seen at night-time floating on trout rivers; perhaps a warning to the water bailiffs to keep away from certain places where poachers might be going about their business in the darkness.

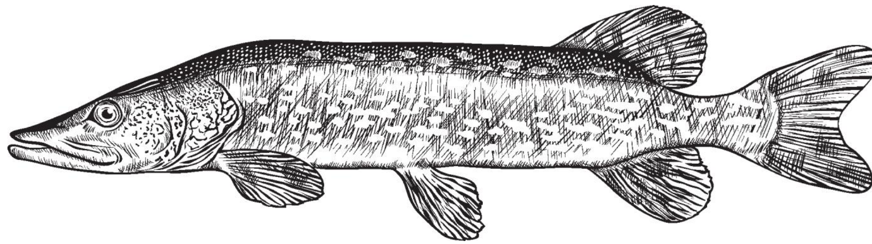


Trout are also the most well-known and widely spread of our river fish. Ireland has many trout-filled streams and rivers. Brown trout are the most common species, though sea-trout are also present in large numbers in river estuaries all around Ireland. Trout are part of the salmonid family and return to their hatching ground upriver to spawn. In Lough Corrib, trout have become the victims of the increase in stocks of that fearsome fishy predator, the pike.

THE PIKE

In Irish folk tradition, the pike has a much less positive image than the trout. Pike are large, shiny green fish, fiercely carnivorous, savage predators of smaller fish and even of small mammals. The pike is the ultimate game fish, the largest freshwater fish in Ireland, who will battle with an angler for its freedom. Indeed, there is a whole raft of stories about pikes that got away. Pike love reedy shallows, where they lie in wait for their prey and dart out to

catch them in their sharp, backward pointing teeth, or with larger prey, hold them still, drowning them. Pike of up to 18 kilos have been caught in Ireland and many a big house boasted its stuffed pike in a glass case in the days when such trophies were a sign of masculine prowess. Now most pike are caught on a catch-and-release basis. Pikes are territorial, aggressive, strong and fast and can even cannibalise their own species. They can live for around fifteen years or even longer, and many tales tell of the ancient, uncatchable pike that guards its territory in a river or at the edge of a lake. Some of the folklore surrounding the pike is frankly incredible and often amusing. A puppy was found still alive in the pike's belly; a pike was seen wearing the spectacles and reading the newspaper of an unsuccessful fisherman who had let them fall into the river. The pike is the gangster king of freshwater in Ireland.



Lough Corrib has known more recent and more real tragedies than that of Aoife or the trout maiden. It was the site of a mass drowning in September 1828, when twenty men and women were swallowed by its waters. They were among the thirty-two passengers on an overloaded and rickety craft, heading towards the Corrib river en route to Galway with a cargo of sheep and timber. Close to where the lake outlet flows into the river, at Annaghdown, a sheep struck its hoof through the wood of the boat, and as a coat was stuffed into the hole the timbers came apart. Twelve people were rescued by a passing boat, but many people died. Some of the young men who were victims were laid out in the clothes they had planned to be married in.

This tragedy became an inspiration to the poet and musician Anthony Raftery (1779–1835), and he wrote 'Anach Cuain', a hauntingly beautiful song to a traditional air, which is still sung today.

Anthony Raftery's life also had its share of tragedy. It was mainly spent in east Galway, though the poet was born in Mayo. Very early in life, a smallpox epidemic killed his eight siblings and left him blind. Given succour by a patron, he fell out with his protector as a teenager and took up the life of a wanderer, following a circuit from house to house, earning his food and shelter by playing his music and composing his poetry. And what poetry! The poems are the work of someone trained in the strict bardic methods of composition, and are full of classical

allusions, though nothing could be further from the dry Classicism of eighteenth-century English poetry. Raftery carried a book of classical myths with him always, and whenever he spent time with someone who could read, he asked to have it read to him. His life must have been incredibly hard, full of homesickness and rough times, though also full of wild nights of carousing and passionate love affairs, where girls become Helen of Troy and his companions gods and heroes. He could not write his poems down, but years later they were collected by those two luminaries of the Celtic Twilight, Douglas Hyde and Augusta Gregory.

One of Raftery's most beautiful poems is 'Raferty's Praise of Mary Hynes'. Mary's beauty was such that she was said to have refused eleven offers of marriage in one day. When Mary skips Mass to spend a day with Raftery, the old women of her village, who watch everyone passing, know all about it. In an image at once comic and beautiful, Raftery transforms the prying old women watching from the half-doors in Ballylea into stars – the Seven Sisters, the Pleiades. Mary's grace and tenderness are masterfully rendered and keep this young girl alive three centuries after her death. What better gift could a poet give? What more riches could Oirbsiu's crane bag offer?

O star of light and O sun in harvest; O amber hair, O my share of the world!

Raftery is seen as one of the last poets of the great tradition of Gaelic bardic poetry, whose patrons had become peasants and whose way of life was vanishing. Some of his saddest lines lament this:

Look at me now,
With my back to the wall
Playing music to empty pockets.

And Galway too, despite its cheerful air, hides its own dark secrets and tragic stories. Hidden waters of despair and mental illness, drownings and suicides can happen in any of the large or even not-so-large towns built on a river, for rivers can be places of self-harm as well as self-healing. Physical barriers have been put into place at what have become suicide points on the rivers of many towns, and Galway, like Cork, has groups of volunteers who look out for those who may be thinking of entering the dark waters. Supports for mental health in Ireland sometimes

have to operate in a challenging environment, and often despair travels hidden from sight, an underground river that is not acknowledged or brought into the light of day.

THE MOY

> *'Then we'll drink to our brave Michael Davitt, From the lovely sweet banks of the Moy.'*
> Seamus O'Duffy's song 'The Banks of the Moy'

Tradition tells us that the Moy (*An Mhuaidh*, the Noble River) sprang into being in the Ox Mountains in Sligo when a boy found an ox, or in some versions a cow, drinking from a spring in the foothills of the mountains. The child caught its tail, and the animal bolted. The boy held on tight and the beast rampaged down the mountain, south, then west, then south again, finally entering the sea in Mayo at Killala Bay. The well the ox had been drinking from sprang forward and followed the

meandering course the animal dug out through the bogs and fields, and so was formed a very beautiful river, situated in an equally stunning landscape.

Fishing in the Moy in the early twentieth century.

The Moy is a river much beloved of fishermen, and the lack of development and intensive agriculture on the shores of its lakes and the river itself has made it one of the most fertile rivers in Ireland. Along its 110 kilometres, it is fed by a large number of tributaries and associated lakes and all of these are worth exploring. At Foxford, a small tributary flows out of Lough Cuillin, the much smaller sister lake of Lough Conn, thus linking the two lakes to the Atlantic via the Moy.

Lough Conn is associated with Fionn, the hero of so many sagas and chief of the renowned Fianna. While hunting a wild pig, Fionn's hound pursued this magical beast into the lake and drowned. Thus, it became the Lake of the Hound, Lough Conn. In some versions of the legend, Lough Cuillin, the Holly Lake, is named after Fionn's second hound, who was also drowned during the hunt. The Moy has many legends similar to those attached to other Irish rivers, such as that of the giant who leaves a magic candle on the water. There is a particularly poignant one of a girl who came from fairyland and married a young man, but she could not talk. It was not until, on the advice of a wise woman, a rush was taken from under her back tooth that she regained the power of speech.

In the Moy, the Mórrigán has been known to appear in the form of an eel and she may also manifest as one of the most powerful figures in Irish folklore, the Cailleach, the Hag of Winter. The story that follows in this chapter links the Cailleach with a local unfinished steeple. The word *cailleach* literally means 'veiled one', and in medieval times was also used for nuns. Another veiled one left her mark on the Moy in much more recent times. Foxford was described in 1872 as a sad, straggling, soot-covered village. Stone cabins and bitter poverty marked it until the establishment of the weaving industry in 1890 by the dynamic nun Mother Arsenius, who founded a convent here and built a school, and then decided that what was really needed was a source of employment. Foxford Woollen Mills, after a hiatus in the 1980s, still exists today – a luxury brand with a worldwide reputation for fine woollens. The Moy water no longer provides power for the mill and the wool does not come from local sheep, but the efforts of the nineteenth century visionary still bear fruit. From Foxford the Moy flows on towards Ballina, the second largest town in Mayo.

Nineteenth-century drawing of Ballina.

Between Foxford and Ballina is Coolcran, a townland closely connected to a classic mermaid legend. There are many international versions of this story, but in most cases the mermaid comes from the sea rather than a river. The story of the O'Dowds, ancient chiefs of the district, has some versions set in Enniscrone, but in this variant, O'Dowd of Coolcran finds a mermaid on the banks of the Moy. He hides her magic cap and has seven children with her. Then the youngest child finds the cap and the mermaid returns to the water, leaving six of her children as standing stones and taking the youngest with her. These giant rocks bleed every seven years or when a member of the O'Dowd clan passes by. Another, slightly mad version of this mermaid tale is told in the Folklore Collection. In this story, the mermaid who marries O'Dowd is actually an Italian woman with the surname Mobbs, who sailed to Ireland in a canoe with her brother, who is a fugitive from justice as he had killed his parents. The lady had a sharkskin tail that covered the bottom part of her body; her husband took this away but when she found where he had hidden it she ran away to live with her brother in a cave on the seashore. She later drowned herself (so she can't have been a proper mermaid!),

maddened with grief and hunger when her brother, who had kept her company and 'fetched certain provisions' (human flesh?) died. This all happened in the early thirteenth century, according to the narrator. The title of the story is 'O'Dowd and his Cannibal Wife'. There are some other wonderful stories associated with the Moy, including one about the women who used to wash their clothes at a plank across the river. One day a woman and her tub disappeared, but many years later a fisherman's hook caught in the plank and when he pulled his line in he discovered there was a huge fish attached to it. Inside the fish he found the woman and her tub of clothes 'and she was washing away for all she was worth'.

Travelling further down the meanders of the Moy, we pass through Ballina and then onwards to the village of Killala, beautifully set on the river's estuary, and with a round tower, a seventeenth-century church and two fine ruined friaries (Dominican and Franciscan) to add to its charm. Killala is a small village with a long ecclesiastical history; dating, it is said, from the time St Patrick baptised 12,000 people in a local holy well. St Muredach, who ended his days on Inishmurray in Donegal Bay, was its first bishop, appointed by Patrick himself. What Killala is most renowned for, however, is the fact that an atheistic fleet of French revolutionary soldiers landed at Kilcummin Harbour and took Killala in 1798. The French forces had been invited by the United Irishmen to come and fight with them for the revolutionary values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, and free the country from the control of the British Crown. An initial French force had left Brest for Bantry in the south in 1796 under General Hoche and the fabulously named General Grouchy. They could not land, however, because of the terrible weather. General Humbert's summer expedition did manage to land, but only 1,000 soldiers were sent, with the promise of reinforcements later. The troops made their triumphant way to Ballina and beyond but were defeated at the Battle of Ballinamuck, having advanced eastwards as far as County Longford. The Republic of Connacht lasted less than a month and what was essentially the last invasion of Ireland has gone down in song and story as a heroic failure on the part of the United Irishmen. Sometimes the songs are not very complimentary to the French, and I have heard the Hoche expedition described as 'the year the French didn't show up because of the rain'.

Killala is a lovely, peaceful village, lit by the light of the endless sea on its doorstep. Deep beneath it, a network of underground passages lies hidden. Discovered in the nineteenth century when a grave was being dug in the Church of Ireland cemetery, this complex of passages was partially excavated once again in 2017, when a carved cross was discovered. This souterrain was probably used for storage during peaceful times and as a hiding place for people and treasures when the settlement – mainly monastic – was under threat. These are crawl spaces so it cannot have been a retreat of first resort and the labyrinth of passages and chambers include both circular and rectangular ones. The underground complex still holds many of its secrets as during the last exploration many of the passages were flooded and could not be accessed.

The view out to the estuary with its rich birdlife can seem a heaven on earth on a fine summer's day. But there were times when the often infertile and boggy lands that border the Moy were more like hell than heaven for those who lived there. This part of the country was one deeply scarred by the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. The *Gorta Mór* (the Great Hunger) was caused by the fact that over several years the potato crop was blighted. The potato was the main food source for most of the people of Ireland, the majority of whom were tenants who lived at subsistence level. Grain and livestock were used to pay rent to landlords, often through the medium of a land agent. During the Famine, thousands of people died and thousands more emigrated. The Moy acts as the dividing line between Sligo and Mayo, and both these counties and Galway suffered particularly badly during the Famine, most especially Mayo. This part of the country continued to bleed its young people, who emigrated in droves well into the twentieth century. The parish of Annaghdown, site of the drowning tragedy on Lough Corrib, had its population halved between 1841 and 1861.

Connemara in the nineteenth century.

In March 1846, into this beautiful but famine-ravaged landscape of bog and rushes, mountains, lakes and river, a boy was born to Catherine and Martin Davitt. The Davitts were cottiers whose grip on survival was so feeble that the family emigrated four years after the birth of their son Michael, evicted because they were unable to pay the rent for their tiny cottage and strip of land. At the age of ten, Michael went to work in the cotton mills of Haslingden in East Lancashire, part of a ghetto-like Irish community, disliked by the native mill workers because it was felt that the emigrants undercut local wages, practised a different religion and spoke a barbarous tongue. Michael lost an arm in a mill accident when he was only twelve, and he was given assistance by a local benefactor to attend the nearby Wesleyan School. After school, Davitt was initially employed in the post office/printing house in Haslingden, but he left his job when he joined the Irish revolutionary secret society, the Fenians. Arrested in 1870, he spent seven years in penal servitude in Dartmoor. By the time of his release his ideas had changed. Davitt had come to recognise that physical force was not the way to improve the lot of the Irish people, but his views remained revolutionary in nature. He believed that the land should be the property of all the people of the country. One of Davitt's strengths, however, was his pragmatism, and realising that

this view was not shared by the people of Ireland, he began the battle for the next best thing – the establishment of rights for the tenants of Ireland, including that of fair rent and security of tenure. His long-term aim was ownership of the land by the tenants who worked it.

In alliance with the MP Charles Stewart Parnell, a man of tremendous public influence in Ireland, Davitt was responsible for mobilising the peasantry of Ireland, forming the great mass movement of the Land League. This movement changed the face of land ownership in the country in a way it had not been changed since the seventeenth century. Before the Land Acts, 0.2 per cent of the population owned most of the land of the country. Just 750 landlords, many of them absentees, held vast estates which constituted half of the land of Ireland. The Land League used the power of passive resistance within the community to fight evictions and rent rises. One of the weapons used was that of social ostracism, and their actions at the estate of Lord Erne at Lough Mask in Mayo introduced a new word, boycott, into English and indeed several other languages. Erne's land agent at Lough Mask, Charles Boycott, was instructed to raise the rents – a method often used by 'improving' landlords to move people off their land so that they could be replaced by more profitable sheep or cattle. The tenants refused to pay and in addition, no one would work the land to harvest the crops or even supply food or services to the agent's family. The situation became untenable, and Charles Boycott and his family left Mayo under army protection.

During an astonishingly short time the British government responded to the power of this passive resistance by initiating a series of land acts. Between 1881 and 1905, the Land Commission was established and over time transferred the ownership of Irish lands to the farmers who had worked it for centuries.

Davitt is best known for this massive achievement, but there was much more to him. He was a visionary, dreaming of a more just and equal society, and he was a tireless worker for his vision, fitting an enormous amount of activity into his sixty years. During his life he was briefly a Member of Parliament in Westminster, a journalist and writer, and an arbitrator during strikes. He travelled widely and lent his support to an even wider number of causes, from that of the Scottish crofters who were also being moved from their lands in the cause of 'improvement' to the situation of Jews in Russia. While we might question some of his

judgments, one cannot doubt his engagement with social justice and his moral courage. Michael Davitt was instrumental in changing the lives not just of a generation of Irish people, but of all the generations that came after. At his own request, he was buried in the tiny village of Straide, where he was born, close to a famine bridge which crosses a tributary of the Moy and is surrounded by the fields he fought for, under the wide Mayo sky he loved. There is a small museum there, but the sense of his achievement goes far beyond this quiet resting place. Sometimes humans can be as heroic as any god.

One-armed heroes, blind poets: no matter what damage nature or man inflicts on the people of this region there always seem to be those among them who can rise above it to create lasting monuments of beauty or justice. A hard country for a hardy people, yet with a gentleness and joyfulness to it and a sense of how the ordinary can be transformed into something mythical and wonderful. Perhaps it is the beauty of the place. Perhaps it is the loneliness, the sense of humanity dwarfed by the glories of the natural world. This lack of human activity has resulted in the Corrib and the Moy becoming renowned as salmon rivers, for the most part unimpeded by the dams and weirs that block the salmon's journey to its breeding grounds. Fishing, pulling those shining silver creatures out of their element, is no longer the huge tourist draw it used to be in Ireland, partly because of the denuded and now-protected fish stock and partly because of the sometimes complicated situations surrounding fishing rights. In addition, as a leisure activity, fishing has greatly declined in popularity. There was a drop of 70,000 angling visits to the country between 1999 and 2006, and the decline continues. This drop in the popularity of fishing may be partly because of ecological concerns but may also lie in the decrease in our ability to do nothing but be still, looking into the depths, which is what fishermen spend a lot of their time doing.

But a few hardy souls continue to fish, as was evidenced during a scene I came upon while visiting the Moy.

A wet day, with raindrops causing ripples on the surface of the river. Before me is a fisherman, knee-deep in the flow of the river. I think of the W.B. Yeats poem 'The Fisherman', his vision for an independent Ireland:

Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face
And gray Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the down turn of his wrist
When the flies drop in the stream

My fisherman is not dressed in grey Connemara cloth but in a waterproof cape and waders. But with his line out, he is for all the world like one of the ancient saints, arms outstretched, praying, in this case for a fish. His prayers are answered; the line jerks and then, as the fish escapes in a flash of silver, a most unholy curse flies from my fisherman's mouth.

THE CAILLEACH BUILDS A STEEPLE

The Cailleach is an ancient figure that personifies female power and prowess, and sometimes dark female anger. She is the hooded, veiled one who comes with the storms of winter and is related to age and death, but also to sovereignty, to the king's right to rule the land and the people. In her stories, hags leap and climb and cover miles with a single step. In some tales, the Cailleach is credited with moulding the landscape, as in the story of the two hags battling at Loughcrew to see who could fly highest. The defeated hag ends up falling through the sky, dropping rocks from her apron and forming both the natural and manmade features of the landscape. In the story below, the Cailleach is held responsible for a much more recent structure, the tenth-century Meelick Round Tower. The tower has lost its conical roof and therefore gives the sense of being unfinished. Meelick is an area full of interesting and unexplored remains of Ireland's past, as can be seen on the traces marked on maps.

In the stony soil and endless bogs of Mayo, surrounded by evidence of the past, the Cailleach must have felt truly at home. In the original version of the story, told in the National Folklore Collection, a passerby says: ‘*Cím do Thóin, a Chailleac béarach,*’ which basically means ‘Greetings to your ass, Hag of Beara’. The story below is a somewhat free adaptation of the original Irish tale from the Collection:

> The Hag of Beara was bored. It might be time to see a bit of the world and maybe make something, she thought. A cake? A cloak? A landscape? She filled her apron with stones and decided to make three leaps; and at the end of the third leap, she would build a steeple. She looked southwards but there was nothing but sea. So, she took a great leap northwards and stopped for a moment in County Carlow, where she saw a woman with a bundle on her back. Out of the top of the bundle peered some geese. The woman saw her looking and said:
>
> ‘I’m bringing these girls to McNulty, to have his gander service them.’
>
> ‘God bless the work,’ said the hag.
>
> The geese thanked her, all aflutter in anticipation of the day out.
>
> ‘And where are you off to?’ they asked.
>
> ‘I am off to build a steeple that will reach the sky!’
>
> ‘God bless the work!’ they chorused in a geesely gabble.
>
> Her next leap brought her to the River Moy, where you can still see her footprints on a rock in the middle of the river. A salmon stuck his head out of the water.
>
> ‘Where are you off to?’ asked the salmon.
>
> ‘I’m away to build a steeple that will reach the sky,’ said the hag.
>
> ‘God bless the work, so,’ said the salmon.

Her third leap brought her to a tiny place called Meelick in the middle of rushes, bog and scraped earth with the rock showing through. Here, she decided to build her steeple.

'I'll keep going until I reach the sky,' she thought. 'If I run out of rocks, there are plenty around in this place.'

So, she began to build. One stone after another, she placed in a perfect circle, each interlocking so well they needed no mortar. She climbed higher and higher and as she went she could see further and further. Or at least she could on those days when there was no mist swirling like a sea under her, as she built her steeple towards the sky, day after day, night after night.

'Let no one interfere with me,' she said to herself, 'and I'll be a happy woman.' She sang as she worked, songs about the blue mountains and the quiet fields, songs about the sea dreaming in the sunlight and the River Moy, making its way towards the shining waves at Killala. The sweat poured off her as the summer came in, but day and night she continued working. She kept working and she kept singing until one day there was a shout from far below her.

Looking down, she saw a man and a woman. They were looking up at her, pointing and laughing.

'What are you doing, hag?' the man asked.

'I'm building a steeple to reach the sky!' said the hag.

The man and the woman laughed again.

Then one of them said:

'Well, God bless your blue ass, so, hag! It's well on view!'

The Hag was mortified. Fish and fowl had wished her success in her work, and all humans could do was mock her. She gave a great roar that sent the couple scurrying and threw up her arms, dropping the rocks from her apron. They went crashing to the earth, bouncing over the landscape like so many balls.

She jumped from the tower and landed on the ground with such a thump her feet left two marks deep in the rock. And then she made another tremendous leap, all the way back to her home in Beara. The steeple never reached the sky and was never given a roof. The hag decided that geese and salmon should have her protection, but not humans. And she pondered how humans are the only creatures in all creation capable of putting down the work of others. And the only ones capable of vulgarity.

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The Foyle at Culmore Point, Derry.

The Foyle and the Erne

‘Green banks …
One could gaze on them forever!
Are on each side of it.’
Fifteenth-century tribute to Tómás Óg Maguire

The Foyle and the Erne are rivers which straddle the borders of Ireland, north and south, acting as political barriers between the two states, yet in the way of water, always permeable, always traversable. In other ways, the rivers are very different kettles of fish; the Erne is defined by its lakes and towns such as Ballyshannon and Enniskillen and the Foyle by sweeping Lough Foyle and, upriver, the city of Derry. The Foyle has perhaps the more dramatic entrance to the sea; but the charm of Ballyshannon is undeniable, with its coastline of dunes and endless yellow sands, its glimpse of the sea from the bridge and its soft blue mountains stretching away in the distance.

THE FOYLE

'Ye must think I came up the Foyle in a bubble.'
Derry Girls

The Foyle is a river of the far north. Its catchment area includes Malin Head on the Inishowen Peninsula, the most northerly point on the island of Ireland. The river is what is known as a capillary river – one which starts as a series of smaller streams and rivers. The Foyle is a perfect example of a coming together of waterways – so much so that it is even more difficult than usual to say where the river rises. Although it is quite a short river, 32 kilometres long, the Foyle network has been estimated to cover 1,450 kilometres. Waters flow into it from counties Derry, Donegal and Tyrone, and for much of its course it forms the boundary between Derry and Donegal. The Foyle officially becomes the Foyle where the Mourne and the Finn rivers meet at Lifford in County Donegal, a market town in the Republic. Lifford is a border town – across the river, travelling east, is not just another county but another state, that of Northern Ireland. The town has its origins in the settlement that grew up around one of the O'Donnell castles, and because of its strategic position it was an army base for centuries. The county town of Donegal, it has some fine old buildings, especially around the Diamond (the distinctive building pattern of Plantation towns), some used as private dwellings, some as office space and some as public buildings such as the market hall. The Old Courthouse, currently a visitor centre, dates from the mid-eighteenth century. The modern Three Coins sculpture represents the three rivers that converge in the town. On the eastern bank of the Foyle is the much larger town of Strabane, which suffered greatly during the Troubles. The two towns are linked by the modern, very busy bridge and by the steel sculptures of musicians and dancers on either side of the river.

A Derry Girls ***mural beside the historic walls of the city.***

The Mourne, joining with the Finn from the east to form the Foyle, is a more domesticated river than the fast-flowing Finn. It rises in Tyrone and carries on its waters the traditions of Ulster industry, with mills so famous that they gave their name to a village, Sion Mills. The Finn rises in the Bluestacks in Lough Finn. Its legend is that of a girl who swam across the lough to rescue her drowning brother, but whose hair became entangled in the weeds. She was drowned and the lake is called Fionn, or Finn, the Fair One, in her memory. The Mourne river is also celebrated in folk memory, but in this case it is a folk song. 'The Maids of Mourne Shore' is the tune of the better-known song 'Down by the Salley Gardens', with lyrics from a poem by W.B. Yeats, but it is also identified with 'The Moorlough Shore'. In the song, a young man takes leave of the river's hills and dales and flowery vales, not because of poverty, but because the girl he loves insists on remaining faithful to her soldier lover. Some versions list the places the boy is leaving, including a mention of linen making:

So farewell to Lord Edward's groves,
Likewise to the bleaching green,
Where the linen veils lie neat and white
Clear flows the crystal stream.

The crystal stream of the Foyle, in Irish *An Feabhal*, carries more than its share of the cargo of story, and the depths of Lough Foyle more than its share of wrecked ships and lost lives. Lough Foyle was a naval base for the Allies during World War II and after it ended the lough was used as a site to sink German U-boats. It is still disputed (but very quietly) which state 'owns' the lough.

The Foyle is one of the few Irish rivers named after a male deity. Feabhal was supposedly drowned in Lough Foyle. He was the father of the hero Bran, who was lured in a dream of the sea god Manannán to set sail and seek 'the Land of Women'. According to a cryptic text from the eighth century, *Cín Dromma Snechtai,* a dialogue between Bran's druid and the prophetess of Lough Foyle, the lough was once a vast plain covered in white flowers where companies of fairy women rode. These women guarded a great treasure – perhaps a magic well – but its waters rose up and covered the beautiful meadows in grey seawater.

The estuary of the Foyle is also strongly linked to the god Manannán. Between the mouth of the Foyle and the Bann is a huge sandbar or shoal, known as the Tuns or Toon Bank, reputedly the place where the god is buried. As we have seen, it's not his only resting place, as he is also supposed to lie at the bottom of Lough Corrib. Overlooking Lough Foyle is a giant statue of Manannán, whose history demonstrates the power images of the old gods can still have. An angle grinder was taken to the base of the statue in 2015, and after what must have been hours of work the stainless steel and fibreglass statue was taken away and replaced by a cross with the words 'You shall have no gods before me'. Since then, the statue has been recovered and re-erected.

Close by, the city of Derry, or Londonderry, is also the setting of myth. According to one version of the invasion of the Milesians, the last invaders of Ireland, the first Milesian came to Derry to resolve a dispute among the Tuatha Dé Danann, but the natives feared he would take over the country and killed him. His nephew, Mil, as revenge, invaded Ireland. The accounts of the fabulous wandering of the Milesians before their

arrival in Ireland are a curious blend of Classical and Irish myth and the Bible; in one story Moses cures a Milesian baby from snakebite, with a touch of his rod, and then decrees that his descendants will live in a land without snakes.

Derry does not have the Foyle at its centre, for the walls of the city are built on a hill above the river on its western bank. Defence is imprinted into the DNA of this city, despite its peaceful beginnings as the Church of the Oaks founded by St Colmcille. So too is division: the river divides the residential districts. East of the Foyle is the Waterside district, an area that during the twentieth century was mainly Protestant and Unionist, and the predominantly Catholic Bogside is to the west, crouching below the city walls. Originally, no Catholics were allowed to live inside or even stay overnight within the walled city. The poet and academic Seamus Deane gives a vivid description of growing up in the Bogside in his book *Reading in the Dark*. He speaks of how the massive walls, the cathedral, the statue of Governor Walker all looked down from the heights on the Catholic poor, those who ‘lived below and between’, literally in the shadow of history.

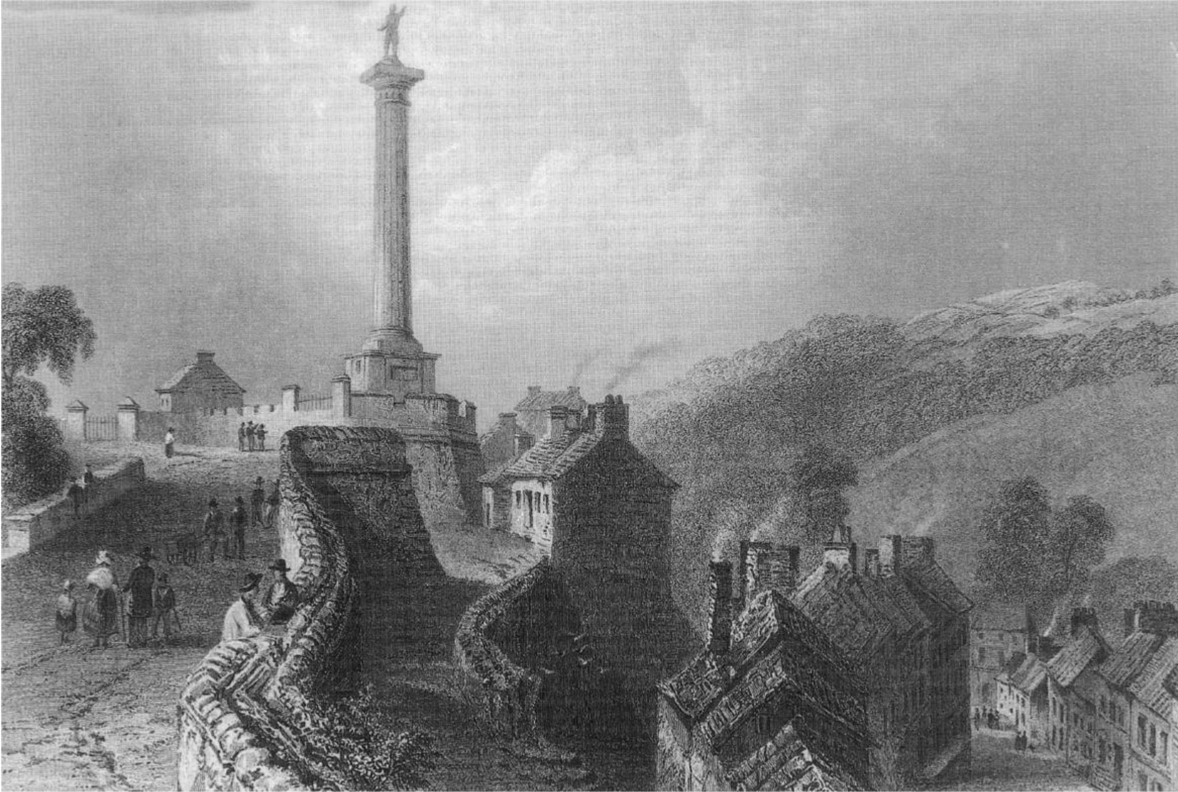
Along with Belfast, Derry was the city which suffered most during the Troubles. Its civil rights marchers were the first to respond to the call for human rights and equality in the 1960s. It is also the site of one of the greatest tragedies (and subsequent cover-ups) in the history of the Troubles, Bloody Sunday 1972.

Happily, the city has known peace and prosperity for a long number of years and the Troubles are now probably most familiar to a large proportion of the public through the comedy *Derry Girls*, with its blazing Northern wit. And despite years of destruction, the city has retained a large number of elegant streets and charming historic buildings such as the lovely Guildhall.

The island settlement which had grown up around the monastic one was, until the beginning of the seventeenth century and Cahir O’Doherty’s failed rebellion, at the heart of Gaelic Ireland. After 1608, it became part of the Plantation of Ulster, with English and Scots Protestant families loyal to the Crown settling on land taken from the rebels. Derry was granted to the London companies who had helped finance the wars and was renamed Londonderry.

The Gaelic settlement was destroyed and the new city was carefully planned, with four streets radiating out from a central Diamond and leading to the gates. The walls of Derry were to become symbolic of Protestant resistance when the city held out against the invading troops of James II during a heroic siege in 1689. On the first Saturday of December, the shutting of the gates against the army of King James is commemorated, and on the second Saturday in August, the relief of the siege is celebrated, with day-long events that include the circuit of the walls and a thanksgiving ceremony in St Columb's Cathedral, consecrated in 1633.

Derry was originally an island in the river, but over time numerous bridges and infills have changed its nature. During the last number of years, many bridges have been built in Derry, in the literal as well as the symbolic sense. The names of the city's bridges reflect the times they were built: Carlisle Bridge, 1863 (named after Lord Carlisle, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland), replaced in the 1930s by the Craigavon Bridge (called after Northern Ireland's Prime Minister), the Foyle Bridge of 1984 (carefully neutral) and the Peace Bridge in 2011. There is still contention around the name of the city itself. Perhaps a solution lies in writer Colm Tóibín's theory that Ireland has now become a hyphenated society. London-Derry has an almost bridgelike feel to it, and bridges can be seen as the hyphen that joins two sides of the river of history. Beyond Derry, the Foyle catchment area also became the possession of many of the Companies that funded the conquest of Gaelic Ireland, and by the nineteenth century much of the land was owned by wealthy landlords. During the nineteenth century huge reclamation projects along the banks of Lough Foyle decreased its size and increased the amount of fertile land to the east of the city.



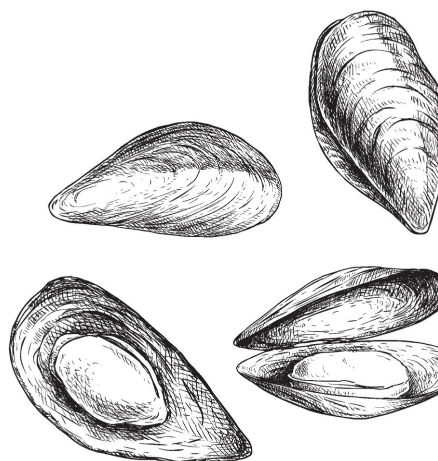
Nineteenth-century drawing of Derry and the city walls.

The Laggan area is the inner Foyle, where the land is most fertile, between the mountains and the sea. Well into the twentieth century, its landlords had no qualms about evicting tenants; there are accounts of them sending them off the good land and telling them to go up river to the mountainous and boggy districts. The linen trade that flourished here, as in so much of Ulster, helped make the city prosper. Throughout its history, Derry knew prosperity – through its cloth trade, shipbuilding and agriculture – but also poverty and neglect. In the lands around the city, intensive agriculture has also played a role in damaging the waters of the Foyle. Like the Nore, the Foyle was once a rich breeding ground for freshwater pearl mussels, and like the Nore the population has drastically declined. This has also affected salmon stocks, with which the mussel population has a symbiotic relationship; the salmon provides nourishment for the mussels and the mussels filter the water.

PEARL MUSSELS

Pearl mussels can live to be 150 years old. Sleeping in our riverbeds, there may still be mussels that began their lives in the reign of Queen Victoria, at the beginning of the Land

War, when Parnell and his party were calling for Home Rule for Ireland, when thousands were still fleeing the country in the aftermath of the Famine and when the Catholic Church reigned supreme and the idea that women should have a vote still seemed like madness to many.



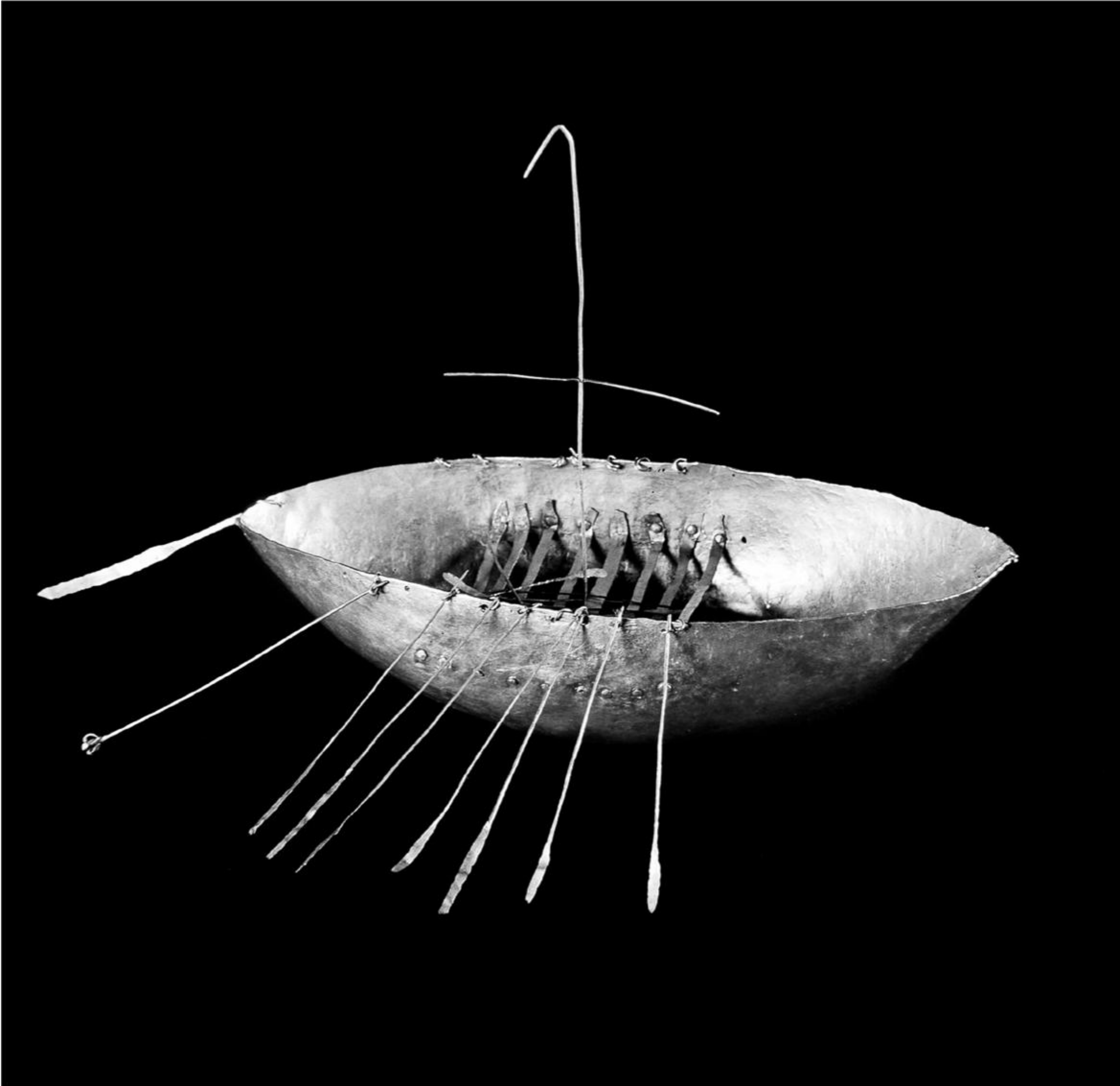
Fewer than fifty rivers worldwide now hold viable stocks of any species of freshwater pearl mussel. Ireland, Scotland, Scandinavia and Russia are the main sites in Europe; altogether 90 per cent of pearl mussels have been lost. In Ireland, numbers have been severely depleted by the introduction of panda, zebra and tiger mussels, mainly brought in on the hulls of boats. All of them cause damage to our ecosystems; the zebra mussels act as water filters, but to such an extent that there is a reduction in the production of both plant and animal plankton, and thus less food for water dwellers.

The habitat of the mussel has also been affected, like so much else, by the phosphorus, nitrogen and sewage that have contaminated many of our rivers. Pearl mussels are one of the many canaries in the coal mines of our rivers, signalling their state of health.

Beyond the walled city, there is an older, mythic Derry in the grove of oak trees on the island where St Colmcille built a monastery. Colmcille loved the oak trees so much that he orientated his church in a north-south direction rather than the traditional east-west, to avoid disturbing the ancient trees. Here he deviates from the instructions of the Church of the time. It seems more than likely that the oak grove was already a sacred place when Colmcille built his church, and the orders from above would have been to raze the trees in such places and make all new, for who knows what wicked spirits an island of oak trees might harbour? Colmcille's close connection with the natural world lasted right up until his death, when an old white horse shed tears when he realised that the saint was going to die. Donegal's favourite son (until the advent of Daniel O'Donnell) sailed from Lough Foyle when he went into exile, carrying the guilt for the deaths of three thousand men in a battle he had instigated. He travelled across to Scotland to found the famous monastery

at Iona. But neither his people nor the rivers forgot him. St Ernan, a nephew of Colmcille, was fishing in a salmon pool on the Finn river on 9 June, 592, when he saw a pillar of fire over the water. The whole of the Donegal sky had lit up. Then he knew that the great Colmcille had died in Iona.

Back before the Christian era lies the unknown and unknowable story of the people who made the wonderful objects now known as the Broighter Hoard. The Hoard was found by farmers ploughing the soil close to Lough Foyle at the end of the nineteenth century. The items, which included a golden torc and a model ship, became the subject of a famous row as to who had the rights to keep them. They are now held in the National Museum of Ireland. The Hoard was worth fighting for – the beautiful bronze and gold artefacts include the small golden boat that is surely the most exquisite artefact to come down to us from the Iron Age. It was made in the first century AD and is the only one of its kind in the world. It attests to a highly developed society on the banks of Lough Foyle, and the legends of the river also bear witness to this sophistication and indeed wealth. It weighs only 85 grams, but the detail is superb, including benches, oars and a paddle rudder. It has a delicate, leaf-like shape and it has been suggested that the boat was deposited as a votive offering to Manannán Mac Lir, perhaps even portraying his magical currach, the Wave-Sweeper. For whatever reason it was made, this stunningly crafted little boat of dreams is perhaps a more fitting symbol of Derry than walls or even oak trees.



The beautiful and intricate Broighter Hoard boat.
Image © National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

THE ERNE

> *'Half the year Lough Erne is in Enniskillen and half the year Enniskillen is in Lough Erne.'*
> Local saying

The Erne is 85 kilometres long, rising in the Republic, at Beaghy Lough in Cavan, and flowing through Fermanagh as it makes its journey north. At Lower Lough Erne, it takes a turn westward towards Donegal where it enters the sea near Ballyshannon. It is also linked to the Shannon by the Shannon-Erne Waterway, linking Belturbet (on Upper Lough Erne) by canal to Leitrim Village. On its course it widens into two long, narrow and beautiful lakes, Upper and Lower Lough Erne. Both loughs are crammed with islands, so that on misty days – of which there are many in this lakeland area – it is sometimes hard to tell where land ends and water begins. Some of the islands are hardly more than a handful of rocks and some are the site of monastic ruins and mysterious stone figures created long ago. Many are covered with small trees and scrub, the low-lying *ros* (wooded headland) so beloved of the early Christian hermits. One such saint, Molaise (or Laserian) is closely connected with an island to the south of Lower Lough Erne, Devenish Island, the site of a round tower and some beautifully carved stonework. Devenish is also remembered as having been the home of Parthalon and his wife. In the *Leabhar Gabhála*, the Book of Invasions, Parthalon was the leader of the second group of settlers to come from over the sea to Ireland; his people were wiped out by a massive plague, but before that it seems that Parthalon settled on Devenish with his wife, servants and their dog, Samer. In what is recorded as 'the first jealousy of Ireland' in the Book of Invasions, Parthalon discovered that his wife had been unfaithful with his servant while he was out hunting. To add insult to injury, the pair had made inroads on his stock of 'magical' drink. When confronted, Parthalon's wife asked him how did he expect her to behave when he had left her alone with his servant and his drink for so long? Parthalon angrily threw the dog, Samer, into the water, where it drowned. The servant fled but, we are told, was eaten by birds and dogs. The small, privately owned island, Inis Saimer, takes its name from that of the little dog, innocent victim of what must have been quite a toxic relationship!

Devenish was also the home of St Lasair. Lasair is sometimes conflated with her male teacher, St Molaise, or Laserian, but according to the seventeenth-century life of the saint, she was very much a person in her own right. She travelled to Devenish to learn from Molaise, though she soon surpassed him in knowledge. The characters of Irish holy ones are sometimes surprising, and Lasair seems to have possessed the unsaintly qualities of greed and a quick temper, as well as being a lady of great learning and miraculous powers. One of the six daughters of a king, Lasair received her name – which means 'flame' – when the hamlet she lived in was set on fire by an invading chief. There are various versions of the story, but in one of them, St Molaise got into such a panic when he was told of the attack that he ran from his cell 'swift, eager and stark naked'. Lasair, on the other hand, remained calmly in her cell as the flames raged around her, chanting her psalms (she did a lot of singing). She was found:

> Seated in a cool light and airy garment on the side of her bed, undefiled and unhurt with her beautiful ancient golden-lettered book.

When she decided she was ready to leave Molaise and Devenish, she went to her parents and demanded the same amount of land that had been given to her sister Damhnaid, claiming equal rights and eventually coming to an agreement with her sister to divide Slieve Beagh in Monaghan between them. She seems to have been not unlike Kilkenny's Margaret Butler in her insistence on her rights; she too cursed her enemies, in her own particularly colourful way, promising 'ill-fortune and poverty, anger, hatred and murder of their kin, weakness wounds and great woe on them'.

Despite her temper, she was not without charitable instincts. She cured many people with her miraculous bell, the Ceolán, and, in one especially spectacular case, cured a woman who had been pregnant for seven seasons and had two serpents gnawing her insides. With the help of her bell and some healing liquid, she freed the woman from her agony, and she gave birth, bringing forth two lizards and 'a beautiful broad skulled manchild'.

Lasair was not the only tough woman of the Erne. Both the river and the lake are female entities, taking their name from one of the handmaidens of the warrior queen Medb. Eirne was a particularly favoured handmaiden, the guardian of Medb's comb and casket, interestingly the traditional emblems of mermaids. She fled with a group of maidens from a monster which emerged from Oweynagat, the mystical cave at Cruachan. Cruachan was Medb's main residence, located in Roscommon, so the maidens covered quite a distance in their flight. Eirne was drowned and became part of the river and lake complex. The comb and casket were lost in the waters of the lough.

But the most impressive goddess figure connected with the Erne is undoubtedly Ceithleann, She of the Crooked Teeth. Wife of the equally alarming Balor of the Evil Eye, chief of the Fomorians, Ceithleann is credited with killing the Dagda at the Second Battle of Moytura with her javelin. While the Irish name Kathleen is commonly seen as having its origin in the name Catherine, one might wonder if this was a case of masking an ancient Irish name with an English equivalent. In that case, that iconic figure of Ireland, Kathleen Ní Houlihan, becomes Ceithleann Ní Houlican, a savage and powerful figure rather than a Poor Old Woman

or even a mourning queen. Enniskillen also takes its name, the Island of Ceithleann, from this fierce goddess. The town is located on an island in the lough and has suffered its own wounds in the last century. On Remembrance Sunday in 1987 a bomb, planted by the Provisional IRA, went off during a religious service. It killed eleven people and injured another sixty-three.

Nowadays, Enniskillen, surrounded by rivers and lakes, is a busy town, though one does not have to travel very far from it to find havens of waterfowl and marsh birds. The villages around it almost seem to be hiding in the reeds and the whole district must have been difficult to subdue, with its hidden places and scattered islands. This area around the river and Lough Erne was very much part of the Gaelic world until the Tudor conquest. From the late thirteenth century, the Maguire chiefs had control of the area, and the kingdom was one where learning flourished. Many of the Maguire chiefs were more interested in husbandry than in the petty feuding and land grabs that characterised Gaelic Ireland. Because of this, some of the chiefs were mocked by their rivals, but for the inhabitants of the region it resulted in a peaceful and prosperous kingdom where cultural pursuits flourished. There was a close relationship between the chiefs and the Church, and the Church held much of the land, which may have been one of the reasons that a premium was placed on crafts and learning rather than warfare. It was described by one poet as ‘a pleasant earthly Paradies’. We can only catch glimpses of life around the Erne at this time and many of the population were transitory, at least during the summer months, when cattle were herded from pasture to pasture along the Erne or on the banks of the upper and lower loughs. The original Enniskillen Castle was built for the Maguires and they were famed for the hospitality they provided there, especially to poets and musicians. There is a sense of a peaceful, productive community, with scholars and husbandmen and skilled metalworkers and wrights going about their daily business. Fragments of poems praise not only the Maguires themselves, but the countryside and the busy river:

A forest of masts is on the Erne
It makes me start with Joy to see them;
Green banks …

One could gaze on them forever!
Are on each side of it.

By the sixteenth century this had changed, and by the last quarter of that century the Maguires were left fighting for the survival of the old way of life. The last Chief of the Maguires set sail, into exile, from Lough Swilly in 1607, as part of an exodus of Irish chieftains called the Flight of the Earls. Some members of the Maguire clan remained, submitting to the Crown and thus holding onto their land. The glory days were over, but the tradition of support for Church and learning continued, with Brian Maguire giving shelter to Father Michael O'Clery (Mícheál Ó Cléirigh), chief master of the *Annals of the Four Masters*, for a period in the early years of the seventeenth century. At least a part of the famed Annals he composed, the source of so much information on the history of Ireland, may have been written on the peaceful shores of the Erne.

Further north, in Lower Lough Erne, we find Boa Island, Lusty Beag and Lustymore, and White Island, all of which have their own particular watery charm. The most accessible is Boa Island, which can be reached by road. Its name is said to come from that of the war goddess Badbh, who takes the form of a crow, and is found shrieking over battlefields and feasting on the bodies of the slain. She is one of a trilogy of war goddesses that includes the Mórrigán and Macha.

The Janus figure on Boa Island.

Boa Island is still a wilderness in some parts, covered with brambles and nettles, though access has been cleared to Caldragh Cemetery. In addition to some ancient and some more modern graves, and an amazing giant hawthorn, this cemetery is the home of two mysterious stone figures. The smaller one was moved here from Lustymore Island. Some think the figure may be Cernunnos, the stag god found seated cross-legged on the Gundestrup Cauldron, the finest example of Iron Age silver that has been found in Europe. The larger figure is known as the Janus figure because it looks both ways and appears to be male on one side and female on the other. The cemetery has a strange atmosphere, and the power of the figures is acknowledged by the offerings left there, which when I visited included a yoyo. These solemn figures seem to be silently watching, perhaps waiting, impassive, reminiscent of the huge staring figures of Easter Island, guardians of secrets long forgotten.

Boat trips on Lough Erne can be taken to White Island, where there are more wonderful stone carvings. The remains of the twelfth-century

church on the island has rows of carved figures dating from the ninth century; the carvings include a sheela-na-gig.

Vikings raided the churches and monasteries on these islands, and this part of Ireland has had more than its fair share of saints and scholars, not to mention creators of beautiful craftsmanship, but now the prevailing sense is one of nature left to itself to grow and be reborn in thickets and small wildernesses of scrub and reeds on islands that have never been cultivated. On its banks, the fields are green and low-lying and often flooded, becoming once more a part of the lough. The main enemies of the traveller are the midges, that plague of lakeland paradises, who would, like Ceithleann of the Crooked Teeth, eat you alive. Underwater there are further savage creatures. The lakes and river are known for their pike, that alpha predator fish of inland waterways.

Crooked-teethed Ceithleann is also the goddess associated with the mouth of the river at Ballyshannon. Built on the small strip of land between Assaroe Lake and the sands that stretch all along the coast, sprawling out towards the sand dunes of Rossnowlagh and the line of blue sea, the town was once famous for the salmon falls at Assaroe. Cathaleen's Fall hydroelectric power station began its operations in 1952, its engineers having created a lake upstream which greatly decreased the flow of the falls. This is the place where, in one version of the tale, Fionn caught the Salmon of Knowledge at Goll Essa. But now the falls have been forever altered and diminished and the salmon no longer leap upriver at Ballyshannon. A bypass for the fish has been made, but there has been a massive decrease in salmon numbers. The 'salmon-falls' and 'mackerel-crowded seas' that W.B. Yeats celebrated in 'Sailing to Byzantium', where are they now?

There are a number of different stories told about the origin of the name Assaroe. In yet another story of a drowning, the king Áed Rúadh slipped at the rocks at the falls and died in the river. He was succeeded by his daughter, Macha, the only female who attained the high kingship of Ireland. In one version, Áed was killed by a soldier unhappy with his pay and in another variation the king drowned while gazing at his own face in the water. His hair was caught by water weeds and he was pulled into the wild torrent. Another mythic victim of the falls was pulled to her death by her fascination with the bubbles that rose from the water, like Sinann in the story of the birth of the Shannon. This was Ruad, who travelled

from the land of the Sídh in a boat with a bronze hull and tin sail to seek her human lover. The boat belonged to the famous musician Abcán, and in one of the tellings it is music which brings about Ruad's death; the singing of mermaids – or that of the Fairy Mounds in the Metrical Dindshenchas – luring her into the depths of the water. Music, light on water, bubbles rising – the hypnotic call of water; these themes echo and re-echo through the stories of the rivers of Ireland, from the story of the birth of the Shannon to the folktales of witches placing candles on water in the darkness of night.

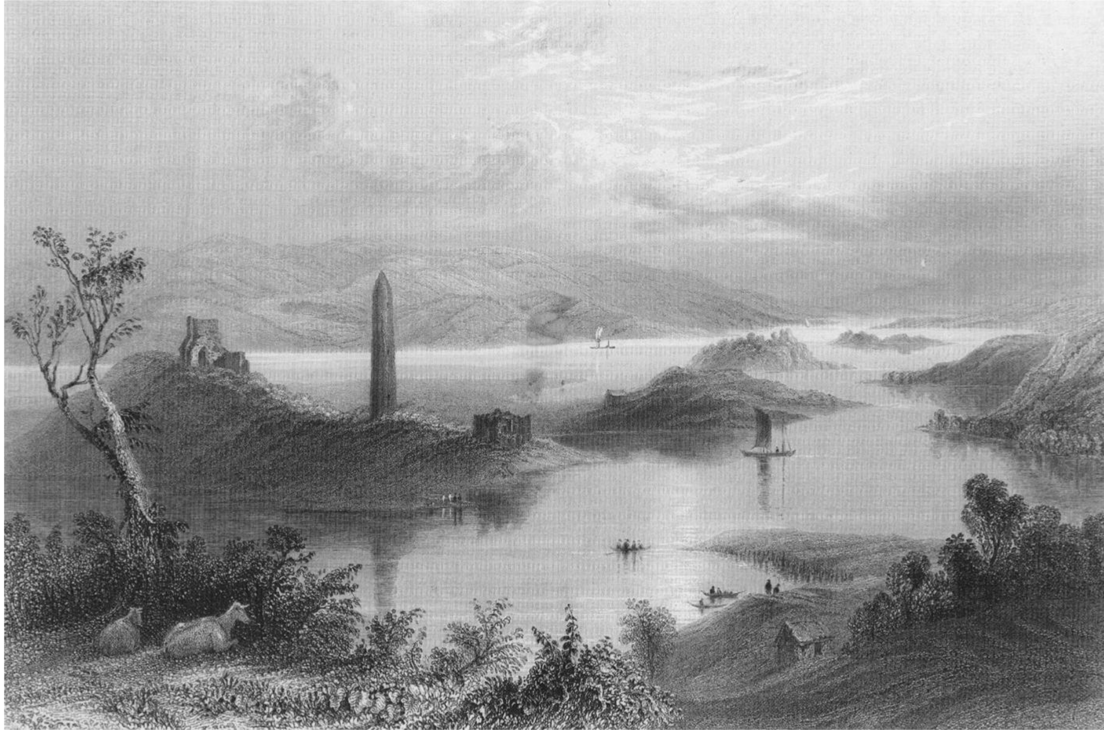
Ballyshannon itself is a relaxed and prosperous town which pays its own homage to music – though music of a very different kind from that of the mermaids. One of its most famous sons, the rock guitarist Rory Gallagher, is commemorated by a statue at its centre. It also hosts a well-known traditional music festival.

So the music continues, though something left Ballyshannon when the falls were destroyed. It has adjusted to that and is still a beautiful and peaceful place. But it would be a lie to say that nothing has been lost.

THE GOLDEN APPLES OF LOUGH ERNE

Normally, the stories told in the legends are so very concise they have to be expanded. In this case the opposite is true. Nicholas Kearney was a notorious forger of tales he claimed to come from ancient Irish traditions. When he wrote this story around 1856, he said he had been given it by an old storyteller, but even if this is true, he wildly embellished what he heard with tropes from other folk and fairy tales. The language used in his version is very much of his time – I especially like how the little horse says *Pshaw*, which does actually sound like a horse snorting. It's not like any other story I have come across in my trawl through river stories and deserves to be remembered, even if it is not a fully authentic Irish legend and mainly concerns Lough Erne rather than the river.

> When the queen came to her under the cover of darkness, the Henwife didn't make things easy for her. In the end, after countless hints and half sentences, Queen Eda had to spit out the words – that she wanted her stepson, Prince Conneda, dead. She was tired of hearing how wonderful he was, of his courage and kindness and good looks. She was tired of knowing that he would inherit the throne. He was the eldest son and she had three of her own little wailers waiting to become kings.



Nineteenth-century engraving of Devenish Island.

The Henwife drove a hard bargain for her advice and tricked the queen into giving her far more than she thought she had promised. Dozens of bushels of wheat she got out of Her Majesty. That's one of the problems when you get mixed up with these characters – you always end up giving more, sometimes giving away the thing you value most. That is because they are a lot cleverer than we are. And at the best of times the queen was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Nevertheless, she was more than happy to have a plan, and she carefully followed the instructions the Henwife gave her.

The queen challenged Conneda to a game of chess, and he lost. So, as the winner, the queen put the *geas* on him that he should fetch three golden apples and the magic puppy-hound Samer and the famous black steed from the King of Lough Erne, all within the space of a year and a day, an impossible task that would surely end in Conneda's death.

But Conneda said: 'Very well, but let us play another match.'

This time Conneda won, and the *geas* he put on the queen was to stand at the top of the highest tower and watch for his return, with her only nourishment the red wheat she could pick up with the point of her bodkin. The lad had imagination, you have to grant him that. *He* hadn't been given any help from the Henwife.

Conneda mounted his beautiful white horse, with its golden harness and reins made of soft red leather, a prancing, dancing beast, the very best of the king's stables. He rode long and hard to the Dún of the druid Fionn Badhna, to ask for his help.

Fionn Badhna made his consultations.

'The person who gave the queen advice is none other than one of the most powerful Hags of Ireland, the Cailleach of Lough Corrib. She is the sister to the Firbolg King of Lough Erne. She must mean for you to die in this effort, but to have any chance at all of success, go to speak to the bird with the human head, who lives on Slieve Mish and has great wisdom in such matters.'

Conneda sighed. Slieve Mish was at the other end of the country to Lough Erne. *Never mind*, he thought, *my horse is the best in Ireland. We will make light work of it*. He went to mount his steed, but Fionn Badhna took his arm and drew him back.

'Wait,' he said. 'Your horse will not survive the journey. Nor will you if you ride him. You must take the small dark pony that is grazing over in that field.'

Conneda could not help laughing.

'That shaggy little thing? Surely my fine charger has ten times the power and stamina of such a beast?'

Fionn Badhna shook his head.

'Believe me, I would not offer you that steed if I were not under a *geas* to do so. The beast will serve you well. Send your own horse back to your father's stables.'

Conneda was not best pleased. He felt it beneath his dignity to ride such a humble beast. And it would take forever to reach Slieve Mish! Yet he was a kind prince, and he petted the little pony as he mounted its shaggy back. His feet were almost trailing on the ground but he hardly had time to wish the druid farewell, for as soon as he mounted it, the little shaggy pony took off, flying over rocks and hills and lakes until they reached Slieve Mish.

Once there, the bird with the human head gave Conneda instructions on how to find the magic ball that would lead him to the entrance of the underwater palace in Lough Erne. She also told Conneda to obey whatever instructions the pony gave him. Conneda wondered at this, as while he realised that the horse must be a magic one, it had never said a word to him.

So up north they travelled, following the magic ball, and many adventures the pair had; and as time went by, the prince became truly fond of his companion, and slept with his back against his hide, keeping them both warm as the nights grew cooler, and as summer changed to winter.

Finally, they reached the shores of Lough Erne. As they watched, the magic ball disappeared into the deep waters of the lake.

The little pony said, 'Now, you must take the vial of all-heal from out of one of my ears and the wicker basket from the other and then we can continue on our way. Do not be afraid; I will take you safely under the waters.'

The prince did as he was requested, and he and the pony travelled under the waters of the Lough until they came to a place guarded by huge, hissing serpents. Here, the little dark pony instructed Conneda to take pieces of meat from the basket he carried and throw them into the mouths of the serpents. And so they passed safely.

Then they came to a mountain breathing fire, and the little pony leapt over it; but the prince was badly burned, and the pony advised him to use the all-heal from the vial he had taken from his ear, and immediately, the burns disappeared.

And finally they came to a great city surrounded by high walls. It was the city of the King of Lough Erne. The only gate that was visible was flanked by two tall, flaming towers.

'Now,' said the little shaggy pony, 'you must listen to me carefully and do exactly as I say. You must kill me and flay me, and then, when you cover yourself with my skin, you can enter the city safely. But when you have entered, do not forget me, but come back and rid me of the birds of prey that will surely come to feed on my flesh.'

Conneda was horrified. He shook his head vehemently.

'No, my brave little steed, I will never do you any harm, for you have done me nothing but good during all our adventures. I would rather die than harm you.'

The pony pawed the ground impatiently.

'*Pshaw*, Conneda, have I not given you proper advice up until now? Have I not saved you from monsters and brought you safely through fires? I tell you, killing me is the best

thing you can do for me. Indeed if you do not, a terrible fate awaits both of us.'

The pair argued long, with Conneda pleading with tears in his eyes that the little pony would not ask him to do such a terrible thing. But in the end, realising that his companion would not budge from his request, he killed and flayed the little beast, and wearing the skin, and sobbing still with grief and horror at what he had done, he made his way safely into the city. No sooner had he entered, however, than he remembered he must return to save the pony's body from the attacks of carrion crows; so he returned to the gates and scattered the ravens and crows that had gathered to feast. He wept even more when he saw his friend as a red, bloodied corpse and said, 'At least I can use the all-heal to make his body less of a terrible sight, before I bury him safely.'

But no sooner had he touched the pony with the magic ointment than a change took place. There in front of him was a young and handsome man, smiling.

He embraced Conneda and laughed. The prince – for of course he was a prince – then told Conneda his story:

'I am the brother of the King of Lough Erne, the arch-druid. I was placed under enchantment by the druid Fionn Badhna. But Fionn Badhna himself had been placed under a *geas* to let me travel with the prince who was sent on a quest to Lough Erne. By killing me and flaying me, you rid me of my old form, like a butterfly from a chrysalis. This was all foreseen by my sister, the Hag of Lough Corrib, the Henwife who gave instructions to the queen when she asked her how to rid herself of you.'

There was great joy in the city at the return of the unenchanted prince, and the King of Lough Erne told Conneda that he was more than welcome to take away the hound, the horse and the golden apples. So, after a great feast, Conneda made his way back to Cruachan, his father's kingdom, on a fine steed provided by the prince of Lough Erne. There he had the satisfaction of seeing his stepmother throw herself off the top of the tower, mad with rage when she saw Conneda return with the hound, the horse and the apples.

Conneda planted the apples at Cruachan, and they bore golden fruit during his long and happy reign. A courteous and gentle man, he went to thank the Henwife for her help. But she had made her way back to Lough Corrib, bringing her hens and her bushels of wheat with her.

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Lough Neagh.

The Bann and the Lagan

‘*Rivers and the inhabitants of the watery elements are made for wise men to contemplate and for fools to pass by without consideration*.’
Seventeenth-century writer and fisherman Izaak Walton

The Bann and the Lagan, the eastern rivers of Northern Ireland, have always been hard-working rivers, very much used in the service of man. Both have suffered for it. From the time of early industrialisation, when the linen industry polluted sections of the rivers, to the terrible scourge of blue-green algae in Lough Neagh, these two rivers are in desperate need of help to flow freely and cleanly again. They are being given this help by many, but the battle is far from over.

THE BANN

'It is of such an extent that the eye can see no land over it. It appears like a perfect sea, and the shore is broken sand-banks, which look so much like it, that one can hardly believe the water to be fresh.'
Arthur Young, describing Lough Neagh in 1780

The Bann is a river that flows through myth, legend and a sometimes bloody history. But let us begin with the facts. At 129 kilometres, it is the longest river in Northern Ireland. The Bann rises on Slieve Muck, in the beautiful Mourne Mountains, and its source, a small trickle of water in a field, is, like so many other river springs, difficult to find among the plethora of small streams on the mountainside. The river only really becomes the Bann when it flows through the Spelga reservoir, before flowing into Lough Neagh, the largest lake in Ireland.

Of the six rivers that flow into the lake, the Bann is the only one to exit, travelling on from there to the sea. By the time it reaches its estuary at Coleraine, the Bann has become a broad and deep river. Where it flows into the sea at Barmouth, between Castlerock and Portstewart, two seawalls have been built, and Portrush to the east and Portstewart to the west are both well-established holiday towns in the wild and beautiful landscape of the north Antrim coast. This area has close links to Scotland; indeed, it was part of what was at one time a single political and cultural unit, Dal Riada. This closeness to another land mass is perhaps the reason why the Bann valley has such a long history of human settlement, notably at Mount Sandel in Coleraine. Mount Sandel is also

the setting of the legend of the beautiful Craobh, who threw herself into the river here.

Mount Sandel.

While the river is marked by divisions between east and west, Lough Neagh marks another division, between the reaches of the upper Bann and the lower Bann, where it flows from Lough Neagh, and is heavily canalised.

The ‘fishy, fertile Bann’, as sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser called it, was once world famous for its salmon and eels. The river has been fished since Neolithic times when our ancestors made dugout canopies so that they could access deeper waters, and the tradition continued with fishermen using the ‘cotts’, wooden boats with flat bottoms, which were also used in Lough Erne and in many other Irish lakes and rivers. Even along the same river the type of cott used could differ, depending on the river’s depth. Along the Suir, the Carrick cott was flat-bottomed, while at Mooncoin it was keeled.

By the eighteenth century, the Bann was heavily guarded by water bailiffs, who kept meticulous records for their employers, but poaching still continued at a phenomenal rate, even with the threat of eviction, imprisonment and sometimes transportation hanging over the offenders’ heads.

However, it must have been tempting to fish in such a spot. Arthur Young, travelling to Ireland in the late eighteenth century, said the salmon fishing in the Bann was the greatest in the kingdom. Hundreds of fish could be caught in a single net and from the twelfth century, when the Welsh visitor Gerald Cambrensis was writing about the Bann and Lough Neagh, it was said the local fishermen complained not that their catch was small, but that it was so great that it broke the nets.

The origin myth of Lough Neagh, a version of which ends this section, tells the story of a pair of runaway lovers and a magic horse. The name of the lough comes from that of the hero, Eochaidh, a figure who may be related to an ancient horse god of the Celts. It is also the name of the clan who lived in the area, said to be the descendants of Eochaidh. There is another account of the formation of Lough Neagh, which has the hero Fionn taking a huge lump of soil and firing it after a fleeing giant. The lump of earth subsequently became the Isle of Man and the hole Lough Neagh.

I first wrote about the lough over twenty years ago, and even then, the lake was suffering from pollution. In the meantime, the problem has been exacerbated by global warming. As early as the 1980s there was a massive decline in the number of elvers (young eels) travelling to the lough, and sand extraction, agricultural run-off and excessive sewage input have all played their part in the massive algal bloom that has made

large swathes of the lough unfishable and indeed unsafe. Pollutants of various kinds continue to damage the lake, and the problem of blue-green algae poisoning the waters and killing its plant and wildlife is now acute. Lough Neagh is the perfect candidate for this problem because the rivers that flow into it pass through heavily farmed land and it has only one outlet to the sea. Despite the Trojan work of those who care about the rivers and the lake, efforts to combat the problem are moving extremely slowly.

As of the time of writing a mixture of local politics, archaic land ownership and greed has let the build-up continue. In some people's view, it has gone past the tipping point and the lake is almost unredeemable. Reports estimate that even if pollution stopped immediately, it would take at least twenty years for the water to return to a healthy state. The poisonous algae are not confined to the lake but follow the course of the Bann northwards.

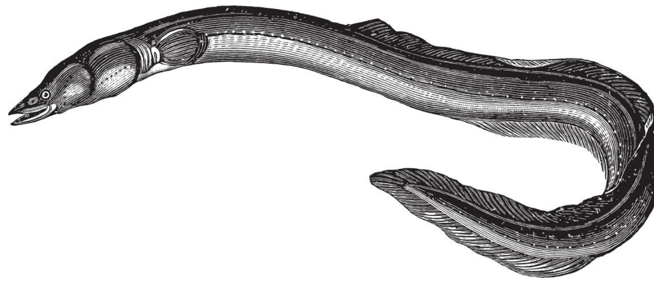
The problem is now affecting the livelihood of families who have fished eels in Lough Neagh for generations. If ever there was a case for a body of water needing legal protection, this is one. What began in legend with horse's urine is in danger of ending up a cesspit in real life.

THE EEL

Eel fishing has provided the means of sustenance for generation after generation of Lough Neagh fishermen. The eel has a chequered history in Irish folktales and legends. Giant eels rose from the water and killed humans. The Bann was reputed to be the home of one such *péist*, called forth by Fionn.

The war goddess, the Mórrigán, took the form of an eel when she tormented Cú Chulainn. There is something strange and unattractive but also magical about eels. There are stories of them feeding on corpses, and they certainly have been known to feed on their own species, but they are also astonishing creatures.

The life cycle of the eel is almost as amazing as that of the salmon. Eels are born in the ocean, and those that live in Irish rivers travel all the way across the Atlantic from the Sargasso Sea, first as larvae and then as tiny transparent glass eels, finding their way via the magnetic field to their freshwater goal. Over time, they change colour to dark brown, although the species that live in Irish lakes and rivers are known as the silver and yellow eel. They spend most of their lives in these rivers and lakes but then, sometimes as a mass migration during autumn storms, return to their birthplace, thousands of kilometres away across the ocean, to spawn and die. Nowadays, their autumn journey back to the Sargasso Sea is often blocked by dams and hydroelectric turbines – in 2021 in the wake of Storm Barra, there was evidence of massive eel kills downstream of Ardnacrusha on the Shannon.



Some species of eel have been known to live for a very long time, even up to a hundred years. They are nocturnal creatures, feeding at night, and capable of sliding over wet grass and mud. Eels can move very quickly, swimming at a rate much faster than most fish, and the fact that they can also travel on wet land may be one of the reasons why so much of the folklore surrounding them has to do with them pursuing humans. The National Folklore Collection contains tales of eels 'flittering' red petticoats and making a nest to fall asleep, stealing men's pants, attempting to kill humans by choking or squeezing them to death, and whistling for the assistance of their mate. They are, interestingly, in light of the importance of horses in the Lough Neagh legend, sometimes said to have been seen wearing horses' collars and breeding in horsehair. Some of them speak as well as whistle. In one story, the eel, while being boiled in a pot, suggests the addition of garlic to the stew and is thrown out by the woman cooking, in terror of this magical creature. Eels have also been identified with the *péist* in stories such as that of St Macreehy of Clare. In other tales, eels are the guardians of sunken treasure.

Eel numbers have declined drastically as global warming increases, but global warming is not the only problem these mysterious, slightly uncanny creatures have to deal with.

Perhaps self-interest will lead to action for Lough Neagh. Ongoing excavation from the quarries on the shores of the lough needs to be stopped, as does the sewage and fertiliser run-off flowing into its rivers and directly into the lough itself. This destruction of the Bann's wildlife is not a new story. In the mid-1700s its thriving freshwater pearl industry went into decline, most likely because of the pollution caused by the bleaching greens which lined the river. Will we never learn? Will we never listen?

The Bann became a resource for industry relatively early. Its valley still holds the remains of many mills and weirs and bleaching greens. As the Cromwellian and Williamite settlements brought colonists to the Bann valley, including a large number of Quakers, the river became a source of prosperity to those who lived hard-working lives along its banks. Many of the finest houses along the course of the Lower Bann were built by residents engaged in the linen trade. The houses remain, though linen production is now almost non-existent in this area. This hugely important part of the history of Northern Ireland will be explored more fully when we look at the Bann's sister river, the Lagan.

Not all the villages founded by the settlers survived. Dunluce, its outlines excavated in 2010, is one of the lost Plantation towns; another is Dungiven. On the Bann, the townland of Movanagher is a further example of these failed hopes.

Movanagher is now known for its canal, its fish farm and its wood; it's no longer a town or even a village. This lost town was founded by the Mercers' Company in the early seventeenth century, but unlike other Plantation towns such as Coleraine, further down the Bann, or Londonderry on the Foyle, it did not survive the inroads made by the dispossessed Irish tribes. It lasted only thirty years. It is one of those places that begs the perennial question – why do some settlements thrive and grow, and others fade and often disappear? Sometimes the reason is obvious: the function of the town or village is superseded by technology, or new forms of transport, or even just fashion; or plague or famine strikes, or some other natural disaster pushes the population to move elsewhere. Sometimes the answer is more complicated.

With Movanagher, the final push came with the Catholic rebellion of 1641, notable for the atrocity of the attacks on the settlers and the fear and panic that ensued. Yet Movanagher seems to have struggled, even in its early days, to attract settlers, and for much of its short history the town had to rely on native Irish for rent and labour. In 1619 three-quarters of the population of the town was Irish rather than English or Scottish. While the area was rich in natural resources – the woods were relentlessly exploited as were the fish of the Bann and animal hides – most material was exported in its raw state. There was little development of industry derived from local resources. Even the mill was not a success as the choice of millstones ruined the grain. The castle/manor house stood uninhabited long before 1641. Mismanagement by the agents used by the Mercers' Company also played a role in the town's lack of growth. These factors probably influenced the decision made by its inhabitants when they took to their boats on the Bann in 1641, fleeing the Irish rebels. They took refuge behind the walls of Coleraine and never went back. The houses in the village itself were burned by the Irish in the spring of 1642, a task made easier by the fact that many of the roofs were of thatch, in defiance of the rules for colonial towns.

One final reason for the town's failure may be tied to the River Bann. Movanagher was built on the 'wrong' side of the river, on the furthest

limit of the lands given to the Mercers' Company, in wooded, hilly country, much of it still under the control of the Gaelic tribes. The town was excavated in 1999, but what remains of the dreams of those settlers, so long ago, now lies quietly under pastureland.

While towns like Movanagher died, other Plantation settlements, such as Coleraine, flourished. It is now a prosperous university town, with a population close to 25,000 and some of the highest house prices in Northern Ireland. Coleraine's history as a desirable place to live goes back a very long time, longer than we can imagine. In the early nineteenth century the first efforts were made to drain the areas around the Bann, and the first discoveries of prehistoric material were made on the banks of the river, which is broad and quiet here. Since then, hundreds of artefacts have been excavated: axe heads, dugout canoes, the remains of eel traps and ritual objects such as the beautiful Bann Disc. People fished, fought and worshipped on the banks of the Bann long before the Christian era.

At Mount Sandel, now the location of an ancient motte and bailey and a leafy river walk through a beautiful forest, items have been discovered that show that the bluff on the riverbank may be one of the first places where people settled in Ireland. The material found at this site includes remains of structures – probably huts – from *c*.7000 BC. It was always a small settlement but, except for the Gwendoline Cave in County Clare, it is traditionally considered to hold the oldest evidence of human habitation in Ireland and the very oldest signs of human building construction. Although more recent finds have challenged this record, there is no doubt as to the incredible antiquity of the site. A large amount of the information on this early settlement is, as always in archaeology, provided by its waste, the riches of the midden. Reindeer and wild boar bones have been identified and large quantities of shells and fishbones, and also the ubiquitous hazelnut shells.

The Bann Disc.

Of a much later date, but equally mysterious, is the bronze Bann Disc. It was found in the river near Coleraine, at Loughan Island, in 1939 and it dates from the first or second century AD. Its domed surface is decorated with four designs, not quite full spirals but beautifully interlinked, three circular swirls around a fourth inner one. The pattern closely resembles the triskel of the Isle of Man and of Brittany. There are small bird heads at the tip of these spirals. The lines swirl like the eddies of a river, or the circling of water in a well or pool. The design also gives the sense of a sinuous sea creature, an eel or sea serpent, and perhaps even a bird in flight. It is possible the swirls symbolise all three: river and bird and fish. The whole disc measures slightly over 10.5 cm.

It has been speculated that the disc was an object used to propitiate the forces of nature that could so casually sweep away human lives. We do not know for sure and can only make connections that may or may not be correct. We do not even know what purpose this beautiful object served, whether simply decorative, made for someone of high status to wear, or if it had a spiritual role. Nor can we say if it was accidentally dropped into the river or given as an offering, to the goddess of the river or the god of the sea. What we do know is that the River Bann is closely linked with a goddess – its very name comes from a source meaning ‘woman god’. The river is under the care of the Great Goddess and its threefold disc may hint at connections to her ancient threefold forms. The Mórrigán, in her form as an eel, seems to link us once again to the Bann, and the Bann disc decoration may also hint at her bird form. Again, we

cannot say for sure. What we can say for sure is that the Bann Disc is one of the highest summits of artistic achievement in Ireland at this time.

Manannán's symbol is the triskel, so perhaps the disc also links us to Manannán and so to the story of Tuag, buried at the mouth of the Bann. The harbour at Barmouth was, before the sea walls were built, notoriously dangerous, with a gravel shoal lying in wait to wreck ships. The water here was a swallower of many men, women and children, ship masts and figureheads and everything on board, from horses to lap dogs, from jewelled diadems to sacks of meal. It is also the site of one of the three Great Waves of Éireann, Tuag's Wave, and it was formerly known as her harbour, *Inbhir Tuag*. Tuag's story reflects the story of one of the other great waves, Tonn Clíodhna (Wave of Cleena), at the other end of the country in Cork. The elements are very similar, that of a young girl in flight, resting and sleeping and being drowned by the waters which rise around her. In Tuag's case, she was taken to the seacoast at the command of Manannán.

And although Manannán could control the waters of the earth – he once made an island rise out of the waves to save a girl from drowning – he was not able to save his beloved. Manannán had fallen in love with Tuag, who was one of the most lovely, most gifted of girls. At fifteen, she outdid her elders in learning, her companions in gentleness and courtesy, and every woman in Ireland in beauty. Manannán thought that she might love him, and wished to bring her to his kingdom, but she was heavily guarded by King Conaire, who wished to keep her for himself.

Manannán sent his musician, Fer Í, to bring Tuag to him. The musician, dressed as a woman, made his way to Tuag's chambers, where he sang so sweetly that she fell asleep. The musician carried her away to the north. He brought her to the mouth of the Bann where Manannán's fleet was to meet him to take her across the waves, but the god was not there.

Had he forgotten, lost interest, found better things to do? Or was taking her deep into the waves a way of having her with him forever?

Fer Í went to try to find a boat, leaving Tuag in a deep enchanted sleep. She did not wake when the waters of the Bann rose and drowned her, carrying her far out to sea, where she became a great wave, one of the three great waves of Ireland. Like the Kennedy sisters of Graiguenamanagh, neither her innocence nor her loveliness saved her.

Like so many others, she succumbed to the power of the magic music, and the sleep that followed made her the perfect victim.

THE LAGAN

'Where Lagan stream sing lullaby.'
'My Lagan Love', song from original poem by Joseph Campbell

There was a time when the fields bordering the lower part of the Lagan were covered with the pale flowers of the flax plant, a blue mist bordering the water, acre after acre of it. But the plant was not grown for its beauty. Flax is the source plant for linen, though it must go through a long and rigorous process to transform into that tough and blindingly white cloth. The history of the linen industry is closely tied to the river, for the Lagan valley was a centre of textile production from the early seventeenth century when waves of settlers came to this part of Ireland. At first, the flax was grown, spun and woven for single homesteads, but as time went on the farmers in the Lagan and Bann valleys began to grow flax commercially. Bleaching greens were established and cloth mills were built. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a strong cottage industry associated with the Lagan valley, even after flax was imported rather than grown and cotton began to compete.

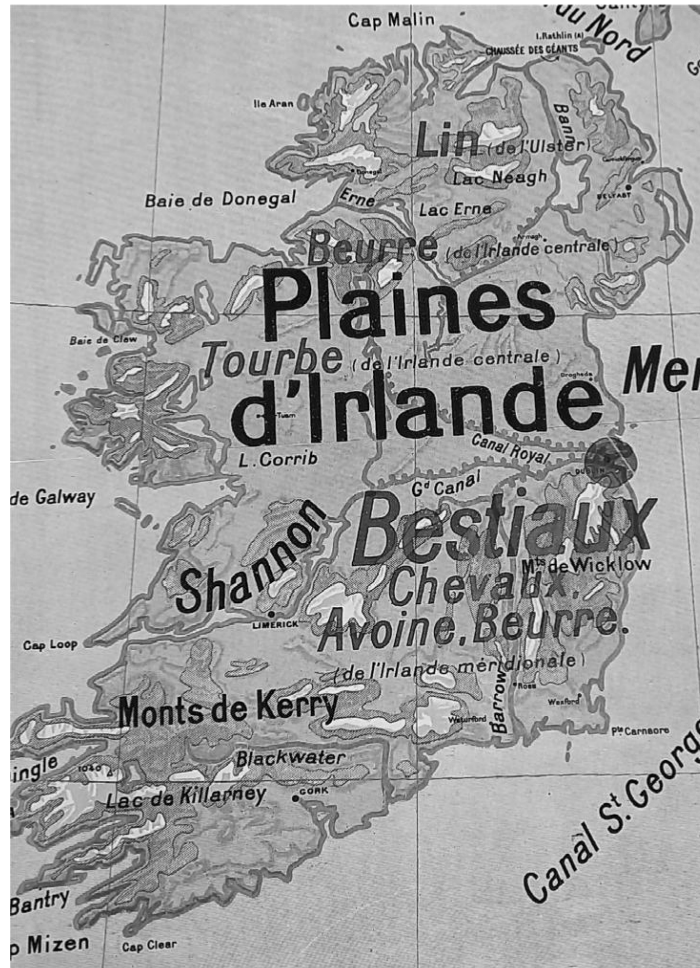
On the River Lagan quayside.

The development of the cloth industry was helped by the arrival of Flemish settlers, the acknowledged masters of the weaving trade, who were actively encouraged to come and settle in the Lurgan area. Quakers were also heavily involved in cloth-making. Like the Bann, there are large numbers of beautiful houses along the Lagan valley, built by people who made their fortune in the various forms of the trade. Mills and factories resulted in the growth of villages based on weaving and other cloth-based industries.

In Moira, outside Belfast, damask weavers, cambric weavers, diaper weavers and spinners are listed in the 1901 census. When the cloth was woven at home, it was gathered up from the cottages by agents for the factories and forwarded to them. Some of the cloth was sent to Scotland for finishing. Glasgow was where the cloth was bleached to whiten it and rid it of the ‘palpable air of the Irish cabin’, but its quality and durability were recognised at an international level. Belfast linen was used for the wings of fighter planes in World War I.

By this time, most of the linen manufacture was based in large factories in Belfast and towns in Northern Ireland. They were huge enterprises, employing thousands. Barbours' Linen Thread Company in Lisburn at one stage had 2,000 staff, many of them women. Women also embroidered the linen, although this was done in the home as a cottage industry. The mills provided employment but in many cases working conditions were dreadful. In the nineteenth century, children as young as nine worked in the mills, their labour valued because of the dexterity of their small fingers.

While it was arguably the most prosperous town in Ireland, Belfast experienced great poverty and terrible problems of health and sanitation, including epidemics of cholera and typhus. The shocking conditions of slum life in Belfast in the 1850s were recorded by the Rev. O'Hanlon, who wrote a series of letters describing the horrific lives of the poor who lived in places such as Sandy Row. Part of the problem was the lack of sanitation. The Blackstaff river, one of the many which flows through the city, was described as a black sewer-like stream, a description which held into the late twentieth century.



Map of Ireland in 1940, showing the importance of the linen industry in Northern Ireland.

Belfast, with its intensive industry, was therefore a city ripe for unionisation and some groups of workers began to organise, seeking better conditions. One such group was the dock workers, for Belfast was also a major port and shipbuilding centre. In the early days of the city, ships could dock as far up the river as High Street, but the dockland area really began to thrive in the nineteenth century and extended over much of the rivers Feirste and Lagan. Change after change was made to the rivers of Belfast over the centuries; the mudflats that had been a feature of the River Blackstaff began to be eradicated in 1937 by the McConnell Weir, while the Lagan Weir began to regulate the tidal flow of the river in 1994. The Lagan, because of its short length and the industrialisation of its hinterland, bears more scars than many rivers.

For hundreds of years, the Lagan has been covered, straightened, blocked and bent into shapes that facilitated profit and enterprise. And profit and enterprise there were in spades. Ropemaking, linen mills, engineering; all prospered in Belfast, so that in the nineteenth century many of its wealthier inhabitants looked with horror at tenement-filled Dublin and shook their heads vigorously at the prospect of Home Rule by the superstitious, Rome-ruled, poverty-stricken and feckless inhabitants of the southern part of Ireland. But times changed. With the decline of the port and of shipbuilding, the dockland area fell into decay.

Looking west and east from the docklands, one has the sense of a small, compact city bounded on one side by a bowl of hills and on the other side by the monolithic buildings of its huge docks. Long neglected, the docklands are now the site of tourist attractions and high-rise buildings. In this part of the city, motorways cut the skyline in horizontal bars, criss-crossing each other in every direction, with the noise and lights of cars adding to the feeling of disorientation. The dockland buildings rear up to vertiginous heights, a vertical escape from the river and the human scale. The river can cope with the verticality but one wonders about the humans, forced away from the huddle of life that previously existed in the small streets of redbrick two-storey houses.

The views of Belfast Lough from above the city are glorious, and there is something viscerally moving about the industrial landscape of the docks and shipyards, now dominated by *Titanic* Belfast, a whole course in history in itself, where one can spend a full day learning about Belfast's shipbuilding and maritime trading past. The *Titanic* is one of the three Ts of Belfast tourism: *Titanic*, *Thrones* (as in the series *Game of Thrones*, filmed to a large extent in Belfast and Northern Ireland) and, sadly, Troubles.

There are other smaller and less well-known corners where the past of Belfast also comes to life. One of these is Sailortown, a place I had never heard of until I started my research into the city.

Nineteenth-century view of Belfast Lough.

Sailortown is located in the northwest of Belfast, on the other side of the river from the *Titanic* Quarter. It is a place where concrete and tarmac cover river and sea, parts of it feeling like a wasteland of dark motorway underpasses, corrugated fences, empty factories, with gaps between them, and the blind eyes of windows with broken glass. Yet, around the corner from these waste areas, you come upon luxury hotels and fashionable restaurants. Money is being invested at a fabulous rate in this part of the city, though some of the facilities such as the high-rise apartments have rents too high for the local population and are used mainly by foreign students.

Sailortown consists of several streets at the heart of this dockland area. Until the middle years of the twentieth century, it was a small but very tight-knit community of mixed Catholics and Protestants, most of whom subsisted on work in local rope, textile and cigarette factories, or casual work on the docks as carters or porters. Men would wander down and look for a day's work loading or unloading the vessels at the port and although it was very hard physical work, a good living could be made. In the 1960s, the introduction of mechanised roll-on roll-off systems meant that this source of income dried up. Then the pressure on traffic in the city gave the authorities the idea of running a road through the Sailortown community. The inhabitants of the streets that made up Sailortown were moved out and never came back, though a faithful few

have worked through the decades to keep the memory of the community alive. St Joseph's Church was the place where Catholics who had grown up in Sailortown came back to reconnect with each other at Sunday Mass, and when the bishop padlocked the church and deconsecrated it, no doubt with plans to sell the building, the congregation broke in, and with the support of the local priest, Father Des, continued to meet and celebrate Mass. Their persistence paid off – the church is now a centre of community events with funding which will help restore it and keep it functioning for many years to come. It was hard and relentless work, and the result is a tribute to the commitment of the local community and community workers. Further developments and investment are in train for these streets, with tentative plans for a footbridge across the river linking the area with the *Titanic* Quarter and bringing the two communities closer, connected rather than divided by the river.

Sailortown bred them tough. There was the usual drunkenness, violence and 'immorality' of large ports – the Sailortowns that are found all over the world. Boxing was popular, both officially and unofficially. Tales abound of hard men who bear a marked similarity to the gangsters of 1940s America. Nearby, Tigertown was the centre of the red-light district. Sinclair Seamen's Church, still standing today, tried to counteract such immorality with sermons from its pulpit, which was made from a ship's prow, exhorting visiting sailors to resist Tigertown's temptations. In its heyday, sailors streamed in from the numerous ships for a night on the town and music poured out from bars such as the Rotterdam and the American. The American is famous for having been visited by U.S. Marines during the World War years. Girls, forbidden by their parents to associate with foreign sailors, sneaked out to the bars and dancehalls, hoping that the smell of tobacco from the cigarette factories where they worked would be masked by their perfume.

Gallaher's was the largest of these factories and the Gallahers girls were so rough that community worker Terry McKeown tells the story of one boy who made sure to travel on a later bus than these girls when he went to work. He could not bear the relentless teasing they gave him. Belfast girls could obviously hold their own with Derry ones. Later, another American, the singer Frank Sinatra, visited the American bar. According to local lore, he wanted to learn a new Irish song and was taught 'The Sash My Father Wore' – the famous song about King

William's victory at the Boyne – by the barmaid there. Other Tigertown bars have become fashionable bistros; one of them retains a souvenir of its former incarnation, a plaque inside the door informing those entering that foul or offensive language will not be tolerated.

Belfast was a city of workers, and work was hard and often not very pleasant, but there was pride in the great traditions of shipbuilding and linen manufacture in the city, and in places like Sailortown there were enough resources for Catholics and Protestants – and even a small group of Italian immigrants – to live together in relative harmony. We have seen other communities broken up by what has been done to rivers; in this case it was not a river but a road which destroyed Sailortown. Belfast is a city where history is imbued in every brick in its wall, at every street corner, with many stories from recent, tragic times.

One sometimes has the feeling that if other towns ignored their rivers, Belfast actively battled with it. The original small settlement of *Béal Feirste* (the mouth of the Feirste) began where the Feirste met the Lagan. There was a ford on a sandbank where there was, it seems, a church, but the city really began to grow when 'lotts' (a defined area of land around the mouth of the river, made available for development) were granted to settlers in the seventeenth century. From the time of the establishment of the Ballast Office in 1785, the aim of the city fathers was to straighten the twisting course of the river so that more ships could dock and more land could be reclaimed. Rivers rush down into Belfast from the Black Mountain and the other hills which encircle the city to the west, but few are in evidence in the city itself – it is a city of hidden waters. The Blackstaff and the Feirste (also known as the Farset) are now culverted and the Feirste flows under High Street, where once ships sailed. Like so much else in the city, its rivers are hidden but never totally suppressed.

View of the city of Belfast from Cave Hill.

Above the city, looking down from Cave Hill, there is a sense of compactness to Belfast, as if a giant had taken a sprawl of human habitation and clenched it tight in his hand. The Irish name, *Beann Mhadagáin*, links it to an ancient chieftain, Madigan, and McArt's fort to the Gaelic dynasty that were once chieftains in the area. The hill is familiarly known as the Sleeping Giant, from its shape, and is said to have inspired the giants in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

In the nineteenth century, it was also the site of Easter celebrations, when the inhabitants of the city would travel up the hill to dance and drink. Rev. O'Hanlon also notes that the inhabitants of Sandy Row, a place of unbelievable poverty and degradation, believed that there were chests of Danish gold hidden in the caves of the hill, and would go up there 'digging in the night' to seek it. But it can be hard to find stories about the ancient sites of Belfast. Even the Giant's Ring, overlooking the Lagan valley near Shaw's Bridge, does not seem to have had any traditions or stories recorded.

When Anne Plumptre visited the area in the early nineteenth century, she saw what she thought was a round tower; in fact one of the mounds seems to have been prosaically used as the base for a bleaching-green watchtower, which indicates that the monument wasn't exactly held in awe. Nonetheless, it is a very impressive site, with its large circular ditch and its henge tomb which reminds me forcibly of C. S. Lewis's Stone Table in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Lewis was a native of Belfast and is much celebrated there.

Upriver from Belfast, the Lagan flows through other towns and sites of dark memories. One of these is the now-closed Maze Prison near Lisburn, where ten hunger strikers died in the 1980s. Close by, there is a much older story of pain and rage, although it is one that finally ends in peace and forgiveness on the banks of another river.

Moira, which we mentioned earlier in connection with its past as a weaving town, is now prosperous-looking and peaceful, but it is reputed to be the site of the Battle of Magh Rath, fought in the seventh century. The battle is notable as it was during the conflict that St Ronan cursed King Suibhne. Suibhne had accosted the saint because the noise of his bell annoyed him. Suibhne threw Ronan's psalter in a lake (where an otter rescued it, unharmed) and he also killed some of the enemy when a truce, brokered by Ronan, was in place. In turn, Ronan cursed Suibhne.

As a result of the curse, Suibhne went mad during the battle, taking flight into the treetops and spending years as a wild man of the forest, until eventually he came to rest on the banks of the Barrow, absolved and made tranquil by St Moling. Close to Moira, huge quantities of human and horse bones were found while excavating for the railway line built in the nineteenth century. Now, there are few traces left of what was recorded as a six-day battle on the 24 June, 637.

Moving further upriver, we search for the source of the Lagan, and we finally come to it on Slieve Croob, the mountain of the hoof, the magnificent views marred in some directions by the presence of transmitters. Here the river is a clear mountain spring. Sometimes it can be hard to hear the music of the Lagan; the river that has been ruthlessly exploited for centuries, dammed and canalised and culverted, its wildlife extinguished. But at last efforts are being made to restore the river to itself; in 1993 salmon began to breed in the river for the first time since 1744. The music of the river is still there, like hidden water, occasionally

surfacing in folk stories and songs. ‘My Lagan Love’ is probably one of the loveliest songs in the Irish traditional repertoire. It sings of romantic love unhindered by anger, by past sorrows.

Where Lagan stream sing lullaby
There blows a lily fair
The twilight gleam is in her eye
The night is on her hair
And like a love-sick lenanshee
She hath my heart in thrall
Nor life I owe, nor liberty
For love is lord of all.

THE HORSE’S TAIL

Our world may not end in fire or ice, but in flood. So many of the ancient myths speak of flood. A memory of tidal waves and ice melt? Or a foreshadowing of the future? In this story of one such flood I have added a small explanation as to how the mermaid Liban might have come into being, for which I hope I will be excused. The tale is told from the point of view of a poor, put-upon steed.

It started with the flight of a guilty couple – Eibhliu and Eochaidh – from an angry husband. The guilty pair pushed me on, further and further north, away from Mairid, the king of the south.

No chance to stop. No chance to make water. My master and friend, Aonghus Óg, should have known better than to send me off with this pair, who can think of nothing but rooting in each other's clothes, even when they are riding on my back. Eochaidh, the great horse master? Excuse me while I snort. He could hardly keep from falling off my back, so intent was he on his love – she who was not only his lady but his stepmother too, his father Mairid's queen. Fair Eibhliu, one of Aonghus's many foster children, for what finer place could a child be fostered in than the great Brú na Bóinne? A student of the God of Love, she certainly knew how to charm, and her wardrobe and jewels weighed a ton. I was in a position to know this as I was carrying all their baggage as well as the pair of them. Their own horses had been killed by Aonghus when they arrived with their followers to his lands on the Boyne, quite without having been invited. In the end, he had loaned me to them, in order to rid himself of them. Their carry-on was too much even for the God of Love.

And a long, weary way I had of it. Their herds and their people trekked after them, far behind.

We came to a green plain where a confluence of rivers joined. Very soon, there would be nowhere else to go unless we took to the waves. I was not planning to swim anywhere. Nor was Eibhliu. 'My love, let us make our home in this place,' she said. 'Look, these rivers seem full of good things and the land is fertile and free of rocks and stones. This shall be our kingdom, my prince, far away from your angry father and the revenge of those we have left behind.'

Left behind? I snorted. *Betrayed, more likely.*

So Eochaidh pulled on the reins, and I came to a standstill where six rivers met.

And at that point the desire to make water overcame me. Aonghus had expressly forbidden the couple to halt in their flight. He had also forbidden them to allow me to void my bladder. Though how he expected me to keep on forever, I do not know. Gods

sometimes set conditions that they know cannot be fulfilled. Why? For the fun of it, or was it to make sure certain things happen?

So my waters began. They flowed and they flowed, and Eibhliu and Eochaidh looked on in horror, until Eibhliu, who was a practical woman as well as a vamp, said to Eochaidh, ‘Let us make a capstone for the spring, or the waters will keep spreading and drown us all.’

So they did, and they built a well-house over it, and they decided to send me back to Aonghus Óg.

But before I was due to depart, someone came to me, a small princess with green eyes and long golden hair. She was holding a red-brown hound close to her. Her name was Liban, daughter of Eochaidh, and she fed me an apple and stroked my nose.

‘You,’ she said, ‘are the most beautiful horse I have ever seen. Do you really have to leave and go back to Brú na Bóinne?’

I nodded and said, ‘That is my home.’

‘Can I go with you, wee horse? I want to see the whole world before I die!’

I was tempted. None of the rest of Eochaidh’s people had bothered to speak to me, and it would be a fit punishment for the man who had stolen his father’s wife that his own daughter in turn should be stolen.

But I said, ‘This place is your home, Princess. But I will place a magic around you, that if ever the well should burst out and flood this plain, you alone will survive. I will breathe into you the gift of living under water.’

Then I blew the magic from my nostrils into her lungs, and I left the morning after.

Of course the day did come when someone forgot to replace the capstone on the well. The waters spread, the people drowned, the city became an underwater kingdom full of floating corpses.

But the girl who had given me a sweet apple survived the death of all her kin, protected, safe in a crystal chamber under her lake, with only her small lap-dog for company.

Liban cried for the loss of her people and also for her father, always so handsome in his crimson cloak (though he had never paid much attention to her, being more concerned with love-making), but after a couple of dozen decades she forgot him, mostly. She grew bored, trapped in her chamber in the lake, and she wished to become a salmon, and for her dog to become an otter. Her wish was granted by the sea-god Manannán, and she was transformed into a mermaid and swam all over the great lough, which was filled to the brim with teeming fish, salmon and trout and eels.

Perhaps she still swims in the waters of the lough, exploring the drowned city of her father, her silver tail a glint of light in the dark waters. There is an ending to this story which says that Liban was caught and there was an argument among the men, clerics and lay people, disputing long as to who had the right to keep her. She was three hundred years old but still as lovely as ever. They say she embraced the god of the clerics and was granted a holy death. Some say she became a saint.

We have all come down in the world during the last few centuries. Aonghus and his kind now hide in the mounds, away from the bells and the chanting, and I have found a small lake of my own, west of the Brú, where I occasionally surface to help out a poor farmer. But only as long as he is kind to me and lets me make water where and when I want.

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The Boyne at Slane.

The Boyne

‘*Frome the bounds of goodly Meath, til the reaches of the sea’s green floor, She is called the Great Silver Yoke, and the White Marrow of Fedlimid … Boand is her general pleasant name*.’
The Metrical Dindshenchas

So we end our journey, sunwise or *deiseal* around the rivers of Ireland, with the royal river, the stately river of the goddess Bóinn. With the Boyne, the problem is not where to end, but where to start. The landscape of what is known as the Bend of the Boyne (*Brú na Bóinne*) is so rich in stories and structures with mystical significance and historical resonance that to focus on any one aspect of these riches is to ignore a dozen others. I have written about the Boyne before, but returning to its banks, the layers of history there seem deeper. The past feels more embedded in the earth of the riverbank and reflects back even more brightly from its shining waters. For so long, this land has had humans on it, fishing in the river, growing crops on its loamy soil, singing songs, chanting their prayers, tending their sheep and cattle and fighting their wars. Telling their stories, the stories which have sunk into the very soil of the place and somehow made it richer. And in turn, the land has grown new stories in its fertile earth.

The valley has had humans living on the bounty of its earth and river for thousands of years: from prehistoric times, through the days of the early Christians to the era of the Norman knights who built the beautiful castles along the river, and on to the centuries that saw the building of great estates, with their bewigged ladies and rakish, gallant bucks. All of these people loved the river, building their dwellings and planting their gardens on its banks. Generation after generation looked at the broad sweep of light reflected in river water and felt that they were somehow made better by being part of this beauty. And surely being seen and acknowledged, surely all that human love pouring out towards the river as the river pours out its waters with endless generosity, surely that reciprocal generosity must have had some effect on both the landscape and the people?

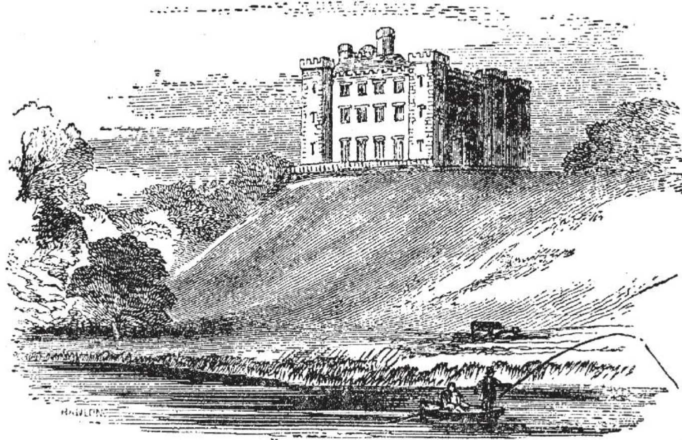
Thankfully, much of the landscape remains the same peaceful green sea of trees and pastures that I first wrote about twenty years ago. The river flows on through it all, seemingly unchanging and serene. Towns such as Trim, with its hugely impressive Norman castle over-looking the Boyne, retain a strong sense of the area’s past history.

However, the Boyne is one of the rivers that is considered to be at risk by the Environmental Protection Agency and the population of the river valley has become increasingly urbanised. This brings with it the familiar

problems of pressure on water supplies and on waste management systems, both closely tied to the health of our rivers. Navan, built by the Normans at the confluence of the Boyne and the Blackwater, has a population which grew from 12,810 in 1996 to 33,886 in 2022. Drogheda, straddling Louth and Meath at the mouth of the Boyne, did not see quite such a dramatic population increase, but it too has grown massively and is considered the largest town – as distinct from city – in the Republic. While the history of Navan is a relatively peaceful one, Drogheda, a Norman town and a staunch defender of the Pale, was sacked by Oliver Cromwell's troops during the Confederate wars and has never forgotten the massacre of its citizens that ensued. It's a town with some lovely medieval features but also, it must be said, some fairly dark and uncared for areas.

Where to begin, then? We could start with the folklore and traditions associated with the Boyne. The folklore of the Boyne area is especially rich, if the records of the Folklore Commission's Schools Project are anything to go by: there are talking sheep, fairy people wearing tall black hats, green lining in their coats and red petticoats, along with enchanted calves and school children turned into cats, dogs, cocks and geese. Horses were swum at Stackallen Bridge during Lúnasa to protect their health in the coming year. A Holy Well on the estate at Slane Castle was reputedly the one where the healer god of the Tuatha Dé Danann brought his wounded comrades to restore their health. The marks of witches' fingers could once be seen on a huge stone on Carrick Hill. Athairne, the satirist encountered in the first story in this book, came to a fiery end on the banks of the Boyne. His house was set on fire by King Conchobar in revenge for his abduction of the beautiful Luain, and he died in the flames, along with his two sons.

Or we could start where the Boyne rises at Trinity Hill near Newberry Hall in Carbury in Kildare and starts its peaceful journey northwards. Close by the hill traditionally known as Sídh Neachtain is the home of Nuada Neacht, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann. The monuments of Brú na Bóinne are so closely associated with it that many people forget that the Boyne rises in Kildare, and in its early course acts as a boundary between that county and Offaly. It then flows northeast through County Meath and enters the Irish Sea between the counties of Meath and Louth.



Slane Castle.

But the best place to start is always with a story. This is the story of Boann (Bóinn), whose name denotes her status as the cow goddess, who visited the sacred well of Nechtan with her little dog, Dabilla. As she looked into the darkness of the well, seeking wisdom, the waters welled up and drowned her. Sometimes the well is called Connla's Well, sometimes the Well of Segais. Segais is also another name for Boann in the texts, so she herself can be seen as the cause of her immersion. In some versions of the story, her hand and eye and foot are lost, and it is in order to 'escape the blemish' that she races to the sea, bringing the water from the well with her. In others, she is carried away by the flood but she also becomes the flood itself. Her faithful dog was carried along with her as the torrent travelled eastwards, and eventually, they reached the sea. The dog was transformed into a rock at the shore of the river as Boann became part of the sea.

This mouth of the Boyne, *Inbhear Colpa*, is one of the places where it is said that the last of the mythical invasions of Ireland took place. The Milesians, the people of Mil, landed here and fought the Tuatha Dé Danann for sovereignty. Their origins are various, depending on which account you read: they are from Scythia, they are descendants of Noah, they come from Galicia in Spain. Mil first landed at a place close to Kenmare in Kerry, but the invaders, initially repelled by the Tuatha Dé Danann, took to their boats and continued northward around the coast, crossing the northern tip of Ireland and heading south again to the Boyne estuary. The inlet is given the name of one of the invading princes, Colptha.

Boann herself figures as the goddess who mates with the Dagda to give birth to the young god associated with love and lovers, Aonghus Óg. She is a cow goddess, with hints of a connection to the planet Venus and the Milky Way, and the Boyne valley was a worthy kingdom for her.

Brú na Bóinne is the home of a wealth of structures, some, such as the passage tomb at Newgrange, as old as five thousand years, some dating from the Bronze Age. The tombs at Knowth and Dowth are part of the same elaborate complex, as are the scattered remains of numerous much smaller graves. The buildings are carefully located within the landscape and the sites bear a specific relationship to one another. They are also orientated towards the different positions of the sun at various times of the year. The famous light box at Newgrange allows light through into the inner burial chamber only at the time of the winter solstice. These lightcatchers are built close to the river goddess; its banks form a cradle for the river and for its monuments. According to the Dindshenchas, the early Irish text on the lore of places, the Brú is the 'bright wonder of the world', and it is a fitting tribute. Even after the passage tomb culture was no more, the area remained a focus of sacred ritual, right up to the time of the high kings. The god Aonghus consorted with the dead here and in his sleep his beloved appeared to him in the form of a swan.

Later, in the semi-historical period, the great King Cormac was placed on a boat to be brought to the tombs of his ancestors at the Brú. The river refused to carry his body there. Three times the river rose up, pushing the vessel backwards, so that the king was eventually buried at Rosnaree, on the southern bank of the river. The traditional interpretation of the story is that Cormac, a Christian, did not wish to be buried with his pagan ancestors. But another possible interpretation is that they did not want him to be buried with them, and the river agreed.

Cormac was killed through the magic of the druids, who made him choke on the bone of a salmon, and the salmon is the mystical fish of the Boyne. The fish is central to what is probably the most famous Boyne legend of them all. In this story, it was on the banks of the Boyne that the hero Fionn, then a young boy, gained his *imbas,* the powerful knowledge he could access by sucking his thumb. Fionn was the servant and student of a wise man, Finnegas, who had lived for years by a particular pool in the Boyne, patiently waiting in the hope of catching a magical salmon, who fed on the nuts of wisdom dropped from the hazel trees that

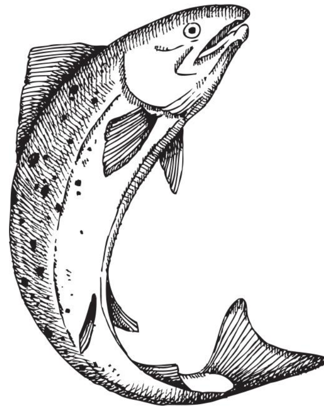
surrounded Connla's Well. One day Fionn catches the fish and Finnegas instructs him to cook it, but on no account to eat any of it. Fionn obeys, but when he burns his thumb on the skin of the fish he puts it in his mouth and gains all the knowledge embodied in the fish. So he, rather than Finnegas, becomes the seer.

THE SALMON

Salmon still inhabit most Irish rivers, and they are the central figure in any number of myths. Unlike dogs and deer, no ordinary humans are transformed into salmon, only the very wise. The Salmon of Knowledge swam in the well of Connla/Segais and ate the red berries or nuts which fell from the nine hazels of wisdom that grew over it and thus became a literal embodiment of the knowledge they contained. This myth bears some resemblance to the Genesis story of the Tree of Knowledge, but here the acquisition of knowledge is not a sin, but something that happens for the good of the tribe. The transgressor becomes a seer and a hero, like Fionn, or like Boann and Sinann, a stream of clear knowledge that fertilises the very land of Ireland with the waters of a newly minted river.

The folklore surrounding the salmon includes the fish that live in holy wells but also stories of communities cursed by irascible saints such as Colmcille and Patrick who were refused a share of a cooking salmon, and in revenge cursed the river so that salmon could no longer swim in it.

The veneration of this fish is not just an Irish phenomenon. International myth and folklore celebrate the salmon. The Scandinavian god Loki took the form of a salmon, and the fish is venerated by communities ranging from the Native peoples of America and Canada to the Japanese Hokkaido.



The iconic power of the salmon may well be linked to the mystery of its life cycle, a cycle that begins in the high mountain streams, the source of our rivers. This is where the female salmon lays her eggs, in channels made in the gravel. After a period of spawning and transformation, the salmon makes its way downstream to the ocean. The fish becomes its familiar silver colour. Somewhere between one and three years of age, the salmon makes its phenomenal voyage across the ocean to the North Atlantic. There, the salmon spends one or two years feeding and then makes the long journey home.

The homing instinct of the salmon is still a mystery, though it may involve using the earth's magnetic field as a location tool, with water conducting electricity. The pheromones

released by their fellow salmon in the river of their birth may also play a part in guiding the salmon home. We still do not truly know the ways of the salmon, but we do know that it is the fish that knows our rivers best, from source to sea.

The salmon leap of the returning fish, now creatures of incredible strength and determination, gives the fish its name, *salire*, to leap. Cú Chulainn was famous for his ability to leap the walls of fortresses, and this feat was called his Salmon Leap.

These leaping fish are a far cry from the diseased and weakened creatures that are the product of many of today's fish farms, where intensive farming has resulted in parasitic plagues such as sea lice. Escapees from salmon farms have been responsible for mass mortalities of wild salmon. Salmon have also been the victims of the massive fish kills that are the result of agricultural, industrial and urban wastewater spillages. There has been an average of forty fish kills a year in Ireland since 1969. The salmon, while not quite an endangered species in Ireland, is certainly far from safe. During the first twenty years of the twenty-first century, salmon stock in Ireland declined by 80%. Part of this is due to the international problems of global warming, making the seas too warm for the salmon to feed, but the state of Ireland's rivers also plays a part, with agricultural runoff and wastewater poisoning the fish. The barriers created by weirs and dams and sluices prevent salmon from returning to spawn and increase the chance of disease in overcrowded conditions. Huge efforts are being made to try to counteract these threats to this iconic fish, with numerous national and international organisations fighting for its survival. The legendary blessing wishing the recipient *Sláinte brádan* – the health of the salmon – may yet be saved from becoming an ironic comment on a dying species.

The Boyne was the scene of many battles, from the bewitched King Muircheartach fighting the stones and ferns of Cletty to one of the most decisive battles of the Williamite wars, a battle still celebrated by Ulster Unionists on the twelfth of July. The site of what is called the Battle of the Boyne is just south of the border. There were a number of battles on the river; this key one was fought in 1690. There was once a monument here commemorating the victory, but it was blown up in 1923 and never replaced. There is, however, an interpretive centre at the lovely eighteenth-century Oldbridge House.

In Unionist iconography, the monarch is traditionally portrayed crossing the river victorious on a white horse, his sword raised high. The crossing of the Boyne has always held heavy symbolism. It was the border between the ancient kingdoms of Meath and Ulster and in the tale of Eithne, whose story will be told later, the Boyne is the border between this world and the world of the Tuatha Dé Danann. One of the accounts of the death of Fionn says that he was killed while trying to leap across the river. His body was found by some men out fishing, and his head was taken back to their house, where it was placed by the fire while they cooked the fish they had caught. The head spoke, demanding its portion

of the catch. Is this strange story somehow linked to Fionn's original getting of wisdom as a young boy, when he ate the Boyne salmon?

In the story of Fionn's death at the river, we catch a glimpse of the darker side of our river goddess. Death and the river are a combined theme in folklore; it is said that the Boyne takes three lives every year. In one rather horrific description, part of the National Folklore Collection, a red man, dressed in a winding sheet, rises up out of the water when someone is going to drown. The Washer at the Ford also prophesies death, appearing as the war goddess Mórrigán foretelling the death of the hero Cú Chulainn in the early sagas and as late as the fourteenth century predicting the death of the Norman knight Richard De Clare when she is seen washing his armour on the banks of the River Fergus in County Clare.

The Boyne is a place of illumination as well as darkness. We have seen how it was the home of the Salmon of Knowledge. Every seven years in the middle of June, the bubbles of *imbas forba* could be seen on the surface of the Boyne, sometimes taking the form of a mass of hazelnuts floating upriver. As we have seen in her story, *imbas forba* was the deep knowledge that Sinann, and that all poets longed for, going through complicated rituals in order to access it. And the Boyne has continued to be a river of inspiration. Numerous poets have written about the river, from the time of the Dindshenchas, the lore of places, through to that of sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser, on to more recent writers such as John Deane and Richard Murphy.

The Boyne was traditionally the place where Christianity confronted the ancient religions of Ireland. On Slane Hill, near the pretty village of Slane – called after the Firbolg King Sláingne – St Patrick, having made his way up the Boyne from Inbhear Colptha on his mission to convert the Irish, took on the might of the high king when he lit an Easter fire. This was in defiance of the law that no one should light a fire on this hill but the high king himself. He then made his way to Tara to confront King Laoghaire. He and his followers took the form of a herd of deer in order to avoid capture and death on the way.

This is why the prayer-poem 'St Patrick's Breastplate' is known as 'The Deer's Cry'. Later, the Boyne and its tributaries became the site of many religious foundations, including Bective Abbey and Mellifont

Abbey on the River Mattock, Dervorgilla's last resting place. Both are now ruined but still beautiful souvenirs of Ireland's monastic past.

THE FOSTER CHILD OF AONGHUS

Riverbanks are the essence of a liminal space. Crossing a river can be an act of crossing between two worlds. And crossing between two worlds can be very dangerous indeed. Women of the Sídh fetch humans away, including young men like Connla, a prince lured from his mortal life by an apple, or they come to the human world to make mischief, like Bécuma.

When they try to follow their lover to the human world it rarely ends well, as the tales of Cliona and Ruad teach us; and when a human girl is abducted by the gods things don't work out too well for her either, as in the case of poor, drowned Tuag. But of all these otherworldly crossings, the saddest of these tales is that of Eithne, the foster child of Aonghus of the Boyne. The story is a far more ancient one than the similar story of Oisín, and it is a reversal of it, for here it is not the human that is taken to Tír na nÓg, but the girl of the Sídh that is exiled to our world. But like the Oisín story, it tells of the way our lives can become divided by living in two

places. It holds echoes of traditional mermaid stories – the loss of the cloak prevents a return to the world of home – but there is a very Christian gloss to it. Christianity wins a soul at the end of the story, but for me the tale's emotional power lies not in this but in the plaintive voices of the Sídh, calling for the comrade who is lost to them, unreachable on the other bank of the Boyne.

'Riders of the Sídhe'.

There was a faint scent of apple blossom in the air. There are no apple trees growing on this part of the riverbank. She came out from under the low hazels, shaking off drops of water that shone in the sunlight. A blackbird called out, startled. Ceasan, his robe hooked up to his waist and up to his knees in the river, frowned. He did not like this rustling and the splashing, the birds telling each other secrets that he could not understand. He was a very holy man. He would have preferred his hermitage to be in some arid, silent place, not in this green world, so full of life and movement and whispers, so wet with the soft early rain. There was so much he did not want to see or hear.

He didn't want to see her either.

She was naked. Naked and beautiful, like a demon sent to tempt him. He turned his eyes to the opposite riverbank, staring at the last of the primroses and the first purple spears of the bluebells, the curling, golden fern.

But she was weeping and shivering in the cold dawn wind. She came towards him through the water, as cautiously as a deer.

At heart, Ceasan was a kind man. He took off his cloak and held it out to her. She took it quickly, his smelly, tattered cloak, and smiled at him as if he had presented her with a golden gown.

'What is the matter, girl?'

She shook her head as if she could not find words. Even in the cloak, she was still shaking.

'I was swimming, and the river took my cloak away. And now I have lost my companions. I cannot see them and they cannot see me.'

So then Ceasan knew that she was one of the Sídh, and had lost her *féth fíada*, her cloak of invisibility. She was stranded in our world and exiled from her own, that world of the other side of the river, the Sídh palaces of Brú na Bóinne.

She was one of those others, unsaved, inhuman. Soulless.

But still a creature in need.

'Come,' he said briskly. 'Come back with me and I will give you clothing and shelter. And breakfast. I have been fishing but I am afraid I have not had very much luck. But there is watercress and honey and nuts in my cell. My name is Ceasan.'

'I will help you,' she said and gave a low whistle, and a salmon jumped out of the river and into her arms, silver-backed, shining. She said gently:

'Thank you, we will value what you give us of yourself.'

Then she looked at Ceasan and smiled again.

This time he smiled back.

He brought her to his cell, a pleasant place with a walled garden where he had grown fruit trees and vegetables and kept some beehives. As they ate their simple meal she told him her story.

'I am the foster child of Aonghus, Lord of Brú na Bóinne, and the bondwoman of Curcóg, who is one of the daughters of the great lord Manannán. My name is Eithne and I lived the happiest of lives. I knew no evil nor trouble.'

Eithne paused and looked north over towards the river.

'There was a day when a visitor came to the palace, a young man. He humiliated me before everyone, with an insult I could not forget. After that, my guardian demon deserted me, took flight from my body.'

Ceasan frowned, for he did not know what she meant.

'Each of the Sídh has a demon, a guardian spirit inside us that guides us through our lives. For us to lose it is like a death. Afterwards, I could not eat or drink. Those who loved me were anxious, but even to please them I could put nothing in my mouth. In the end, they found that I could drink only the milk of a white cow from India. I lived on that, until today, when I was swimming in the river and I lost my cloak in the waters. Now I will never get back to my world. I will never see my people again. I have lost all that I love and I am alone. I do not know what to do.'

They sat in silence. Then the girl said:

'May I stay here with you? I know that you will not harm me. I will help you find food and perhaps you could teach me about your gods, for I have surely lost my own.'

Ceasan hesitated. If anyone found him sharing his solitude with a young and lovely girl, he would lose his reputation as a holy man, despite his age and her youth.

He stood up.

'We had better build you a bothy, so,' he said.

They built a bothy for Eithne and Ceasan started to teach her how to read, filling her head full of the stories of the Bible. In turn, Eithne told Ceasan the stories of the Sídh. Tales of their battles and loves and feasts, of their music and their dancing and their lives of pure pleasure.

Ceasan listened, for he could find no evil in those tales of beauty and courage. As he taught her to read and pray, she taught him how to sit quietly and look, look and see the young birds in the branches, the beasts of the forest, the fish in the waters. Eithne showed him that they meant him no harm with their rustlings and calls. Word got around the forest

that the clearing had become a place where wild creatures were welcome. It became a place full of life.

But there were other times, times when Eithne went to the riverbank and wept and crooned, lonely for Curcóg, for Manannán, for her kind foster father. Times when she looked across the water as if straining to see the host of the Sídh. And sometimes a whirlwind would pass over and she would draw in her breath sharply, and for a moment there would be hope in her eyes. But then the wind would be gone, leaving nothing more than the scent of apple blossom.

Ceasan did not notice how little she ate and how her body grew thinner and thinner so that her beauty was almost gone. Then one day, on the eve of Mayday, as they made their way down to the banks of the Boyne to fish, she stopped and looked upward, as if listening. Every bird in the forest stopped singing.

'Can't you hear it?' she whispered. 'It is a host of the Sídh. I can hear them, I can hear their voices calling me to come home! They are here to bring me back! They are just on the other side, just across the river. Aonghus and Manannán and my sister Curcóg – all of them are there. I have to go to them! I have to see them!'

She was in the river now, moving further and further into its depths. She began talking and gesticulating to the invisible host. Beyond the noise of the river's flow, there was the sound of horns and timpans and the low, sweet voice of a great lord.

'Eithne, come to us! Your home is here with us!'

'Eithne,' Ceasan called. 'Come back! Your place is here, with the true God.'

His voice was panicked.

A long time it continued, that parley. Ceasan could almost see her fading into that twilight world. He called and called again, each time more urgently.

'Eithne, come back, you cannot leave me!'

And then she sighed. She turned and came back across the Boyne, back to Ceasan and to his Lord. Her face was covered in tears. Even Ceasan, though he had won a great victory for his God, though he had kept her with him, could not rejoice. He could see that her heart and soul had been torn into pieces by the choice she had made.

She was quieter after that and spent more time than ever alone on the banks of the river, only coming back to the cell when Ceasan rang the small bell for prayers. And then one bright dawn, he found her on the riverbank. Her hair and her face were wet with dew and her eyes closed as if dreaming. When he saw her lying there he fell to his knees and shook her, but he could not wake her. The river flowed on, and on the other side, there was the shadow of riders, richly garbed, magnificent in their beauty. The great lord Aonghus came so close that the hermit could hear his voice, singing a lament for the lost one.

Ceasan could not bear to listen and went back to his cell and his prayers.

* * *

It is high summer by the green banks of the Boyne in Slane. The liquid voices of the birds and the murmur of the water seem to be trying to tell me something. The rivers I have explored in this book have shared so many stories with me, and travelling along their courses I have discovered many hidden treasures of natural and human beauty. To follow a river, whether by land or water, is to become immersed in its river-story, each new landscape unfolding its own part of the saga until it

reaches the sea. Along the way, I have learned that while we can never step twice in the same river, like the salmon, we carry the river inside us, always looking to it to lead us home.

Here, in Slane this feeling is exceptionally strong. Slane was the home of the young poet Francis Ledwidge, who was killed at Ypres in July 1917. A soldier victim of World War I, Ledwidge wrote to his friend, Katharine Tynan:

> *I am always homesick. I hear the roads calling, and the hills, and the rivers wondering where I am.*

Does the river miss its poets, as Ledwidge claimed? Does it remember them? Does it remember the people who fought and cried and made love on its banks, their sorrows and their joys? Does it remember the trout, the herons, the swans? Or does the river forget, remember, forget, re-remember, disremember? Or perhaps, does each part of its life, from voiceless pearl mussels to restless humans, do some of its remembering for it, as each creature becomes an element in this endless flow of forgetting and remembering, the river's long life-story, a story that predates humanity by unimaginable millenia?

And among the pike and the pearl mussels, the otters and the eels and the kingfishers, what part will we humans play in the story of these shining waters?

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Web Resources

This is only a small selection of the websites which were consulted during the writing of Where the Waters Flow. *There are many sites devoted to particular aspects of rivers and the creatures who depend on them and on ecology in Ireland – far too many to list. Some websites come and go, so I have concentrated on the ones that contain the greatest number of resources used and that are likely to continue to operate.*

www.celt.ucc.ie (Celtic Studies, original sources)
www.duchas.ie (Folklore and the Schools' Collection)
www.dri.ie (Images)
www.epa.ie (Environmental information, including *Water Quality Indicator Report* 2023/240)
www.iho.ie (Historic maps)
www.dib.ie (*Dictionary of Irish Biographies*)
www.maryjones.us/ctexts/ (Celtic Studies, original sources)
www.catchments.ie (Rivers)
www.archive.org (Out-of-print material)
www.dias.ie (Celtic Studies)
www.jstor.org (Journal Articles)

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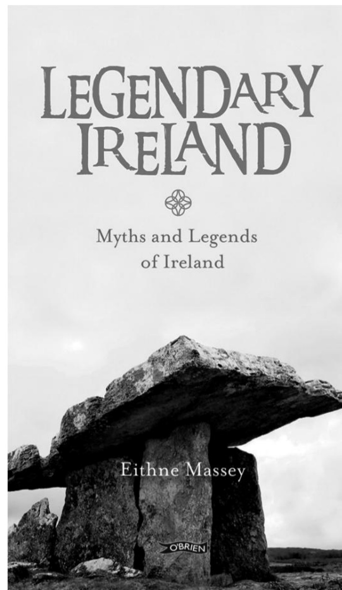

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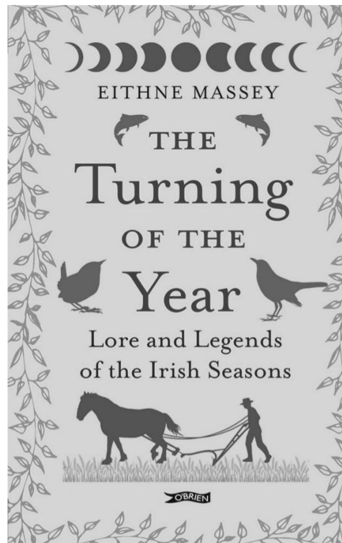

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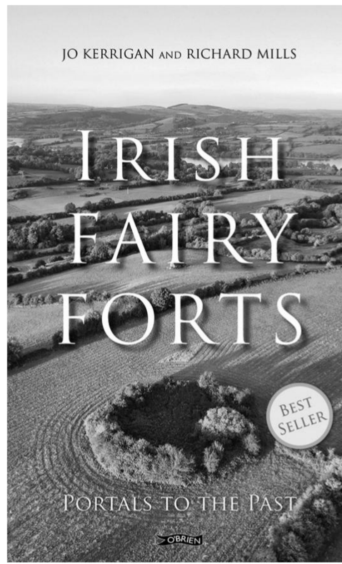

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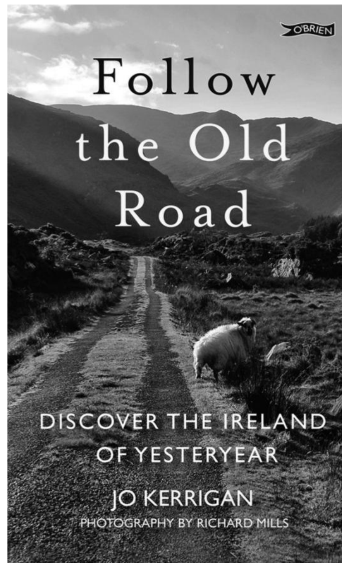

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About the Author

EITHNE MASSEY has had a lifelong love of the beautiful landscape of her native Ireland, with its history, lore and legend. *Where the Waters Flow* grew from a particular fascination with the living, ever-moving inland waters of Ireland. Eithne's lyrical books include a perennial bookshop favourite, *Legendary Ireland*, in print since 2003 and published in many countries worldwide. She is also the author of *The Turning of the Year: Lore and Legends of the Irish Seasons* and has written numerous books of Irish myths and legends for children, among them the beautiful and popular children's picture books *Best-Loved Irish Legends, Legends of the Cliffs of Moher*, and *Legends: Newgrange, Tara and the Boyne Valley*. Her numerous novels for young readers include the award-winning *Blood Brother, Swan Sister*, along with *The Silver Stag of Bunratty, Where the Stones Sing*, *Michael Collins: Hero and Rebel*, and her adaptation of the award-winning animated Cartoon Saloon movie *The Secret of Kells*.

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