

A Flock of Words
Explorations of the Irish Sea

by

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Published by the University of Wales
Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies
Aberystwyth

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ISBN 978-1-907029-37-0

Printed in Wales by Y Lolfa, Talybont



Ports, Past and Present
Calafoirt, Inniu agus Inné
Porthladdoedd, Ddoe a Heddiw

To learn more about the project visit portspastpresent.eu

The Ports, Past and Present project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund through the Ireland Wales Cooperation programme.



Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd Prifysgol Cymru
University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies

Preface

The writings gathered here were the result of various journeys made in and between Wales and Ireland as part of a commission for the European-funded project *Ports, Past and Present*. Many of them became part of a larger book, *The Turning Tide: A Biography of the Irish Sea* (Harper Collins: 2023), and these appear here by kind permission of the publishers.

Ports, Past and Present focuses on the five port towns which still run ferry services between Ireland and Wales: Pembroke Dock, Rosslare Harbour, Fishguard, Dublin Port and Holyhead. It envisages the Irish Sea not as a space which separates our two countries, but a rich and storied heritage, full of journeys and connections. During the course of the project, researchers from the University of Cork, the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth University and Wexford County Council worked with the port communities to bring the past to life through stories, films, apps, and twelve creative commissions.

In these vivid and engaging pieces Jon Gower evokes other types of journeys—the passages of birds, homing, migratory, or blown off course. Here, birds act as guides into unseen and hidden cultures, or to links with the past, from the dazzling stench of guano once collected at Grassholm, to the lovely litany of bird-names in Yola, the lost language of the Wexford area, or the rowdy arrival of ravenous Brent geese on the greens and pitches of Dublin housing estates.

This selection of Jon's work has been edited and designed by Mary-Ann Constantine, Martin Crampin and Elizabeth Edwards at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies.



Introduction

The Irish Sea is a place blessed with an abundant natural history, from the gargantuan blue whales which occasionally pass through its waters to the tiny plankton, present in such numbers that they account for much of the other marine richness hereabouts.

The rarest sea bird in Europe, the elegant roseate tern visits its coasts in summer while the rarest goose, the Greenland white-fronted goose wings in during winter. So, it is perhaps no accident that the ports which connect with this sea area are close to some rather wonderful wildlife sites. I have been lucky enough to visit them all, and I can attest that one's sense of wonder, and of privilege in sharing this world with nature, only deepens on such occasions.

In the case of Dublin, huge flocks of Brent geese have now taken to feeding in the city, mowing the grass of city parks and tidying the verges of housing estates or, at daybreak or day's end, flying in V-formation over its rooftops as they fly in and out of their night-time roosts. Even as you enter Rosslare Harbour you might sight black guillemots but only a short distance away are some of the most important tern nesting areas in Ireland, a wild whirl of wings and banshee-screeching in high summer. Holyhead, meanwhile, is only an uphill stroll away from the ranks of guillemots and brightly coloured puffins at South Stack, while the Pembrokeshire ports of Pembroke Dock and Fishguard take ferry passengers across stretches of sea which can sometimes teem with birds, such as gannets from the island of Grassholm which plunge-dive from a height to spearfish their silvery prey.

Hopefully, by reading these accounts of what's to be seen, and often pretty easily seen, you might set out to explore some of these very special places for yourself.

Jon Gower, March 2023

A Charting

Knowing precisely where you are stops you being all at sea, so let's take our bearings together. As you hold a book open the two sides are not dissimilar to a ship's hold, carrying a cargo of information, maybe a little ballast but certainly a weight of stories. The spine of the book is perhaps the keel, gently cradled in your palms, as if in dry dock. And, staying with the conceit, reading a book is very often a journey, although this one is far from a straight line. For the sea is unpredictable, diverting and bounteous in its gifts and signals. We will thither and hither, sometimes loop back, sometimes make the same passage from port to port two or even three times, or veer around sharp rocks, or lose sight of the lighthouse. But we will get there. I know where we're going. If the weather allows and the tides prevail.



A Tumult of Tempests

James Joyce, with his penchant for portmanteau words and neologisms—often banging two words together like a ship's blacksmith to create something new—would have had fun whipping up a verbal storm. The man who gave us 'the sea, the snotgreen sea, the scrotumtightening sea' crossed the Irish sea pretty often, once to meet W. B. Yeats near Euston in London in a rare meeting of poetic minds. So Joyce might have served up some whipwinds and churnwinds, galeblasts and blastgales—the latter blowing in the opposite direction of course. There'd be agitbroths of spumewhite and blastornado hellwinds setting off all the wild bells keening in the rigging. Oh, had he but glorytime enough to madpen such stuff!

Claire Connolly has suggested that 'one way of writing about the Irish Sea was to deny its roughness, as if to refute the suggestion that Ireland was not ready for incorporation into empire, a "strange country" resistant to improvement and exploitation.'¹ Such a defensive formulation began to emerge in the seventeenth-century, even as Cromwell's body started to churn up the sea.' The earliest natural history of Ireland by the Dutch physician Gerard Boate appeared in 1672. It has a chapter calmly, or calmly, entitled 'The Irish Sea not so tempestuous as it is bruited to be'. In this he was flying in the face of the opinion of the inveterate map-maker John Speed, who appraised the Irish Sea as one 'whose rage with such vehemency beateth against her bankes, that it is thought and said, some quantity of the Land hath been swallowed up by those Seas'. He wasn't alone in such a view. The Pembrokeshire historian George Owen backed up Speed's assessment when he maintained that the unyielding, land-eroding sea off Pembroke was 'dealeinge so unkindely with this poore Countrey as that it doth not in any where seeme to yeld to the lande in anye parte, but in everye corner thereof eateth upp parte of the mayne.'



Boate, who hadn't actually visited Ireland before he wrote his natural history, nevertheless felt expert enough to investigate 'the Nature of the Irish Sea, and of the Tides which go in it,' averring that 'that part of the Irish sea which divideth Ireland from Great Britain, is very much defamed both by ancient and modern writers, in regard of its boysterousness and tempestuousness, as if it were more subject to storms and raging weather than any other, and consequently not to be passed without very great danger.'

Boate goes on to challenge the wisdom of a proverb that suggests that something may be as 'as unquiet as the Irish Sea' by marshalling historical evidence that 'the Irish sea is quiet enough, except when by high winds it is stirred, so as not only in the summer, but even in the midst of winter people do pass it to and fro [...] True it is that some ships do perish upon this, but the same happeneth also upon other seas, who are all subject to the disaster of tempests and shipwracks.'

Such writing wasn't just natural history, it was also propaganda: it appeared at a time when attempts were being made to lure adventurers, planters and investors to settle in Ireland, and so promising calm passage and easy two-way access was an essential component of the colonial project. It's the same sort of flagrant abuse of advertising standards that had parched areas of Patagonia being described as lush with shoulder-high grass when attempting to attract Welsh settlers to move there in the middle of the nineteenth century.

¹ Claire Connolly, 'Too rough for verse? Sea crossings in Irish Culture', in J. Leerssen, (ed.) *Parnell and his Times*, (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Dublin's Urban Geese

Daybreak reveals Dublin Bay. I've caught the 130 bus from the city centre with local guide and bird enthusiast Niall Keogh, and we're off to find out why Dublin is not only the capital of Ireland but also of urban brent geese.

The pale-breasted sub-species has white underparts, unlike the dark-breasted race, seen in Britain, which has slate-grey underparts. *Branta* comes from the same linguistic root as 'burned', and there is something of that about the brent, with its charcoal-black neck and bill and matching wingtips. In the case of pale-bellied brents the black of the neck ends abruptly at the top of the bird's breast. It may seem numerous to the good people of Dublin but it's considered to be one of the most endangered species of goose in the world.

As geese go, they are not the silent type, and their guttural calls, taken collectively, can make for a low-pitched babble. Up close, it's a sound not dissimilar to heavy breathing, which probably accounts for one of its Scots names, *ratgas*—snoring goose, derived from the Norse. But this goose is a multi-vocalist, able to produce an evocative murmur as it drifts across marsh or sea-edge. At short range it can also generate a deafening clamour to the extent that an observer, or rather a listener, once compared them with a pack of hounds in full cry, although that might have been a bit of hunter's hyperbole. Niall agrees that it's not that good an analogy, suggesting it's more of a croaky yodel. Listening to the fly-past I suggest we amend that to 'quietly croaking yodel', and soon we're like two sommeliers of sound, replacing 'yodel' with 'gurgle' and then qualifying that to 'liquid gurgle' before jumbling them all up in various permutations. A Joycean quietly croaking liquid gurgle-yodel. Then Niall helpfully thinks of something new to add to the mix, pointing out that the full Latin name for the species ends in *hrota*, denoting the sub-species, *Branta bernicla hrota*, possibly suggesting that might be the sound of the bird as well. So, here we are, comparing the finer notes of goose call as they gurgle and honk above us.

The dispersing birds, now dwindled in number, fly so close that we can see the charcoal necks and heads of these mallard-sized geese and note the distinctive white neck patches. They will have been here since August and early September, when they wing in to places such as this. Bull Island has long been a favoured location: it is also the first designated bird sanctuary



in Ireland. It was so classified by the minister for justice in 1931, in great part due to relentless championing by Father Patrick Kennedy, a Jesuit priest and teacher from Belvedere College in Dublin. He argued that 'Birds know the difference between a man with a gun and a man with a pair of field glasses; where there is no shooting they are not easily frightened.'

To get to the safety of their winter haunts these small dark geese have certainly racked up the air miles, leaving the wild wildernesses of northern, Arctic Canada, arrowing over Iceland, and gathering groups from Greenland as they go. Many of them stop to feed in large estuaries such as Strangford Lough and Lough Foyle after they arrive on the island of Ireland, before dispersing further afield, many then heading for Dublin.

For Niall there is a special excitement that belongs to the arrival of the brents: 'It's the opposite side of the year to the first swallows, when people remark that seeing them heralds in a new season. We may lament the loss of summer but one of the things you can certainly enjoy about the winter is the arrival of the brents. In Dublin they're so obvious and there are so many of them that they are clear indicators of the change of season.' Niall thinks that Dubliners have adapted to brents in the same way that brents have adapted to Dubliners. 'Many locals incorrectly call them Canadian geese—not to be

confused with the Canada goose—because they know they’ve come from Canada and many people feel very proud of them. Some of them take on the role of unofficial goose warden, or brent goose vigilante, and you’ll see them giving out—telling people off—should they leave their dogs go after them or get too near the birds on their bikes.’

Another aspect of local pride in the birds can be found in the fact that the Killbarrack Coast Community Programme—which helps drug users in recovery—has adopted the brent goose as its logo. When President of Ireland Mary McAleese visited the scheme in April 2003 she cited the example of brent geese looking after injured members of the flock and suggested this community-led scheme to help those who have become involved with heavy drugs was very similar.



Dublin Dockers

Dublin has been a centre for the sea-trades since 841, when the Vikings built their *longphort*, a defensible dock in what is now the Wood Quay area. In medieval times it was a busy hub of North Atlantic commerce, but it wasn't always an easy port to navigate. Silts brought down by the rivers Dodder and Liffey settled on sandy beds to create what could be dangerous shallows, while the habit of emptying ballast into the bay led to the emergence and consolidation of two huge sand humps called the South Bull and the North Bull. In 1707 an Act of Parliament allowed the city of Dublin to create a Ballast Office, and gave it powers over the conservation of the port, thus giving birth to Dublin Port as a legal entity. The sand bar that had made life very difficult for captains was soon scoured away after the construction of the Bull Wall, initially drawn by a Captain William Bligh—he of 'Mutiny on the Bounty' fame.

In the early days the sailors disgorged the cargo themselves but over the years, as sail gave way to steam, the need to turn ships around more quickly led to new specialisms and the birth of the Dublin Docker. Previously, men called 'hobblers' would row out to ships from various parts of the city to settle on a price for their work before much of the work moved onshore. Offloading work remained casual for a very long time, awarded on a whim or as a favour, and therefore never guaranteed. In 1947 a system of giving lapel buttons to men gave them preference when it came to jobs. A man might inherit his father's button after he retired, or became too ill to work, so it was a way of keeping work in the family, as it were.

One way of dealing with the dockside inequities, when men might only get work by offering bribes to a foreman, was to stick together. Tight-knit docker communities made up the 'Real Dublin'. Ringsend and City Quay on the Southside and the area around Sheriff Street on the Northside—these were areas where family ties and a sense of belonging were strong. But men still had to work for a range of stevedores, with all the attendant uncertainties, until Dublin Cargo Handling was created in 1982 and became the only stevedore outfit allowed to work the deep-sea section of the port.

The dockers who were lucky enough to be picked for work divided into two specialisms: those who worked the cross-channel ships, plying the routes between Dublin and Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, London and other British ports; and the deep-sea dockers, who handled cargo from further afield and exported goods such as cattle and leather, peat, colts, porter and Irish larch. Handling livestock attracted extra payments for the dockers. In one famous photograph they're seen winching an adult elephant onto the quayside; on another occasion they had to handle a tiger bound for Dublin Zoo — mercifully secured behind bars, its long incisors glistening at the prospect of fresh dockers' fingers hors d'oeuvres.

As with all such docklands there was much more than safe harbourage. There were shipyards where vessels were built and repaired. There were flour mills and fertiliser companies, coal heaps and cattle pens. Five glassworks operated in the Ringsend area alone, one manufacturing bottles to hold the increasingly popular Guinness stout. The brewery was located a mile up-river at St James's Gate, near where the Vikings built the original Dublin settlement. Back down along the quays, the Guinness family moored ships for decades, to deliver barrels of stout to Great Britain and beyond. Indeed, one of these vessels, the *M.V. Miranda Guinness* was converted into the one of world's first beer tankers, with a capacity of 205,000 gallons, or 1.87 million pints—a stout vessel indeed.



Holyhead: An Island Thrice Over

Just before first light at Holyhead and Newry Beach is a still Whistler painting, the sea a dove-grey wash. Sedately, a Stena Line ferry slides into view, its lights making of it a fairy castle, seemingly drifting between dimensions. The light on the breakwater rhymes quietly with the bright pulse of the lighthouse on the rocks of the Skerries, 7 miles north-east and burning much stronger today than when it was first lit in 1716. Then it was nothing more than a big coal fire kept burning in a conical grate. The two lights flash into the widening light: a visual Morse code spelling danger, beware. The Skerries flashes every fifteen seconds, visible for 20 miles. The Breakwater flashes green every ten. Meanwhile murky Whistler is replaced by bright Mondrian, Dayglo colours threading through the brightening sky—tangerine, candyfloss pinks, pale apricot amid deep indigo.

The sound increases, too. On the big roads into town lorries clatter in, air-braking near the Edinburgh Castle pub as they choose their lanes for the next sailing to Dublin. They're heading home to depots all over Ireland: Tierney International from Dunkerrin, County Offaly; Hannon Transport from Blakes Cross; Caffrey from Coolfore and Nolan Transport from New Ross in their smart red and white livery. Technically, and to my mind romantically, they are all on the E22 road, which stretches all the way from Dublin via Holyhead to Moscow and then eastwards to Ishim in western Siberia.

Holyhead, the 'holy headland', lies on Holy Island, which is situated in the north-west of the island of Anglesey, and is thus an island three times over, being an island off the island of Anglesey, off the isle of Britain. The historic heart of the town is compact to a fault and overlooks the port with its cranes and the dominating height of the enormous *MPI Resolution*, looking like a gargantuan oil rig. It is actually the world's first purpose-built vessel for installing off-shore wind turbines, currently at dock in Holyhead. Its six 200-ft legs are used to raise itself out of the sea when installing the turbines, and it has the impressive capacity to carry no fewer than ten at a time. It's much taller than the town's buildings. I stare down at it from the low cliff on which St Cybi's church is situated—a neat medieval building, dedicated to St Cybi and rimmed by the walls of a Roman fortlet. Next to it is the square box of Eglwys y Bedd, Church of the Grave. The grave in question is reputedly that of an Irish leader called Sirigi who was killed in Holyhead by the Welsh leader Caswallon Law Hir. Although the historical evidence



for this deadly encounter is scant, the alternative name for Eglwys y Bedd is Capel Llan y Gwyddel, which means 'Chapel of the Irishman's enclosure'.

The town itself is backed by the dramatic summit of bare rock known as Mynydd Tŵr or Holyhead Mountain, itself only a brisk walk from the stunning cliffs at South Stack with its dramatic lighthouse setting and, in summer, teeming colonies of auks. An early traveller, Askew Roberts, noted in his *Gossiping Guide to Wales* (1882) how 'the sea in S.W. gales often dashes over the dwellings of the lightkeepers, when the scene is truly sublime [...] No-one, by order of Government, is allowed to shoot the sea birds, as in foggy weather they are invaluable to steamers and shipping, being instantly attracted round a vessel, or induced to fly up screaming, by the firing of a gun.' The sea birds at South Stack constitute a superb spectacle in any weather, with 11,000 guillemots arrayed on the ledges in high summer, when pairs guard their single bright blue egg set precariously on mere inches of jutting ledge.

In the water the adult guillemots are superb divers, often plumbing depths of 70 metres on a single breath before high-speed chasing their prey of sprat and sand eel. The adult birds read the sea supremely well, seeing variations in colour on its surface which tell them where the currents speed up and where there are upwellings, as these are the places where the fish are often most easily found.

Fishguard and the 'Last Invasion of Britain'

It's hard to imagine it as the scene of a historic military incursion. Carreg Wastad Point, a rocky lip of land with a dolmen, a megalithic tomb, sat atop, a couple of miles out of the town of Fishguard. It overlooks what is today the aquamarine bowl of Aberfelin Bay and is set within a quietly quilted land, shot through with cadmium yellow threads of gorse. They, in turn, bind together a tight patchwork of fields belonging to old farms such as Bristgarn, Tre Howel and Pontiago. Stand on this hump of rock and you can see the frayed edges of this landscape-tapestry—the other promontories and fingers of rock that reach out to the sea along this busily serrated coastline: Carn Helen, Trwyn Llwyd, Y Globa Fawr, Capel Degan and the intriguingly named Maen Jaspis. Who was Jaspis that he should have a rock named after him?



Today the wind is quietly sibilant, whispering through the thin grasses, only the electric chirp of swallows interrupting the sougling lilt of the gentle south westerly. The little hirundines zip along like tight, blue bullets, keeping low to the ground as they trawl insects into their small gapes. A raven passes overhead, its cry a hoarse kronk like that of a heavy smoker.

To underline the utter peacefulness of the place you can approach it from Llanwnda, where the ancient well has recently been cleaned up, and the watercress runs in a stone-built channel recently unchoked of weeds. It's such a special place, this, one of those liminal spaces where the line or veil of separation between the physical world and another is impossibly thin, or even rent asunder. Pause awhile at the well as I did and you'll soon be quite pleasantly unsettled by the palpable sense of the past taking hold. Or maybe it's something else. Alastair Moffat certainly got the specialness of the place when he visited, remarking in *The Sea Kingdoms* how the dolmen at Llanwnda 'looks as though it is a door to the underworld which stands permanently ajar. And, indeed, that may have been what the makers intended. The Celts believed that holy wells were portals to the Otherworld, and if they lifted their heads to look up the hill at Carreg Wastad, they may have seen another way in.' It's certainly a place where, as Moffat avers, the old gods seem very close.

Llanwnda and the Carreg Wastad all seems too peaceful and undisturbedly ancient for the setting of an invasion, but the same cliffs where fulmars wheel today on stiff wings once had French soldiers scaling them, an invading force hell bent on destabilising Britain. This wasn't war as noises off. They saw and heard the guns here. Soldiers added blurts of scarlet tunic to the dark gorse green of the land. There's a simple rocky monument erected during the centenary of the landing that crowns the hump of hill as if to prove it all actually happened. This edge of land was the unexpected backdrop to 'The Last Invasion of Britain' which still sends ripples of excitement through gossipy local history. Despite the local naysayers of Nayland, the sceptics of Solva and the doubters of Dale. Invasion! Yes. At this Pembrokeshire version of Finisterre, of Land's End. Yes, here. Just imagine.



At Land's Edge

Finisterre, diwedd y tir, the end of land,
Land's edge, the very rim of it,
Splinters into the sea

This battered coast,
Hammered by the end winds of the
Hurricane season
As September plays out its drama.
Here come the gales
The Atlantic artillery of rain coming in
That spray the rooftops with
Beads of lead,
Heavy water indeed.

There was once a storm so bad that
Gerald of Wales
That Norman observer
Saw villagers go out picking fish the morning after
Off the thorns of the blackthorn,
Off the hedges be damned, now that's what I call a storm,
They picked fish, off the cliff-edge blackthorn
Shrunken like bonsai
By the prevailing south westerlies
Blackthorns
That had snagged them like hooks
Fish on the hedges
Cod on the rocks.

This filigree of geology
Called the coast
Etched by millennia of waves and wind
Into a variegated tapestry
Shaped by storm and spume,
Ebb and flow
Wind toss and channel surge



Look, there's Tri-Maen-Trai
Three rocks of the tide
Glistening like green weed
A wild hairstyle to drape over the wild skulls of geology
The backbones of granite
The sunset faces of
Old Red Sandstone

Listen to the baptismal names
Of coves and crags, caves and islets
Naming them is a litany, a sure sense of benediction
The ones who were here before, leaving their names behind.

Pen Capel Degan	Plumstone Mountain
Carreg y Wrach	Spittal Cross
Y Globa Fawr	Rosemary Hill
Carreg Wastad Point	Wolfsdale Hill
Carreg Coffin	Goodwick Moor
Carreg Tomas	Cow and Calf
Penrhyn Ychen	Crincoed Point
Penrhyn Mawrth	Esgyrn Wood
Ynys Meicel	Langton Farm
Aber Hywel	Bigney
Pen Brush	Ashdale
Pen Daudraeth	Abercastle
Carregwastad	Saddle Point

Castle Point

Somebody named them all, sung the land into being,
The old ones, the ones who were here before.

At Strumble Head the choughs caw and lift
Like scraps of burnt paper bonfired into the thin air
Their calls cut through the rice paper skies
Of the seascape behind
As the lighthouse glints
And the gorse seeds pop

Time runs slowly here
The days stretching before you
Like pizza dough
The river insistent but not rushing
The Gwaun heading in little coruscating waves
For Allt y Dryll and Lower Town
To add its tricklings to the sea
At Fishguard Bay

With its showers of spearing gannets
Their wide wings as white as formal shirts.
And the black flick of shearwaters
Their wings turning on a sixpence.

The sun goes down on Fishguard
At land's end
This Finisterre,
At day's end, as the light fades,
The weakening sun a pearl, suspended

And then, quietly, a lone herring gull
Scythes over the breakwater
As a ferry leaves for another country

The sound of evening
Softening, softening

Until it is the whispering sweep of a gull's wings
Drifting as it flies
After the wake
Of a small boat
Drifting out to open water.
There it goes.



Wexford Birds in Yola

The naming of birds in the Wexford area is fascinating. The local Wexford dialect, known as “Forth and Bargy”, or “Yola”, had alternative names for many birds, and listing them is a delightful process.

The red-throated diver was a *far outer*, while its relative the great northern diver was a *say lamb* or *loon*. The little grebe, sometimes known as a dabchick, was known in Wexford as a *dipchick*. Some of the commoner water-birds had their own litany of names so that the grey heron was *cauchees*, *cawchee*, *granny*, *granny goose*, *granny cureask*, *ganny gureask*, and *crane*. Confusingly, not only were Brent geese known as *bernicle*, but the barnacle was also known by the same name. Wigeon too had a local name, the *whinnard*, while a mallard might be known as *duuks*, *digger*, or *dig*, while a teal became a *tail*. The same is true in Welsh, where a familiar bird, such

as the pied wagtail, so closely associated with farming, has a string of names longer than its own tail. So, on a stretch of coast such as Wexford’s, where the cormorants are common, the bird has been variously baptised as *black diver*, *black shag*, *black hag*, *frole*, and the lovely *cawmurl*. But the loveliest name of all, perhaps, is the collective term for small waders such as sanderling, dunlin, and turnstone, all known as *sea mice*, which one can imagine

scurrying along the shoreline. The list goes on. A lapwing’s names, strung together, are a found poem: *laupeen*, *lapeen*, *peewee*, *Philip-a-wee*, *Phillip-o-week* and *green plover*. The jack snipe, which is smaller than a snipe, is therefore in Yola a *half snipe*, though it’s not quite that small. That elegant wader, the whimbrel, which arrives in Ireland in May is the *Maybird*, while the wood pigeon’s names are a little triad of great variety—*quest*, *woodquest*, *coolor*, which carries within it a soft echo of its soft, persistent cooing. A lovely, lovely name.



Seabird bedlam at Lady's Island and Rosslare

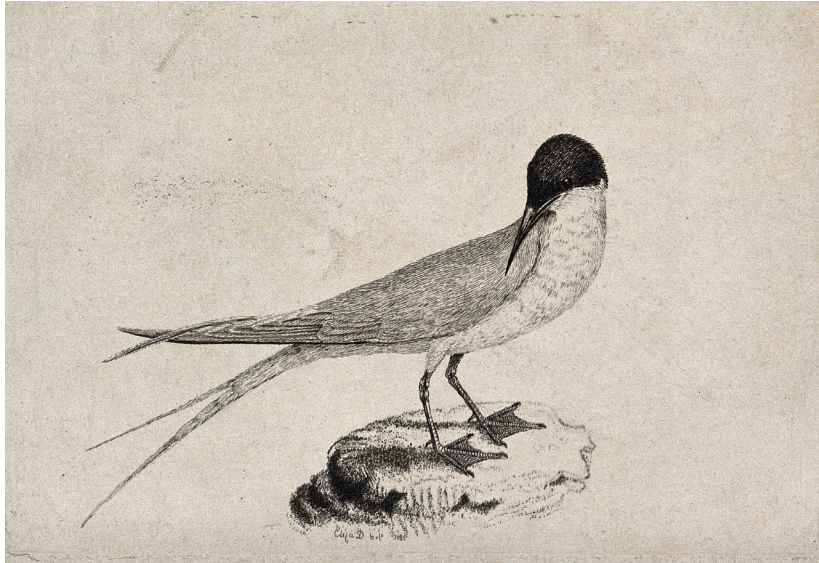
A tern colony in high summer is a seabird bedlam, a screeching cacophony as birds fly madly back and forth to feed, or scythe back to their nests with shivering silver bounty. Lady's Island Lake in County Wexford is the largest tern colony in Ireland, which means the decibel level is raucously high.

There is a noisy roseate tern phenomenon known as 'gakkerer'. Threatening each other by crouching down with body and tail elevated, the roseates raise their back feathers and pump their heads up and down in unison, emitting loud, guttural, cackling calls. At the ternery all of these loud sounds meld and jumble, the shrieks marrying with the chatter, the crackling cries, the swooping sounds. The cries are present, too, in the names for terns found in the now defunct Yola dialect, a mix of Anglo-Saxon with borrowings from Irish and French: 'Skirr', 'Skers', 'Sherawee' and 'Skeerane'.

The tern mayhem at Lady's Island Lake is a mere sherawee's swoop away from the busy Europort at Rosslare. Here a naturalist arriving in Ireland might well enjoy the sight of black guillemots that nest in the harbour walls. They are unusual for County Wexford because its coast is generally soft and therefore unsuitable for the species. Sadly, the population of this very sedentary species has fallen here in recent years, and is now down to four or five pairs. They are very handsome birds, with black plumage the colour of pitch along with white flashes pure as a nun's whimple. It's a striking mix, especially if you happen to see the bright scarlet of the bird's gape as well, the colour of Boots No. 7 lipstick.

One of the other inhabitants of the harbour is less conspicuous but no less interesting. The Irish stoat is attracted here because any port infrastructure is synonymous with rats. This inquisitive and ferocious muscelid is a sub-species found only in Ireland and likes nothing better than a fine rat supper. With extra rat. I keep my eyes peeled as I cycle up the hill towards Kilrane but know that I would be fortunate indeed to see one, although one doubts if one could get close enough to note the neurasthenic smile of the Hollywood killer.





All of the principal harbours around the Irish Sea happen to be very close to superb nature sites, and thus many wildlife experiences are very easily accessible. How accessible? Well, thinking of my own experience, an overweight man in his early sixties who has two kinds of arthritis, I can easily go by bicycle from the Rosslare Europort to Lady's Island in just over half an hour. You pedal quiet country lanes out to the sandbanks near the great vanes of the windfarm at Carnsore point. These separate the brackish lagoon from the sea and, sitting there, I had the whole, long stretch of beach all to myself. On the shingle I watched black and red Burnet Moths feeding on the lavender-coloured flowering heads of sea holly and small squadrons of cormorant which seemed to come in threes, flying in trident formation.

We know that the tern colony here is especially important because of the roseate tern. Why? Well, this primarily tropical species is the rarest seabird in Europe, and this is one of the best places to see them in Ireland. Breeding birds skitter over the barrier beach to feed and plunge-dive along the southern shore around Carnsore Point, trailing their long tail streamers. The birds feed in open clear water on small schooling fish, diving as deep as 1.2 metres and staying submerged for as long as two seconds. Sandeels form 60–92 per cent of the bird's diet on Lady's Island, with sprat and herring

also featuring prominently, along with very small amounts of pollack and snaithe. Inish Island, one of two little islets set in Lady's Island Lake, is the second largest colony of roseates in Britain and Ireland, and is host to important numbers of sandwich, common, and a few Arctic terns.

It's worth dwelling a moment on the last of these. The Arctic tern is a bird that sees more daylight than any other, as it can breed as far north as the Arctic circle and then migrate to the longer light of the south polar summer in the Antarctic Ocean. Conservative estimates of the journey reckon on its being 40,000 km a year. As one bird can live three decades it can travel the equivalent of three round-trips to the moon in its lifetime, all the more remarkable when one considers that this small bird weighs little more than a garden blackbird.

The roseate is easily confused with common and Arctic terns, but it can be distinguished by its black bill, which goes red at the base for a few weeks in mid-summer, and by its enormously long tail streamers. The overall whiteness of the bird also makes it stand out a tad. That said, you do need to be a skilled birder to spot a roseate. When the bird is seen at a distance the pink breast does not show up all that markedly: it's a faint shell-pink or peachy bloom on the underparts. Think old red wine stain washed out of a starched white shirt and you'll have a fair sense of it. It makes one think that an appropriate collective noun for the species would be a blush, yes a blush of roseate terns.



A Frenzy of Shipbuilding at Pembroke Dock

In Sir Edwin Landseer's 1864 painting *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, two sleekly muscular polar bears face off against each other either side of what looks like a jagged piece of iceberg. One of the animals, its huge paws splayed out to give stability and extra strength, is tearing at a piece of a flag, the red ensign, which resembles a big ribbon of flesh. The other bear has just snapped off a bone from a meat-stripped rib cage, which it is raising aloft, trophy-like, between its massive incisors. Between the two powerful animals lies the mast of a ship, its sails ragged and reddened. There are other scraps and shards of rigging scattered about, along with a mariner's brass telescope. This is nature red in tooth and claw, the drama playing out against dark tones of ice.

The ship in question is the ironclad icebreaker HMS *Erebus*, one of hundreds built in Pembroke Dock. It, along with its sister vessel the HMS *Terror*, was smothered by the very ice they were meant to break. The *Erebus* undertook not one but two of the most ambitious naval expeditions of all time. During the first she ventured further south than any ship had ever been. The second was a voyage to find the Northwest Passage, which proved to be her doom: she vanished in the wastes of Arctic Canada along with 129 members of crew, including those of her sister vessel.

No fewer than 260 ships were built in Pembroke Dock over the course of 112 years, including HMS *Erebus*. It took two years to build her; she was a special kind of warship known as a bomb vessel, able to carry mortars that could hurl shells high over coastal defences—very much in keeping with her classical name, a sower of destruction, a bringer of havoc. The yards of Pembroke Dock were almost built in nearby Milford, where a man called Charles Francis Greville established a private shipyard to take advantage of the Navy's urgent need for new vessels in light of the Revolutionary Wars in France. A contract was issued to build three ships there, even though it was a long way from any source of timber. In other ways, too, Milford didn't make sense, but it may also be that the developers had influential friends. Horatio, Lord Nelson visited the town on the last leg of his triumphant tour of Wales, and stayed in a hotel that is still named after him. As he was in a ménage à trois with Emma Hamilton and her cuckold of a husband, he might well have done some high-level lobbying of the Navy Board, and this trip to Milford could have helped consolidate matters.

Charles Greville passed away while the Navy Board was in the process of buying the Milford yard. The Board found one 6 miles upriver. The site, at a place called Pater, had both the physical features and water access they needed, although the necessary labour wasn't available locally. A decommissioned frigate, the *Lapwing*, was beached deliberately as a temporary accommodation for workers. Without further ado, work started in earnest, and the Pater Dockyard, later renamed the Pembroke Dockyard, was established in 1814. Orders were placed for the construction of seventy-four-gun battleship, and four frigates, and honoured even after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in June 1815, which meant a smaller navy would be required. The willingness of the Navy Board to spend money in a seemingly cavalier manner was curious in the extreme. It took the work away from Milford, too, and the last ship to be built there, the *Rochefort*, was launched in April 1814.

To supply the necessary manpower, some men had to row over from Milford to Pater, 6 miles away. Conditions when they got there were far from comfortable. Shipwrights and carpenters might have to splash around up to their waists in muddy water, only shielded from the rain and wind by drapes of sack or wraps of ship's canvas hung over their shoulders as they were pelted by the small artillery of Atlantic rain. In February 1816 the first ships to be constructed there, two 28-gun frigates, the *Ariadne* and the *Valorous*, slipped into the water for their maiden voyages. The *Ariadne* became the last sea command of Captain Frederick Marryat, famous for children's novels such as *Midshipman Easy* and *Masterman Ready*, which drew on his experiences at sea during the Napoleonic Wars.

With the work pouring in, the shipyards at Pembroke Dock expanded at a lick. The eastern section of the yards was added and Royal Marines were drafted in to guard the establishment, living in an old wooden ship called the *Dragon*, which was dragged up onto a shingle bank nearby. The first houses in the town, on Front Street, were initially occupied by officials such as storemen and shipwrights. Living conditions there were less than salubrious, with streets such as Pigs Parade earning this swinish sobriquet because the shacks and sheds were squalid in the extreme. But house construction proceeded apace and soon there was a public house, too, the first of many: in its heyday the town would have no fewer than 200 pubs to slake the thirst of thousands of workers. Houses accreted around the twelve-foot-thick dockyard walls, streets arrayed like ribcages around the beating, clanging heart of the town, the shipyard.

Great wanderers: Skokholm's storm petrels

I have spent memorable evenings on Skokholm Island, catching storm petrels in the safe pockets of mist nets (fine mesh, almost invisible) whilst listening to the tiny purr of the nesting birds in their underground burrows. I've used recordings of the birds to attract birds to be caught, and it's a technique that has revealed nesting sites in stone walls, rock cavities and small burrows in soft ground on islands which they had not previously been known to inhabit. Under cover of night the small birds flew around us, invisibly soot-black against a background of moonless sky – soft bullets, dark hurtles, feathery breaths. Tiny whooshes in all directions: incoming whispers.

Storm petrels are great wanderers and they have habit of visiting other colonies or prospecting new ones, so there is often traffic between Skokholm and Bardsey, from Skokholm to Irishtearaght, and from the Channel Islands and Brittany to west Wales. They are rather sparsely distributed in the southern Irish Sea but are more numerous south of St George's Channel and out into the Bristol Channel and especially in the Celtic Sea frontal region south-west of The Smalls, where they often associate with common dolphins. The old quarry on Skokholm is a prime location to find them.

The Irish name for storm petrels is *garr úisc*, *garr* being short for *garrcach*, or fledgling, and *úisc* meaning grease, animal oil or fat. This tiny bird, the same size as a house sparrow, has to carry a lot of energy supply with it as it flies and patters across wide oceans, and does so in the form of oil and fat deposits, which plump up its body.

If a bird is killed the body can no longer store the oil and it is released into its digestive tract. So a petrel's corpse, duly threaded through with a tarred wick, became a macabre candle, the light coming out almost as a last breath from its clogged windpipe. It's interesting that one of the folk traditions of Wales is the *cannwyll corff*, the corpse candle, being a spectral candle that appears in the window of a house in which someone has recently died. Like a greased fledgling, lit in remembrance.



Shearwater Islands: past and present

When I was a teenager, I spent many nights on Ynys Enlli (Bardsey) catching shearwaters to be ringed, or to recapture ones that had previously been caught to see how they had grown and check the condition of their plumage. But there was one problem. One of the only defence mechanisms the Manx shearwater has when it's waddling on land is to spray fish oil out of the tubes above its bill at anything that comes within range. Harmless enough to a human, you might say, even if a tad unsalubrious and smelly. But this was the ultra-hot summer of 1976, months characterised by drought, so that each day one of the things you would see was the nun who lived on the island keeping the holy wells open by digging down with a tool that looked like something used in World War I. There certainly wasn't enough water to bathe or shower that summer, and so being sprayed with the equivalent of a syringe full of cod liver oil each and every night did put one in a pickle.

You could swim in the sea, certainly, but there was no bath, shower or washing machine. Gradually I began to smell like a recently beached jellyfish before the aroma intensified to eau de deceased cetacean, the stench deepening so that my skin gave off the tang of sun-baked bladderwrack, overlaid with notes of rotten dogfish. When I finally left the island at summer's end – I wanted to stay for ever and put up a fight against returning to full-time education – I caught the train from Pwllheli to Aberystwyth, a two-carriage affair which was all the more full because it stopped at the ginormous Butlins Holiday camp along the way. Plastic bucket bearing holidaymakers squeezed in like anchovies in a tin but by some unholy miracle I ended up with a carriage all to myself, travelling like some young potentate on his own royal train. It was only at journey's end, when my brother Alun picked me up in the car and then had to get out pretty damn quick to be sick, that I realised just how pungent I'd become. The romance of shearwaters, eh? Needless to say the journey back to south Wales seemed to him to last a century, and despite all the windows being open I gave him a horrible fug for company, being the very epitome of ocean rot, an experience like riding shotgun with a dead dolphin.

My most recent experience of shearwaters was more salubrious. I was staying in the lighthouse on Skokholm, which is set in the middle of what might be the most densely packed shearwater colony on earth. The stroboscope of light strafed the low heath perforated with thousands of burrows. The illuminated, incoming shearwaters might have been Macbeth's witches, screaming as they tumbled towards the safety of their holes. There was the silent film-flicker of their disembodied wings, caught in my torchlight, as they whirred overhead like big, wildly displaced nightjars.

On such rare nights I am content to a fault and profoundly so. When I am with *my* birds.



Urban Geese

With metronome beats they wing in,
The Brent geese of Dublin Bay,
Racking up the air miles
Veering over Arctic Canada,
Slicing across Iceland,
Gathering groups from Greenland
To graze all winter
On the greens of the city.

There they are, intent as lawn mowers
At the junction of Alfie Byrne
And Clontarf Roads
Birds of the Bay come inland.

Branta bernicla, their Latin name,
Sauntering the Santry banks
As they do the northern tundra,
Where foxes pelts run white, not red
Like the traffic lights
At Doyle's Corner.

Ineffably beautiful Brents
Plump as turkeys outside
Chanel college in Coolock
Notable from their pale bellies, the Irish kind
Not the dark ones that visit British shores.

There they go, lifting up from
The night-time roosts at Bull Island
Veering to disperse:
Heading for Macauley Park, near the bus stop.

Roaming the new estates at Red Arches Avenue
Hoovering the turf at Foxfield Green
But giving the AstroTurf of Donnybrook,
Short shrift, leaving it to the rugby studs,
Choosing, rather, to give

A short back and sides
To park land at Malahide
With the blunt razors of their bills.

For garden birds, we build bird tables
Put out niger seeds to charm the goldfinch
Place peanuts in nets to ensnare siskins
Spread out old apples for blackbirds
To hole precisely
With the yellow drills of their beaks.

So, too in Dublin Port, where spills of soya meal
And messes of maize where the cranes unload
Delight the geese
That gather for alfresco dining
At the Alexandra Basin
Plumping, plumping
As they graze in head-down sweeps.

Then, come the lengthening days
The inner clock triggers
A cue for long-haul flight
To Greenland's western edge,

To Eqalungmiut Nunât, Land of the Fisherfolk
On the chill rim of the Ice Sheet
And the lichen- encrusted land,
At Kûp Akua, 'where the waters meet or mix.'

The skeins fan the skies
Like fronds of eel grass,
Adrift in all that air
Resolve and determined purpose

In each beat of a wing.

Gaining height now

Still gaining.



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p. 22 (above): Unknown artist, *Halfenkel Beckasin* (Jack-snipe), 1830s or 40s, lithograph, New York Public Library.

p. 22 (below): John Gould & H.C. Richter, *Calidris Arenaria* (Sanderling), 1862–73, hand-coloured lithograph, New York Public Library.

p. 23: John Gould & H.C. Richter, *Phalacrocorax Graculus* (Shag), 1862–73, hand-coloured lithograph, New York Public Library.

p. 26: Eliza D., *A roseate tern*, date uncertain, etching, Wellcome Collection.

p. 18: Perhaps John and Elizabeth Gould, *Roseate Tern*, 1837, coloured lithograph, New York Public Library.

pp. 30–1: W.E. Hitchcock after John James Audubon, *Least Petrel*, *Mother Carey's chicken*, 1844, coloured lithograph, New York Public Library.

p. 33: John Gould & H.C. Richter, *Puffinus Anglorum* (Manx Shearwater), 1862–73, hand-coloured lithograph, New York Public Library.

top: John Gould & H.C. Richter, *Fratecula Arctica* (Puffin), 1862–73, hand-coloured lithograph, New York Public Library.