

‘Stories are here, we’re not losing them...’

Christine Willison, Fishguard storyteller



Shemi Wad

Uisce Dŵr Water

Folk Tales, True Tales and Tall Tales

Fibbing from Fishguard

Peter Stevenson

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Contents

Preface

Introduction: *Fishguard and Fibbing* 6

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: *The Flyer and the Fibber* 10

Chapter 2: *The Mermaid and the Shoemaker* 16

Chapter 3: *Mrs Evans' Prophecy and the Great Western Railway* 24

Chapter 4: *The Surveyor and the Hare* 32

Chapter 5: *Buffalo Bill and the Great White Whale* 40

Chapter 6: *Swan Girl and the Travellers* 48

Chapter 7: *Iola and the Yole* 56

Deb Winter: *Over the Water to Anywhere* 64

Transcripts

References

Preface: Ports, Past and Present

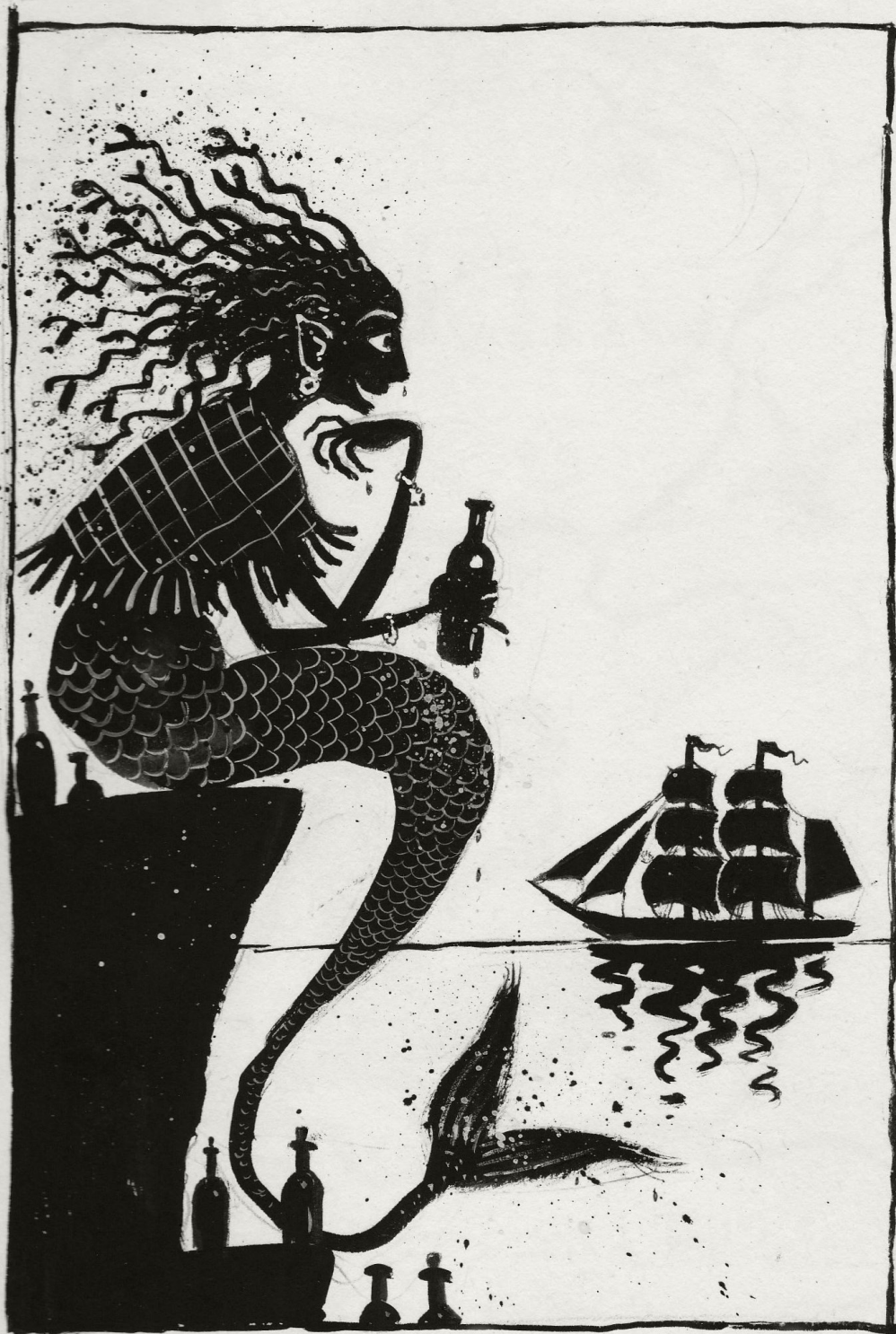
From the legendary journeys of early Celtic saints to the account of the great satirical writer Jonathan Swift (who got stuck for days in Holyhead in 1727 and wrote a brilliantly irritable journal about it) the sea-crossings between Wales and Ireland have been vividly imagined and recorded. People have travelled for many reasons: for trade and for leisure, for medical, religious or political purposes, for family reasons—and also, unwillingly, in times of war. Each act of travel links the two countries together, reminding us of their shared histories, their similarities and their profound differences over the centuries. And the port towns which are the points of departure and arrival on these journeys are fascinating places indeed.

The stories in this collection were created by Peter Stevenson as part of a commission for ‘Ports, Past and Present’, a project focused on the history and heritage of the five ports connected by ferry services across the Irish Sea: Pembroke Dock, Rosslare Harbour, Fishguard, Dublin Port and Holyhead. *Folk Tales, True Tales & Tall Tales: Fibbing from Fishguard* complements *Uisce Dôwr Water*, a film by Peter Stevenson and Jacob Whittaker exploring Ireland-Wales connections from Fishguard. Like the film, this book draws on a wealth of local material and pays homage to the energy and creativity of some wonderful storytellers in Fishguard, Goodwick and the Pencaer peninsula: their voices can be found in the ‘Transcripts’ section at the end of this volume.

Fishguard’s connections with Ireland and the wider world are explored here in tales which take a sideways, irreverent look at some of the port’s most famous historical set pieces: the 1797 French Landings remembered by a mermaid with a drink problem; an unconventional First Flight across the Irish Sea. Yet, as is often the case with Stevenson’s work, there are wide and complex themes at play here: local and traditional stories become, in these retellings, powerful vehicles for themes of belonging, of ownership and loss, and illuminate the interconnected injustices and blessings of our globally enmeshed societies. Vividly illustrated, engaging and thought-provoking, each of these tales is a journey in itself.

Mary-Ann Constantine

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Introduction

Fishguard and Fibbing

Shemi Wâd was born in 1815 in Wdig where he lived in a now-demolished white-washed cottage in Broom Street / Duke Street. He earned his pennies as a fisherman, market gardener, farmhand, clock mender, pig sticker, and tall tale teller for children and the folk at the Rose and Crown. He had a giant cabbage in his allotment that was too big to cook, and he once flew across the Irish Sea pulled by gulls and rode home on the shell of a giant crab. He smoked, drank, spat tobacco, scratched himself in public, and didn't believe in washing. That's why he had fleas. One was a singing flea who lived under his bed in a saucepan he used as a chamberpot. It sang rude sea shanties, and no one sang better than Shemi's singing flea. It would have rocked TikTok.

You see, Shemi was a fibber. Fishguard and Goodwick (or Abergwaun and Wdig – I use both Welsh and English forms) are renowned for their tradition of tall tale telling, where the storytellers persuade the listeners to believe them for as long as possible, no matter how ridiculous the narrative becomes. They've succeeded if people queue at the end to ask, 'Is that true?'

Liar's competitions are held in the Appalachian Mountains where Welsh migrants have settled for over 250 years, and where the native Cherokee have no word for storyteller, so they use the word 'liar'. Many Appalachian wonder tales are about Jack, he of the giant killing and seven league boots, whose adventures become more and more unlikely as the tale continues. Jack tales were also told by Welsh Romany storytellers who lived along the west coast. Irish travellers, too, brought wonder tales over to Pencaer where they worked on farms like Trehowel and Trenwydd in the 1800s. These migration stories rarely fit into the convenient geographical and political narratives of sedentary people, yet they leave us immeasurably richer, despite memories of the racism shown to Irish kids who grew up in Britain in the intolerant 1960s. Migration has been a way of life in the Irish Sea for as long as records exist. In the twelfth century Norman and Dutch migrants settled in Pembrokeshire before crossing the water to Wexford where they spoke a rattle-bag of words from Frisian, English and Welsh, which developed into the Yola language. Following the introduction of English in schools and the confiscation of lands, Yola was declared extinct in the 1850s, but it lived on in song and story, such is the stubbornness of folk tradition.

The sea between Wales and Ireland tells even more stories. In the fourteenth-century manuscript, *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, Bendigeidfran built bridges across two rivers as he marched his army to Ireland to rescue his sister Branwen from an arranged marriage with the Irish King, so beginning a devastating war. In the thirteenth-century *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* is a praise poem to Seithenyn, a warrior drowned when the land of Cantre'r Gwaelod was flooded after a girl left the sluice gates open (although later versions imply he drunkenly assaulted or raped her). In the twelfth century, Giraldus of Manorbier saw a forest of tree stumps off Newgale following storms that washed away the sands and delayed Henry II's invasion of Ireland. And between Pen Llŷn and Cemaes was a Welsh utopia of rivers and forests, not submerged beneath the water, but hidden by a hedge planted by a folk philosopher Rhys Ddwfn, who reasoned that the mainlanders would destroy his world if they saw it. So all we ever see when we stare out to sea is rain.

Recent scientific research supports these old stories. Along both the west Welsh and eastern Irish coastlines are the remains of forests, now partially covered by sand and water, where archaeologists have unearthed deer antlers, auroch horns, bear prints, and evidence of herds of mammoths. Over the years, soil has eroded, cliffs crumbled, walls collapsed, land flooded, ancient trees have been felled, mature hedges uprooted, fishing grounds emptied, and Pembrokeshire blue stones transported to Wiltshire. Tales of mermaids and swan girls mingle with stories of witches and cunning men who inhabit the borders of our imaginations, and the sea reminds us there was once a migratory culture amidst its endlessly shifting boundaries.

The stories in this book are born of these forgotten folk tales. And in this land of fake news, when advertisers tell us fibs to encourage us to buy stuff we didn't know we needed, and governments draw boundaries in the sea with children's crayons while water levels rise, this is a time to remember our flood myths and the dreams of those who walked this land before us.

And no fibbing.

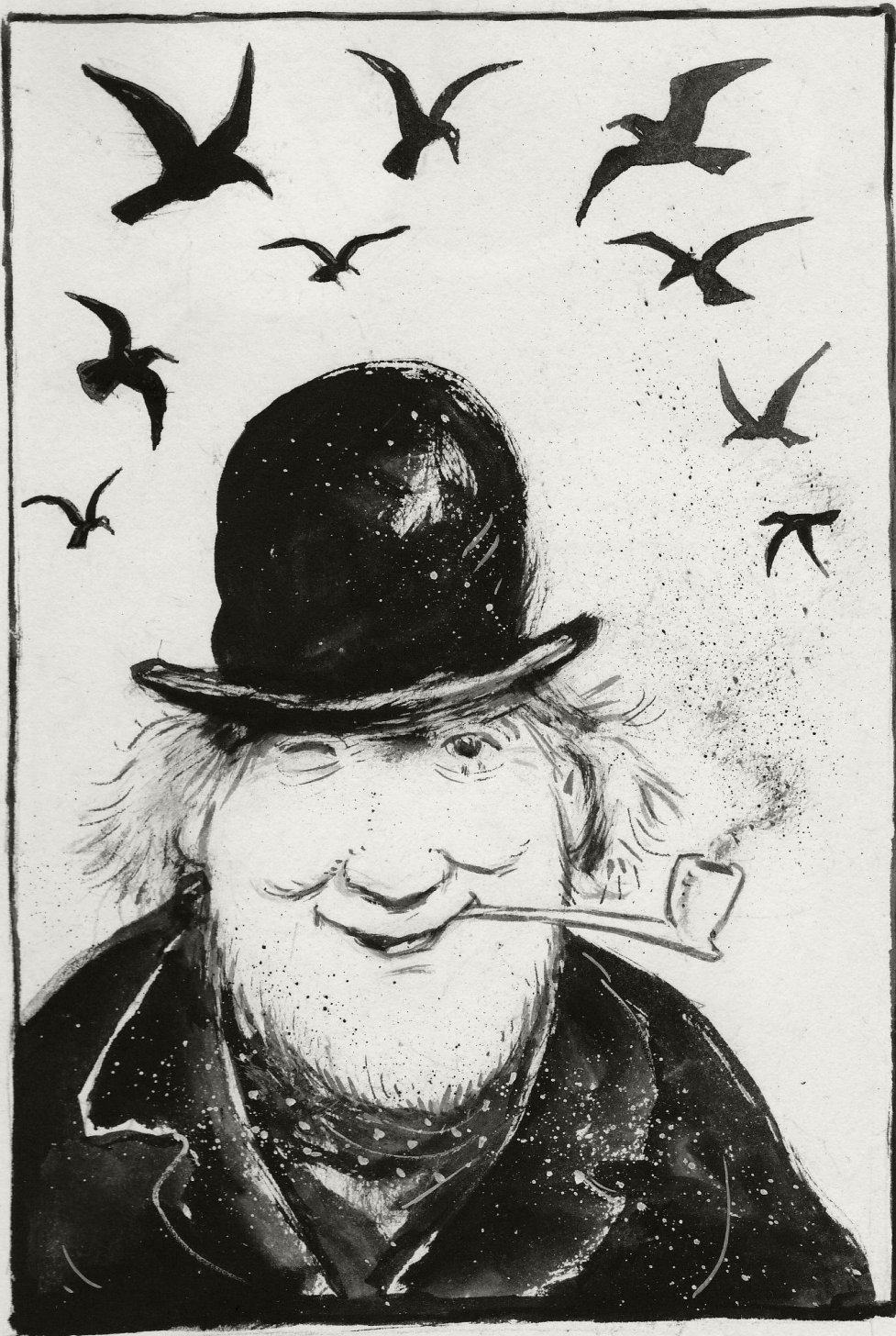
Well, maybe a little.

Acknowledgements

This book is a companion piece to the film *Uisce Dŵr Water* made in 2021 by Jacob Whittaker and Peter Stevenson with a soundscape by Ceri Owen-Jones and Elsa Davies and commissioned by 'Ports, Past and Present'. The stories are based on folk tales, true tales and tall tales, gleaned from oral sources, interviews, conversations, transcripts, archives and books, and written with more than a wink of the eye towards the fibbing tradition of Shemi Wâd.

Thanks to the film crew: Jacob Whittaker, Elsa Davies, Ceri Owen-Jones. To everyone on the creative commissions strand at *Ports, Past and Present*: Mary-Ann Constantine, Sarah Baylis, Martin Crampin, Elizabeth Edwards, Cathrine Agnew. To Deb Winter for kindly writing the afterword to the book. To all who gave their time to speak to us and who appear in the film: Deb Winter, Hedydd Hughes, Martin Bates, Christine Willison, James January McCann, Caeti-Elena Ianuari Mhic Cana, Holly Dunn and Seatrust. To Michael Freeman and Richard Hughes for useful research articles. And to the funders: the European Regional Development Fund through the Ireland-Wales Cooperation Programme (2014–2020).





Chapter 1

The Flyer and the Fibber

I first saw Ireland as a child from the ruins of 150 iron age roundhouses on top of Tre'r Ceiri, the Giants' Town, on Pen Llŷn. The mountain was usually covered in mist, *y brenin llwyd*, but when it lifted the Wicklow Hills appeared, just beyond the reflections of the lights of the submerged land of Cantre'r Gwaelod. And out there in Cardigan Bay was the utopian world of Plant Rhys Ddwfn, a land of lakes, rivers and forests that existed only in stories and memories. So in my childhood mythology Ireland was both real and mystical, like the giant's town, the sunken city and the Welsh utopia. One day, I flapped my arms, jumped off the mountain, and flew there as elegantly as the choughs that wheeled and squealed overhead. When I explained to my mam that I'd flown to Ireland, she gave me a piece of sad cake and told me to sit under the table with the dog and stop fibbing.

Back in 1910, actor-turned-aviator Robert Loraine left behind his starring roles in George Bernard Shaw's stage plays, and flew his Firman biplane from Holyhead with the intention of becoming the first man to fly from Wales to Ireland. In true theatrical style, he crash-landed in the sea sixty metres short of Dublin, and swam ashore, which sort of disqualified him. Two years later Denys Corbett-Wilson, war hero, jockey, racing-car driver, and playboy son of a rich barrister, accepted the challenge.

On 12 April 1912, Corbett-Wilson and Damer Leslie Allen took off in separate Bleriot monoplanes from Hendon Aerodrome in a race to Ireland via Chester and Holyhead. Allen arrived in Holyhead first, refuelled and disappeared into the mist over the Irish Sea, never to be seen again, while Corbett Wilson accidentally dropped his compass overboard and landed in a field near Hereford. While waiting impatiently for his mechanic, he filled his engine with low-grade castor oil, and took off again only to splutter to a halt in Radnor. After three days of repairs, he assumed the race was lost, but resumed the chase and found himself in a field overlooking the ferry terminal in Goodwick harbour. At 6am on 22 April he took off again, and 100 minutes later landed in a field at Enniscorthy having completed the first flight across the lands of Cantre'r Gwaelod and Plant Rhys Ddwfn.

Five days later, Vivian Hewitt from Bodfari flew from Holyhead to Dublin and so became the first Welshman to make the journey. Ironically, he would have made

the flight earlier but for thick mist that obscured his vision, although he did make the trip ten minutes faster than Corbett-Wilson, so kicking off an argument over which aviator was truly the first to cross the Irish Sea. The answer was none of them. That honour belonged to an old fisherman and fibber from Wdig, who flew to Ireland many years before Corbett-Wilson, Loraine, Allen, Hewitt and me.

Shemi Wâd loved to tell stories to the regulars at the Rose and Crown, because he liked nothing better than watching their faces as they wondered whether he was fibbing them. Well, maybe that's not completely true, as he equally enjoyed fishing and sleeping, often both at the same time. He had half-shares in a fishing boat and a fishing net with his friend Dai Reynolds. They caught mackerel, lobsters and crabs off the Cow and Calf Rocks at Pencaer, and split the catch half and half, though Dai complained that Shemi's half was bigger. So Shemi said, to be fair, he'd have the fish on the inside of the net and Dai could have those on the outside.

They once caught a giant herring, 24 stone and too far too big to fit in the boat, so they hauled it back to Goodwick in the net. When they cut it open, old Jonah himself hopped out, and don't laugh, because he wasn't the first bible character to turn up in Fishguard. Years before, Jesus called at a cottage and asked a woman if he could bless her family. Well, she had seventeen children and she thought Jesus might not approve of her having so much sex, so she hid ten of them in the woods, then brushed the hair and scrubbed the faces of the remaining seven ready for blessing. When Jesus left, the woman went to fetch her other ten children, but couldn't find them. They became *bendith y mamau*, mother's blessings, the first fairies. *Y bobl bach*. Old Shemi's ancestors.

One sunny day, Shemi went fishing with a rod from his favourite rock at the Parrog. He settled himself down and felt in his pocket for the live maggots he kept as bait. He pulled out string (long), string (short), a tin of 'bacci, a box of matches, a spare box of matches, a piece of cheese, an unwashed hanky, two coins, a sweet covered in fluff, more string and a stale currant bun. But no maggots. So he broke off a piece of currant bun, threaded it on the hook, tied the rod to his tummy with the string, and dreamed of nice fat mackerel for tea.

As the tide ebbed, the sharp-eyed gulls spotted the crumbs and swallowed them down, leaving the line wedged between their beaks. At that moment Shemi snored loudly and startled the gulls who took off, pulling the fishing line behind them.

Shemi held fast to his fishing rod and found himself flying through the air and over the sea: on and on they went with only the horizon for company until he saw below a green land and a grey city. Then the fishing line broke, down Shemi fell, and landed with a thump in a flower bed. He checked that his sou'wester was still on his head, and asked a couple of passing ladies where he was, but they couldn't understand a word he said. This was clearly Central Park, New York, where they didn't speak Pembrokeshire. He was tired after his long flight, so he climbed inside an old cannon that reminded him of the ones back home, wrapped himself in his oilskins, and went to sleep.

At nine o'clock next morning there was a loud bang and Shemi woke up to find himself flying over the sea once again, but this time not attached to gulls. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep, until he landed with a thump on the green grass of Pencw. He picked himself up, checked his sou'wester was still on his head, looked around to make sure no one was watching, and strolled to the Rose and Crown where he told the landlord all about his day. The landlord didn't believe him, of course. He said a flock of gulls could never have pulled Shemi over the sea to New York. It was too far. They must have dropped him in Phoenix Park in Dublin. Again.

You see, this wasn't the only time Shemi flew to Ireland. He once caught a sewin off the beach and noticed an old heron eyeing it up. Shemi tugged on the line until the heron grabbed the sewin and took off, hauling him behind it. He flapped his arms until the line snapped and he landed on a rock by the sea. An inscription on the rock told him he was in Ireland, and he was just wondering how to get home when a giant crab walked past him, so he jumped on its back and sailed it to Goodwick just in time for another pint at the Rose and Crown. The poor old crab died from exhaustion and everyone in Wdig had crabmeat pie for dinner.

So there you are, Shemi Wâd was the first to fly to Ireland, and not Denys Corbett-Wilson or any of the other aviators, which I know might be difficult for those of you with scientific, academic, and logical minds to believe, but what if I tell you that the old fisherman wasn't even the first person in Fishguard to fly? That honour belonged to an old cunning man, a *dyn hysbys*, from Werndew, near Dinas.

Around the same time Shemi flew to Ireland, Willie John was living at Trewern about a mile from Pontfaen. He was the uncle of the Rev. W. Meredith Morris

who wandered the lanes collecting stories about the old itinerant Pembrokeshire fiddlers like Swansea Bill, Ianto'r Garth, Levi Gibbwn and Grassie Busville.

Willie's wife had inflamed lungs and could barely breathe, so he set off across the Gwaun Valley and over Mynydd Melyn to Werndew, to consult the celebrated *dyn hysbys*, Dr Joseph Harries. Now, this Dr Harries was no relation to the infamous Dr John Harries of Cwrt-y-Cadno, whose fame travelled so far that his Book of Incantations is to this day archived on the shelves in the Librarian's office at the National Library of Wales, where it frequently casts spells amongst the stacks. But that's a whole other story.

“In the early part of the nineteenth century the name of Dr Harris, Werndew, was a household word all around Fishguard, Goodwick, and the coastline for his medical skill. He [...] was certainly a cause of fear to naughty children who refused to obey their parents.”

Marie Trevelyan, *Folk-Lore and Folk-Stories of Wales*, 218.

Dr Joseph Harries of Werndew was a tall slender man with shaggy hair and deep-set eyes, renowned for healing the sick, foretelling the future, assisting those with ailments of the mind, and finding lost animals and stolen property. He owned a magic mirror which he invited people to stare into until they saw what they wanted to see. Most people only saw mist, rather like peering out into Cardigan Bay from Tre'r Ceiri, so Dr Harries invited them to squint their eyes, use their imaginations and look again. In this way a woman identified the person who had stolen her jewellery, while another retrieved a stolen painting: Daniel Thomas of Dinas and his cousin Edwin Lewis found their missing cattle after being told to cut out a sow's heart, stick it with pine needles and burn it on the fire.

Dr Harries gave Willie a potion and told him to hurry home for his wife was nearly gone. Willie explained that he had no horse and it was a moonless night and the path was worn away, so the doctor told him to walk down the lane to Dinas and he would be offered a lift. Willie set off into the darkness and when he reached Dinas he found himself whisked up by a gust of wind and flying through the air. The five-mile journey took less than twenty minutes, and when he landed back in Trewern he gave the potion to his wife who could breathe again and recovered immediately.

So there we are. Remember, next time the mist covers Cardigan Bay, squint your eyes and use your imagination, and you might see the utopia you've always dreamed of, or maybe a conjurer flying through the air, or more likely an old fisherman being pulled through the air by a flock of gulls.

Shemi's gravestone at Rhos-y-Caerau, Pencaer, carries the message, *Cyfaill i bawb a hoff gan bawb*. 'A friend to all and loved by all.'

And that's no fib.





Chapter 2

The Mermaid and the Shoemaker

'Breeches, peticoats, shirts, shifts, blankets, sheets (for some received the news in bed), have been most woefully defiled in south Wales lately on hearing that a thimble-full of French men landed on our coast. I hope that you will have the goodness to compassionate our unfortunate wash-women.'

Letter from Edward Williams ('Iolo Morganwg') to William Owen Pughe, 7th March, 1797.

In 1922 the Great Western Railway published a booklet called *Legend Land*, a collection of folk tales designed to encourage people to use the train to explore the mythology of Cornwall and south-west Wales before taking the ferry to Ireland. In 2017 'Visit Wales' adopted a similar ploy, designating it *Blwyddyn y Chwedlau*, the Year of Legends: the singer Cerys Matthews opened a major exhibition at the National Library of Wales, and a firework display on Aberystwyth promenade hailed the return of the drowned inhabitants of Cantre'r Gwaelod. 'Lyonesse', the author of *Legend Land*, writes sweetly in the introduction, 'All people should like the old stories; all nice people do.'

'Lyonesse' was the pseudonym of George Basil Barham, who worked for the National Telephone Company and the Ministry of Food, and was the author of *The Development of the Incandescent Electric Lamp*, along with several novels set in the west Midlands—not, perhaps, the usual qualifications for a writer of folklore. He included in his collection a number of famous Welsh folk tales, including the Lady of Llyn-y-Fan-Fach, St David and his Mother, How Bala Lake Began, The Vengeance of the Fairies (Pennard Castle), The Old Woman who Fooled the Devil (Devil's Bridge), and The Women Soldiers of Fishguard.

The latter is the well-known tale of the three-day invasion of Wales by a raggle-taggle army of 1400 soldiers from revolutionary France on 22 February 1797. The story is so famous in Pembrokeshire that it has been documented in history books and children's literature, re-enacted on major anniversaries, made into a tapestry inspired by Bayeux, turned into a miniature wargame, and built out of Lego. It's the stuff of fairy tale, an endlessly changing story that for two hundred years

has bonded a community and continues to attract armies of tourists to invade 'Legend Land'.

The history of the invasion is usually told from the point of view of military leaders, while the folk tale focuses on the heroism of the local shoemaker, Jemima Nicholas, colloquially known as Jemima Fawr, a formidable woman renowned for breaking up bar-fights, who reputedly rounded up twelve drunken soldiers and locked them in St Mary's Church. There is, however, another story that lurks in the darker recesses of the folkloric mind deep in Pencaer, of a mermaid who lived on the very same cliffs where the invaders landed.

Early in the evening of 22 February 1797, she hauled herself onto the rocks at Carregwastad, shook herself dry, and watched as four ghostly ships with glowing white sails loomed out of the twilight from the direction of Strumble Head. They anchored offshore, and a flotilla of boats crammed with soldiers and equipment rowed towards the rocks. She took an indelicate swig from one of the bottles of the madeira she had stashed in caves and crannies all over Carregwastad after rescuing several crates from the Portuguese wine ship *Friends*, which had gone down in a storm the December before. She combed her tangled seaweedy hair with a crab claw borrowed from one of Mr James Trenewydd's lobster pots, stared at her reflection in a green glass float, and realised she was a little drunk. Maybe that was why she didn't look like the elegant mermaids with flowing golden hair so beloved of picture-book illustrators.

The mermaids of Bae Ceredigion have had an alcohol problem ever since a local farmer acquired a magic hand-mill from the devil in exchange for a suckling pig. He was a man of simple needs, so he made three wishes, for beer, women and a little salty fish for his tea. The hand-mill began to grind and his kitchen filled with beer and fish-women—but he didn't know how to stop it. The door burst open and a river of beer and mermaids flowed down into the sea, where he drowned. The mill is still on the seabed to this day, grinding out beer and salt, which explains why swimming in Cardigan Bay sometimes feels like you're frolicking with drunken mermaids.

Some ninety years before, this same mermaid had been caught in a net by some fishermen who kept her captive in Mr Mortimer's wine cellar at Trehowel farm. She slept in an iron tub filled with sea water, and was forced to perform like a sea

lion in a peepshow, in exchange for fish soup to which she added sweet milk to make it more palatable. They called her Morforwyn. She never had a name before.

One night, one of the men touched her where he shouldn't, and she lashed out with her tail and flattened him against the wall. She told him he had no right to keep her imprisoned and he must return her to the sea, or he would be cursed horribly. And anyway, she may look virginal but mermaids are long-lived and she was over a hundred years old and had been around. He realised he had been cruel and inappropriate with an octogenarian, so he carried her down the cliff and released her into the sea where she was warmed in the embraces of her sisters from Llanina, Llanychaeam, and Gwbert. In return, she promised to warn the Pencaer farmers and fishermen of impending storms, plagues or invasions.

And here she was, Morforwyn, another century later, her belly warmed by wine, tail curled around her shoulders for comfort as she watched a flotilla of small rowing boats approach Carregwastad. An army of soldiers climbed out and crawled around the cliffs like confused ants, some wearing British uniforms dyed dark blue, but with enough muskets and equipment for two armies. One small boat was plundered by her sisters, and its cargo of ammunition hidden in an underwater cave for later use.

Morforwyn had little interest in wars over who owned what land. The sea has no borders, only sharks and poisonous anemones whose personal space she avoided. She would have left these irrelevant men to kill each other, were it not for the promise she made to the James and Mortimer families of Trehowel and Trenewydd to warn them of impending danger. And that included invasion.

She sang a sweet siren-song which lured the farmers and fishermen to the clifftop, and no one noticed she was actually singing a rude sea shanty. She pointed to the masts of the four phantom ships and the gathering blue army and the men knew this was the invasion they had feared ever since the Black Prince bombarded Fishguard with cannonballs 20 years earlier thinking the locals wouldn't fire back. They did, though.

A girl, a quick runner, was sent with a message to Tregwynt Mansion where the local gentry and militia were engaged in a ballroom dance. The commander of the Fishguard and Newport Volunteer Infantry excused himself and rode to the Fort to inform his superior that the French were invading, while the wealthy folks

barricaded the doors and windows, and buried their treasure and jewels in the manicured gardens.

Morforwyn finished her madeira, wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, belched and scabbled around in the clefts in the rocks in search of another bottle. As she bit off the cork with her teeth, she noticed a couple of soldiers hauling a chest up the cliff below her. She sang her sweet shanty, lured them closer and offered them a drink. Their eyes blazed with lechery, but silly men like these could easily be enchanted, and soon they were drunk as her sisters, who were busy dragging more soldiers to watery graves in the sea below.

The wine loosened the tongues of the two men who explained they were from *La Légion Noire*, a regiment of criminals, prisoners, deserters, sex-offenders, activists, innocents and general scum under the command of William S. Tate, a Wexford man who had emigrated to America to serve with the 4th Artillery Regiment of South Carolina during the War of Independence. He fled to Paris where he met Wolfe Tone, and inspired by the ongoing revolution, decided that a similar republican government would work in Ireland. After a failed attempt at invading England in December 1796, they set off again two months later, but were blown off course. It was shambolic. The soldiers couldn't understand Tate's orders because he spoke no French, only an indecipherable American Irish, so they decided to go pillaging and looting instead. Exhausted with drink and talk, the two men fell into a drunken stupor.

As dawn broke on the morning of the 23rd, Morforwyn wrapped herself in a blue cloak borrowed from one of the soldiers, and set off for town. She passed a burning hayrick, watched a cottage being plundered for provisions, noticed a small battalion being threatened by Jemima the shoemaker with her pitchfork, and heard gunfire as a grandfather clock at Brestgarn Farm was shot when its ticking was mistaken for the cocking of a firelock. She lured a group of soldiers to Trehowel Farm, and locked them in the cellar where she'd been imprisoned all those years ago and where she stashed some Portuguese wine in preparation for John Mortimer's wedding. She tied up a few more stragglers and left them in one of the barns at Trenewydd. It all seemed a bit Whisky Galore until she found herself consoling a farmgirl who had been raped, and helped bury her husband, shot trying to save his wife. It was time to call her sisters.

The following morning, 24 February, after a number of skirmishes, the two armies lined up on Goodwick Sands awaiting battle. The Welsh soldiers were outnumbered two to one, so they were ordered to walk round and round to give the impression there were more of them than there were. Tate knew the French were being tricked, but what concerned him more were the 400 women with blue and red woollen shawls covering their heads and shoulders, standing and staring, and carrying weapons and ammunition from the boat that sank during the landing. He had been told Welsh women were noted for their ferocity, but even more terrifying, protruding from beneath the women's cloaks, were tails.

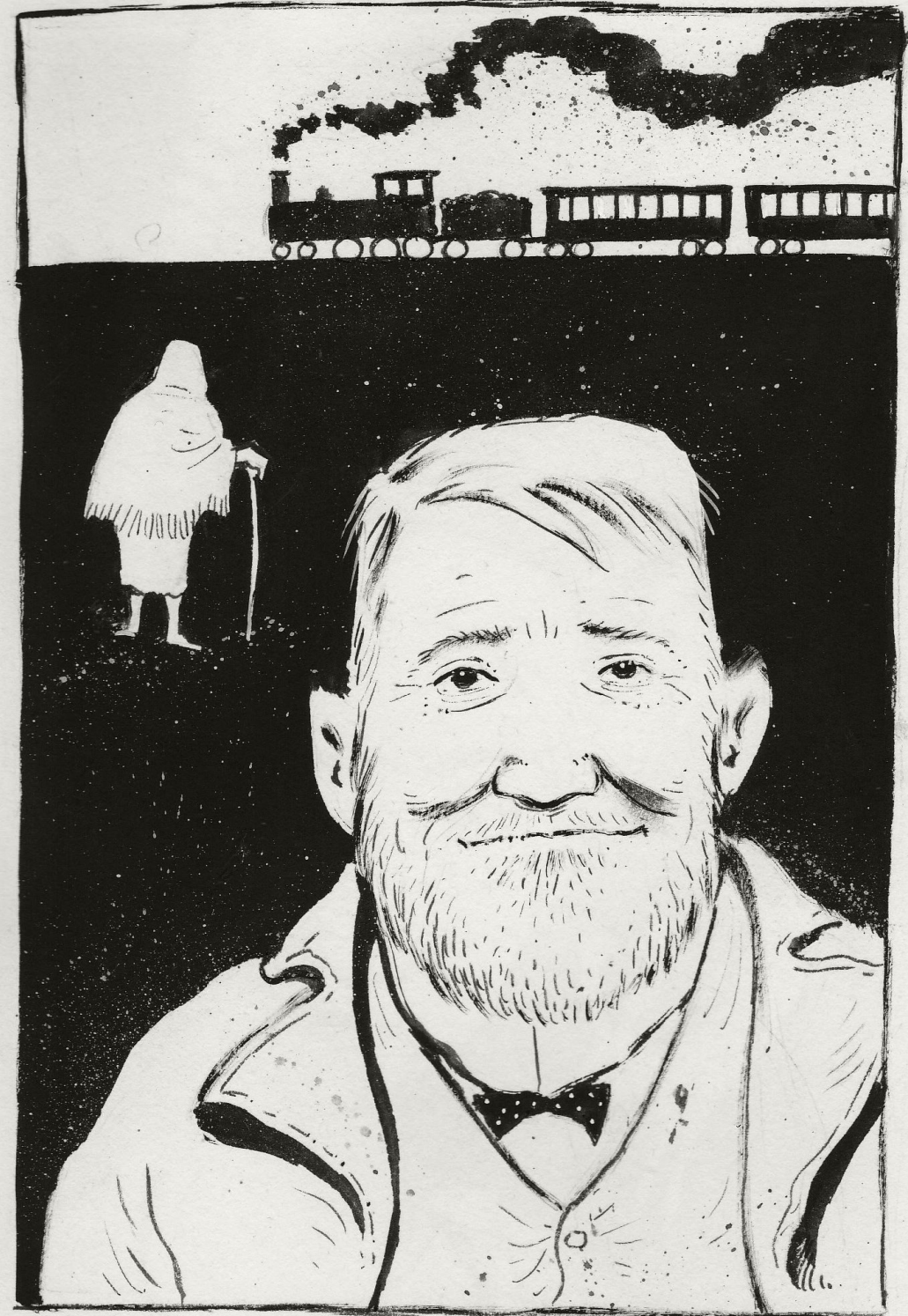
Believing his troops to be inefficient and outnumbered, Tate surrendered his sword at the Royal Oak Inn to bring an end to the two-and-a-half day war. His soldiers, many of them 'very ill of a flux', had been defeated by a heady mix of madeira and mermaids, and were loaded into boats and taken to Fishguard, and then to jail in Haverfordwest to await deportation.

A hundred years passed in the time it takes for a mermaid's heart to beat once, and Morforwyn watched again as the centenary of the Last Invasion was celebrated with a marching band and a procession of 89 women dressed in long red cloaks and tall Welsh hats, which Mrs Mason of Prospect House had borrowed from Nanny Ffynon Carn. Morforwyn's memory might have been a little imperfect after a century of drinking Portuguese wine, but she was sure most of the women wore blue cloaks during the invasion. Red cloaks only appeared in Wales around the mid 1800s, while tall hats were worn mostly by gentry on horseback. Nor did Jemima's army of women march round in order to fool the French into thinking they were Redcoats. They just stood there looking menacing, slapping their tails threateningly on the sand.

In the 1950s, in the aftermath of yet another war, Morforwyn became weary of the violent ways of men, and decided it was time to leave. She wrapped herself in the long blue cloak she had worn throughout the invasion, dug up the gold and jewels that had been buried by the wealthy folk at Tregwynt Mansion, packed the last few crates of Portuguese madeira onto a tramp steamer, and emigrated to America like so many dispossessed Welsh folk before her. She jumped ship at the entrance to the Hudson, crossed the border without a passport, and booked into a room with an en-suite bathtub at the Chelsea Hotel. She wandered around Greenwich Village where the cats were too stoned to notice her tail, she drank beer

in the White Horse with Dylan the poet, sipped cappuccino in Reggio's with Dylan the protest singer, and when her money ran out she swam up the Elizabeth River and settled in New Jersey.

And she may still be there, for when a construction crew demolished a wall at the nearby Liberty Hall Museum at Kean University a few years ago, they discovered a hidden stash of bottles of Portuguese madeira from 1796, the same year the wine ship sank off Strumble Head. And wherever there's Portuguese madeira, there's sure to be a Fishguard mermaid close by.





Chapter 3

Mrs Evans' Prophecy and the Great Western Railway

One day she came home and told the assembled company she had just seen something remarkable down in the valley. It was, "a large number of heavily laden carts or waggons going very fast one after the other, and no bullock or horses drawing them, but the first one appeared, from the smoke she saw, to be on fire."

Jonathan Ceredig Davies recounting the words of Sarah Evans.

30th August 1909.

An amiable gentleman with a close-cropped beard and a beaming smile was standing on the newly built breakwater at Goodwick harbour, eyes glued to the four funnels of the biggest liner in the world. It had been launched only two years earlier, and had recently crossed the Atlantic in record time. The SS *Mauritania* was anchored in the bay because the harbour, despite having recently been dredged, was too silty to take her weight, so the passengers were being loaded into tender boats and escorted to the quayside and onto the Great Western Railway where a huge banner at the station read 'GWR: The Holiday Line'. No one in Fishguard had seen anything quite like this since the French invaded.

The gentleman watched as luggage was thrown onto the breakwater, a child was lifted over the guard-rail, while another was held above the water to relieve himself. Mr Davies had travelled by sea and rail throughout his life, as far as South America and Australia, and he considered the *Mauritania* a considerable improvement on the old turbine steamers that churned the stomach and reacquainted passengers with recently eaten meals. He was 16 in 1875 when he left Llangunllo with his parents and settled on Tehuelche land in the Chubut Valley of Patagonia, where his family were closely involved with the Anglican church. He had trained as a minister and written a strongly-worded book about settler life in the Land of Giants: 'Another curse of the colony is drunkenness. The place in this respect is equally bad as Wales.'

Jonathan Ceredig Davies was never short of an opinion. He had returned to Ceredigion after sixteen years in Patagonia and had occupied himself with all

things antiquarian, gathering relics and bygones for a proposed book of folk tales which his friend, Countess Alice of Amherst, had encouraged him to write. He had travelled to Fishguard by train from Llandysul along the new GWR line through Trefgarn, which had replaced the underused Maenclochog railway. He'd had several interesting and amusing conversations on the way. A Mr Griffiths had told him about Maggie the witch of Pontfaen, while Mary Thomas of Bengal informed him that the county was teeming with witches. On the way back he had arranged to meet Thomas Phillips the Carmarthen stationmaster, a renowned teller of train tales. Mr Davies was feeling replete with stories.

His favourite was about a circus elephant that had recently died at Letterston and been towed by a tractor to its grave in a field belonging to the Harp Inn. Over fifty years earlier a more famous elephant had been buried behind the Talbot Inn in Tregaron, although the people of Bont said the locals had dragged it up the hill and buried it on the other side, which seemed unlikely and was probably a comment born of the feud between the two towns. Mr Davies liked elephants ever since he saw one being winched ashore at Cardiff Docks. They transported heavy loads, much like the ships and trains he so loved.

Lost in dreams of elephants, he hadn't noticed the old woman standing next to him, with a cloak pulled over her head and a long black skirt down to her ankles. She tugged on his sleeve, and lowered the cloak to reveal a face so wrinkled that her only visible feature was a generous toothless smile.

She pointed at the *Mauritania*, 'She is constructed of twenty-eight types of wood carved by three hundred Palestinian craftsmen, but they can't get her to the quayside because one of the breakwaters was built at the wrong angle. That's why the harbour silts up. The architect responsible killed himself, poor dab.'

Mr Davies perked up. This was intriguing. He asked if she knew any more stories, the darker the better. Her face shone. 'Do you know about Sarah Evans' Prophecy? We wouldn't be standing here today without Mrs Evans.'

Mr Davies was hooked, so he offered her a slice of lemon cake he had bought for the journey home. She politely turned him down, explaining that she must watch her weight. He looked her up and down. She could have hidden behind a fencepost. Without once meeting Mr Davies' gaze, she began.

'Sarah Evans was a pious woman who lived with her husband David at Penyfeidr, a small farm near Trefgarn Rocks. She was known for visions that allowed her to see into the future. The neighbours believed her every word because her prophecies always came true. If she said you would be fine, you would be, but if she said nothing, then you should worry.'

One day she came home and told the family she had seen something strange in the cwm, which she described as, 'a large number of heavily laden carts or wagons going very fast one after the other, and no bullock or horses drawing them, but the first one appeared from the smoke, to be on fire.'

Nothing remarkable in that, you might think, for it was only a steam train, but the family looked confused, because there was no track in the Trefgarn Valley. This was the late 1700s, thirty years before Mr Stephenson built the first passenger line between Manchester and Liverpool, and fifty years before Mr Brunel announced the construction of the South Wales Railway to Fishguard.

It was 1847 when Brunel's workforce began digging embankments and cuttings in the Trefgarn Valley, and the people agreed that Mrs Evans' prophecy was coming true and soon they would be able to travel in luxury to Goodwick without being shaken up in Willie John's old donkey cart. Unfortunately construction proved difficult and when the North Pembrokeshire and Fishguard Railway finally opened, it went through Maenclochog, and not Trefgarn. Sarah Evans's prophecy was declared the ramblings of an old charlatan, although some blamed it, as usual, on Maggie the witch of Pontfaen.

However, the trains through Maenclochog were slow and frequently late and packed with chickens and sheep, and the wealthy passengers on their way to the health spas grumbled at having to share their carriages with scruffy children who didn't speak English. The visitors stopped travelling when it was revealed that the rejuvenating waters were full of peat and had no medical properties, and there were healthier places to spend their money on the quest for eternal youth. The line closed in 1882, and Maggie of Pontfaen giggled.

Shortly afterwards, a new railway arrived in Goodwick to connect with the ferry to Rosslare, and this time it followed Mr Brunel's original design through the very spot in the Trefgarn Valley where Sarah Evans had stood a hundred years before,

when she saw those heavily laden carts or wagons going very fast with no bullocks or horses pulling them, belching smoke and fire. So you see, Mrs Evans's Prophecy came true after all.'

The old lady finished her story, took the lemon cake from Mr Davies, swallowed it whole and smiled more broadly than ever through her wrinkles. Mr Davies thanked her and asked permission to reproduce the story in his forthcoming book, fully acknowledged, if she would tell him her name.

'People are far too nose. Use my initials. H.W.E. Oh, and let me tell you, Mr Davies, in a few years time an even greater ship with a name similar to the *Mauritania* will go down off the Irish coast. And a man named Barnes Wallace will drop flying bombs on the Maenclochog Railway tunnels. And do give my love to Maggie of Pontfaen if you meet her, though remember she died fifty years ago.'

Mr Davies scribbled a few notes in his book, snapped it shut and turned to thank the old lady again, but she had vanished. And he wanted to ask her how she knew his name? She was probably one of the many old witches, he concluded. They know your business before you do.

He stood in silence for a moment and watched people pottering along the streets, shopping, talking, grumbling, rubbing their aching backs, lost in everyday thoughts. A boy stuck his tongue out at a man with a camera. Another ran his fingers along the railings. A group of lads ignored a girl in a red coat whom they fancied. An old woman trundled along the pavement with a shopping bag and remembered her youth as a mother passed by pushing a pram. An old couple sat on a wall outside a drapers shop, the man with his head in his hands to comfort his neuralgia while the shop assistant cut out a piece from a roll of cloth laid out on the ground. A man in overalls stared through the open doors of a garage, and dreamed of tools. Little wonder that *Under Milk Wood* would be filmed here sixty years later.

Mr Davies made his way to the railway station and joined a party of *Mauritania* passengers in a second-class carriage. He changed trains at Carmarthen where he met stationmaster Thomas Phillips, who was gathering train tales for a book he proposed to call 'Humours of the Iron Road'. Stationmaster Phillips told him about a farmer who complained after being charged 3d for himself and 6d for his dog at the ticket office. When the farmer asked why, the clerk said the dog had twice the number of legs as the farmer.

Then there was a young woman who was infatuated with one of the porters until she noticed his cap had GWR engraved on it. So he was already married, was he? And he hadn't told her. The cheek of it! Well, she never liked him anyway. Gŵr, in Welsh, means husband, you see.

One day, the Rev. Kilsby Jones was on the train when he took exception to a yappy pekinese called Tino, so he picked up the dog and threw it out the window, which was not the expected behaviour of a man of the cloth. Tino's owner was understandably distraught, and in a fit of fury she snatched the reverend's pipe from his lips and threw it out after her dog. When the train stopped at the next station, there was Tino running along the track with the reverend's pipe in its mouth.

An old couple had never been on the railway before but wanted to visit their son in London, so they asked the Minister for advice. He told them the big city was full of sin and devilry so best not to speak to anyone. When they reached Bristol the old man left the train for a paned at the platform cafe. He, and was so busy flirting with the waitress, he never noticed the train had left without him. The stationmaster put him on an express to Paddington, where he met his wife, who remembered the Minister's advice and refused to speak to him.

Mr Davies' favourite story was of a little barefoot urchin who crept into the train on a wet cold day, entered an apartment containing an elegant lady and a grumpy gentleman, climbed onto the corner window seat and fell asleep. The gentleman objected to the scruffy little creature being allowed into his carriage with dirty feet, but the lady arose, removed her expensive muff, placed it gently under the child's head, and kissed him. The gentleman hid behind his newspaper and said nothing more.

Mr Davies thanked stationmaster Phillips and arrived home most satisfied with his day of story gathering. He recounted his adventures to his patron Countess Alice who offered to assist him financially to publish his book. They gathered a list of aristocratic and religious subscribers and a couple of years later '*Folk-lore of West and Mid-Wales* was published, in which the story of Mrs Evans' Prophecy and his encounter with H.W.E. is printed.

More time passed, and he worked lovingly on his autobiography, *Life, travels, and reminiscences of Jonathan Ceredig Davies*, which he had printed privately in Llanddewi Brefi in 1927 using a hand press with only enough type to print one page

at a time, all on his own, for 438 pages. When he ran out of paper, he wrote the last 9 pages by hand.

As old age, increasing poverty and failing health crept upon him, he began to question his colonial life in Patagonia. He remembered he had once described a Tehuelche man as behaving, 'almost like civilised people, using knives, forks, and spoons.' This troubled him now, because at home in Wales, there were visitors who regarded him in the same way he viewed the native Patagonian, as an 'uncivilised' Welsh native. In quiet moments he reflected on the relationship between Y Wladfa and Tehuelche, Welsh and Mapuche, and the wars between Argentina and Chile, which led him to conclude he may have been both coloniser and colonised. But perhaps best not to write this in his memoirs. He was too old and set in his ways.

Shortly after his book was completed, he made peace with his God and waited for Death. One day he sat by his fireside staring into the flames when a knock rattled the door and there stood a thin old woman with a black shawl pulled over her head, concealing her face. He assumed his life was over, and he was about to offer to go with her, when she lowered her shawl to reveal a wrinkled face and a wide smile. Despite his failing memory, she looked familiar.

'Mr Davies? I would like to thank you for your book of folk-lore. It has given me great pleasure, and I especially appreciate you mentioning my grandmother's prophecy.'

Now he remembered her. 'Ah, we met in 1909, when the *Mauritania* came to Fishguard? You told me about your grandmother Sarah Evans.'

'I'm afraid you're mistaken Mr Davies. I wasn't in Fishguard in 1909. I wasn't even in Wales. I have never seen the *Mauritania*. Although Sarah Evans was indeed my grandmother.'

'But you are H.W.E.? You told me the story of the prophecy. And you foretold the sinking of the *Lusitania*. I recognise you.'

'I'm afraid I have never set foot in Wales till today, Mr Davies. I was born in Patagonia. There are many memories of you in Y Wladfa. People in the chapel have told me stories, and I have followed your writing closely. I bought a copy of your book for my family in Pembrokeshire. But it wasn't me you met in Fishguard.'

That would have been my grandmother, Sarah Evans.'

'How is that possible? She would have been 150 in 1909.' Mr Davies's body may have been failing, but his mind was as sharp as ever.

'She was probably older. But it was Sarah you met. She likes to check up on her prophecy. She'll be there now, wandering along the railway line through Trefgarn. She waves to people on the train at the very spot where she first saw it. She is very proud of her prophecy, and she asked me to thank you.'

'You mean her spirit is still alive? She's a ghost?'

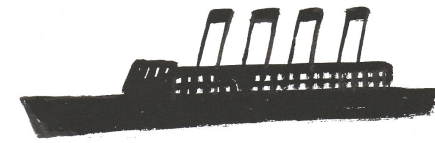
'People don't die here, Mr Davies. They become dreams and memories, and live on in stories, just like you. You are a story in Patagonia.'

'Do they remember me kindly there?'

'I think of you kindly, Mr Davies, despite your views about my father's people. When my mother buried her Welsh husband's bones, she took a Tehuelche man. I am their daughter, a child of two worlds. My grandmother will be happy I have seen you. We are going on a cruise to New York on the *Mauritania* next week.'

And the woman beamed, pulled the shawl over her head, and vanished.

Jonathan Ceredig Davies was 73 when he died in Llanddewi Brefi in 1932. Without him, Mrs Sarah Evans's Prophecy would have been forgotten.





Chapter 4

The Surveyor and the Hare

The town of Fiscard is so filthy, so ill built, and so uncivilized, as almost to be interesting on those very accounts.

Dr. Thomas Stringer, *Welsh Excursions: Through the Greater Part of South and North Wales* (1820)

Friday 8 September 1843.

A group of men are drinking peacefully outside the Rose and Crown in Wdig. Some are fishermen, others farmers, some make culm at the lime kiln in the harbour to spread on the land to improve the soil. All of them have to transport their goods along the private turnpike roads run by the notorious Fishguard Trust. The high tolls are crippling them, and to make matters worse, the trust is affiliated to the Anglican church, while most of the men are Nonconformist. A few days earlier they demolished the Prendergast tollgate on the Haverfordwest road but were distracted at the Corner Piece Inn when their leader, a young man called Davies, accidentally shot a horse. Now they have regrouped and after a few more beers, will attack the tollgates in Fishguard and Penmorfa. They will dress in skirts and shawls and mop caps in the noble tradition of radicalism and subversion. No one will laugh. It's no joke.

On the hillside above is a hare, an old gnarled fleabag with a scar from nose to cheek, a bite out of one ear, and a lazy eye that can outstare a cat. It is watching a girl who is sitting on the quay gutting herring and filling a bucket with the innards. She stabs the blade in the ground to clean it, washes her bloodied hands, and ties her hair into pigtails.

The girl, the hare and the men are all staring at an elegantly-dressed man strolling along the quay, whistling while reading selections out loud from a copy of Dr Stringer's *Welsh Excursions*. He is an employee of the Great Western Railway, surveying the area around Goodwick with a view to building an iron road for Mr Brunel to replace the unmetalled turnpikes, so rejuvenating the harbour and bringing prosperity to the town. He shakes his head at the nonsense he is reading:

'The streets are barely passable for any sort of vehicle; the solid rock, worn into frequent holes for the reception of mud, is almost equally offensive to the foot of man or horse.'

The girl is listening with one ear as she slices into the belly of a herring.

'It is the only town I have ever met with from which dunghills, I do not mean mere heaps of dirt, but literal and bona fide dunghills, are not excluded.'

'We spread it on the fields as fertiliser,' mutters the girl.

'Expert fishermen have declared these banks to abound with turbot and other fish of the choicer kinds; but the attention of the inhabitants cannot be drawn to the subject, lest it should interfere with their favourite, though unsuccessful, herring fishery.'

She spits and licks her fish knife.

'Their manners are rough towards strangers, whom they uniformly confider as spies, to an excess amounting to insolence.'

'Iesu mawr!' she shouts, 'We were invaded by strangers. 1797! Remember?'

'The habit of intoxication is very prevalent.'

She brushes the fish guts from her apron and takes a nip of gin from a flask.

'The practice of husbandry is as backward here as every other useful art. The system has remained nearly stationary for upwards of a century, though it is now beginning to make some little advances towards industry and good sense. This movement among so obstinate a race may be accounted for from the circumstance, that the people, till within the last fourteen years, could never be reconciled to the corruption of their own simplicity by the introduction of turnpikes.'

'Best not to mention turnpikes to the boys at the Rose and Crown.'

The man walks over to the girl. 'I see you disagree with Dr Stringer, as I do? I believe Pembrokeshire would benefit from an integrated transport system paid for by taxing the wealthy. That is why I am here. I am an engineer, surveying the possibility of building an efficient railway line run by Mr Brunel's Great Western Company with

connections onto steamboats direct to Ireland'.

There is an audible 'kerching' as one of the men at the Rose and Crown spits unerringly into a chamberpot. He looks like a young Shemi Wâd.

A woman with an impressive black beard walks by carrying a sledgehammer.

The hare stares at a small dog that is barking madly. It whimpers and runs.

The girl empties the bucket of fish guts into the water and the gulls go into a feeding frenzy. The man continues reading.

'I would... recommend it to travellers to avoid a night here, if they can.'

'You looking for lodgings?' the girl dries the blade of her knife on the hem of her skirt. 'Dyffryn Arms in Pontfaen has no bed bugs or fleas. Well, not many. I live nearby with my nan. You can walk with me. But no funny business!'

'Thank you, I am a gentleman, madam. And you have a sharp knife.'

'Yes, you look harmless. It's an hour and a half on foot and the roads are full of potholes. You'll need sturdy boots or you'll get blisters.'

'I have appropriate footwear. Made in Dublin. Like myself.'

The girl wraps a red blanket round her shoulders, washes her feet in the sea, and puts on her shabby boots. 'Nan bought them from Jemima Crydd after the invasion. I filled the holes with cured beef and newspaper paste. You're Irish?'

'Dublin born and bred, and proud of it.'

She holds out her hand as if to shake his, but her palm is facing up. He fumbles in his pocket and offers a couple of coins. She takes them, and gives him a parcel of red-stained brown paper. He looks inside. It contains a heart.

'It'll protect you. You'll thank me later.'

She stomps off in her outsize boots, and he follows. A man wrapped in a blue shawl calls her over to the Rose and Crown. They speak animatedly, occasionally glancing at the surveyor. The man gives her his shawl and she wraps it around the surveyor's shoulders and tells him to keep his head down. As they walk through the

town, they are approached by more bearded women carrying shotguns, banging drums and blowing horns. She pushes the surveyor into a ginnel and presses her finger to his lips.

The men stop outside the house of Thomas Williams and inform him he is to leave with his family and belongings or they will knock his house down on Monday. They've already shot bullets into the home of Henry Collins, and demolished the garden wall of surveyor John McKenna. And there are no police on the streets to save him. Beca are the police tonight.

'Diawl!' cries Thomas Williams, 'I will see you all in Hell!'

The girl wraps the shawl over the Irishman's head. He is agitated.

'Did those men say they had attacked a surveyor's house? I'm a surveyor!'

'You work for the railways not the turnpike. That's why you're still alive.'

'So I'm safe?'

'No, they'll probably shoot you,' and she takes his arm and hurries him out of town along the track to Pontfaen. 'What's your name, Mr Surveyor?'

'John Kelly, pleased to meet you. I think.'

'I'm Hettie. Have you still got your heart, Mr Kelly?'

He pulls the parcel out of his pocket. The blood is soaking into his cloak.

'See that old hare on the road waiting for us? Follow her.'

'Why follow a mangy old hare with a limp?'

'She's Maggie. My Nan.'

Mr Kelly thinks for a moment but decides best to keep his silence. He knows Irish women who can change into hares, and they aren't to be messed with.

After a mile, Hettie says, 'Nan had polio as a girl. Then she was shot in the leg by the squire at Pontfaen after she witched his cows. She walks with a stick now. The women round here live the old ways, but you have a cow's heart to protect you, Mr Kelly. You'll need a nail, too. Mrs Rees the baker's mother keeps one in her

shoe to keep Nan away. Nan says the shoe leather tastes better than Mrs Rees' bread.'

Mr Kelly is trying not to freak. As something of an amateur antiquarian he finds this most interesting despite being convinced he is about to be turned into something unspeakable. He whistles to calm himself.

'Ssh, whistling in the wind is a conversation with the Devil,' whispers Hettie.

Behind them, they hear the sound of an approaching horse. A rider overtakes them, stops and pulls down his black cloak.

'Hettie Howells. Are you and your evil sisters behind this insurrection?'

'Thomas Williams, you and the Fishguard Trust caused this through your own greed. In two months' time, you'll denounce twenty-six men in court, while armed militia protect you. They'll go free, and you'll live in fear of being hunted like a dog.'

Thomas Williams raises his arm, cracks his whip, and rides away.

'Dos i chwarae efo dy nain!' Hettie shouts after him as a thin red gash stretches from the corner of her eye to her mouth.

'Are you alright? Let me see,' asks Mr Kelly.

'I'm fine, John Kelly,' she dabs her cheek with the hem of her skirt, 'but Thomas Williams won't be. Pric pwddin!'

Time passes quickly in the Pembrokeshire darkness as they cross the Crinei and the Aer and skirt round the field of the dead at Parc-y-Meirw, following Maggie the hare-witch towards Pontfaen, where they are brought to a stop by a light hovering in the middle of the road.

Hettie grins like the cat she is. 'See, a *canwyll gorff*, a corpse candle. I watch them from my window in the Jabez Chapel graveyard. They flutter round some poor soul like fireflies and then hover over the hole where they will be buried. My best friend Martha, the housemaid at Pontfaen vicarage, told me her mam saw a phantom funeral on the road in front of Caersalem and at the back of the procession was Rev. Jenkin Evans, wearing a funny hat. Martha's mam died three days later and was buried at Caersalem. Martha saw the vicar standing exactly where her mother

saw him, wearing his funny hat. Her mother had seen her own funeral. You're lucky to see one.'

'You don't believe all that nonsense, Hettie?'

'A porter at Cardiff railway station told me his friend was brought home to Pontfaen to recover from a sickness. In the night he took a turn for the worse, a corpse candle appeared, and the porter followed it to the cottage of the *dyn hysbys*. He watched as the conjurer laid a coffin across some chairs, and sure enough, three days later the porter's friend was laid to rest in it, just as the porter had seen. And the corpse candle led a procession to his friend's grave.'

A voice calls out, 'Hettie Howells, gwrach, gwrach, gwrach!'

A little boy runs away into the shadows.

'Run, Willie John, or I'll turn you into a toad!'

'Can you do that, Hettie?' asks Mr Kelly.

'No, but Willie John thinks I can.'

Hettie is on a roll, 'A girl from Llandysul came to Pontfaen recently, never been here before. She'd been having nightmares about being raped and drowned in the village. I told her that when the Normans came here a thousand years ago, they drowned the village men and raped the women. Her dreams were a memory of our shared ancestry. Nan gave her some herbs.'

The corpse candle flies down the lane from Penrhiw and settles over Mr Kelly's head, then hovers over an empty corner of the churchyard.

'Ha! The corpse candle has it wrong. There are no graves there,' he grins.

Hettie's teeth glow in the dark, 'A few days ago the vicar told me the churchyard is full, so the next grave will be dug there, where the light is now.'

Mr Kelly realises he may be witnessing his own funeral, that he is standing on a corpse road, and Pontfaen is full of witches.

'Have you still got your heart?' asks Hettie, as she unlaces a boot, and pulls a nail from the sole with her teeth.

Mr Kelly holds out the bloodied parcel and closes his eyes while Hettie pierces it with the nail. His hands turn red, blood spatters on his cheek, and the corpse candle vanishes.

'There, you're probably safe now. Mary Thomas of Bengal taught me that, but if you want to be completely sure, you must roast the heart like a chicken.'

Hettie helps Mr Kelly to the Dyffryn Arms where he hurries into his bedroom and lies awake all night clutching the heart to his chest.

Two hares keep watch outside, one old and gnarled, the other young. Both have scars from the corners of their eyes to their mouths.

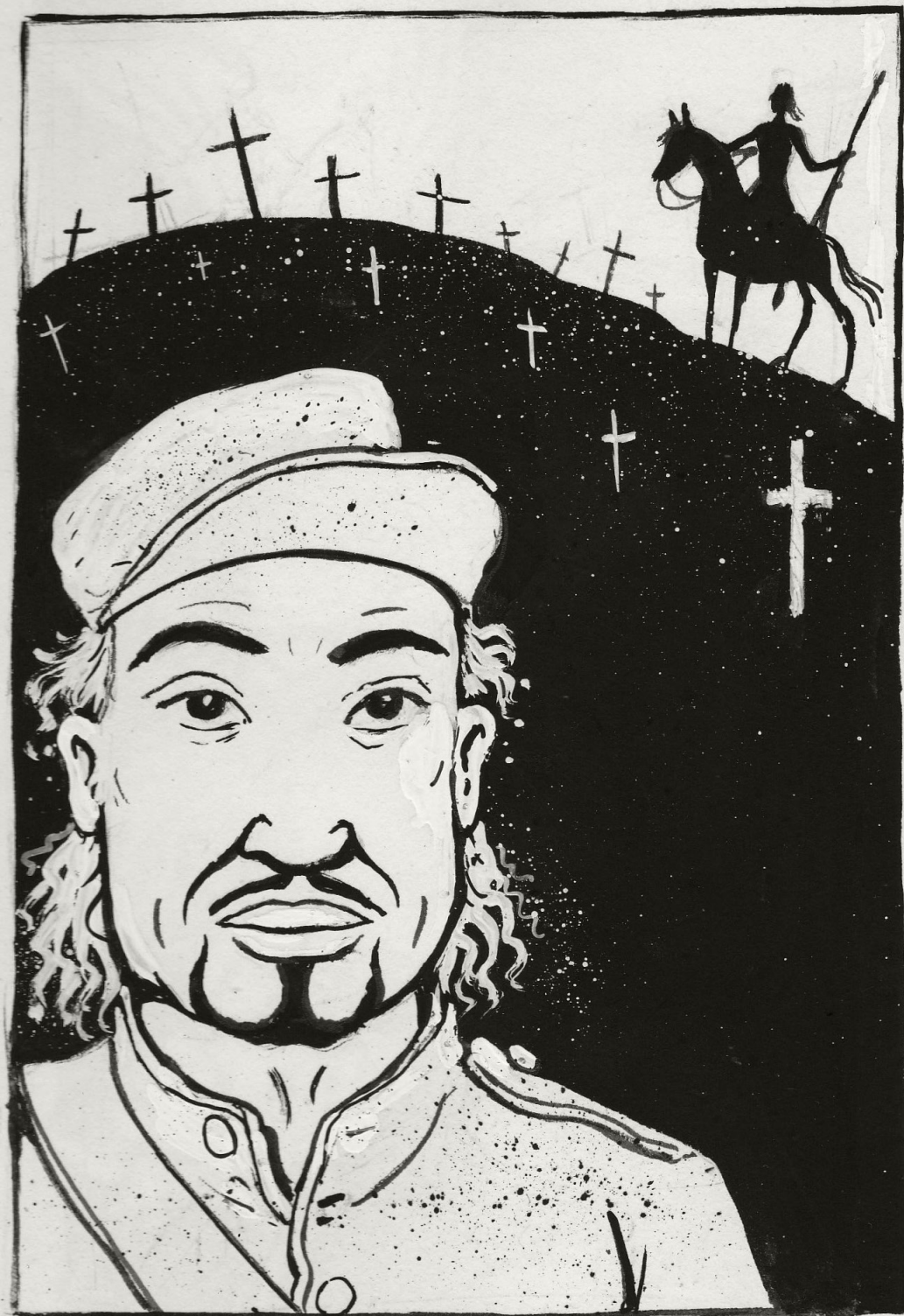
In the morning, Hettie walks John Kelly silently back to the old town. The streets are filled with rubble, and in the square is a wooden donkey with a body made from a beer barrel and a head from a bucket, a mop for a tail, four broom handle legs fixed to a charred pallet with a wheel at each corner. On its back is a straw figure with a banner round its neck saying 'Surveyor'.

Mr Kelly politely thanks Hettie and scurries away down the road towards Haverfordwest, with a recommendation to Mr Brunel that the train and ferry should be considered a priority in a town cursed by road tolls and witches.

Hettie sits on the quay with a bucket full of fish. She licks the blade of her knife and thinks Mr Kelly was a much nicer surveyor than that rude Dr Skinner who wrote such nasty things about Fishguard.

And she will have another heart as soon as she finds Thomas Williams.





Chapter 5

Buffalo Bill and the Great White Whale

With plesur I am sending you these few lines to inform you that I arrive safe after a rough and long voyage of 17 days. but thank God I am safe and I got a good situation in one of the best shops in the city I hope I shall have my health there is some good shops here better than London.

Letter from Wiliam Batine James to his brother, sent from 101 Church St., Toronto, April 1871

Back in 1980 I went to see *Flash Gordon* at the Studio Cinema on West Street, later to become Theatr Gwaun. It was the first movie I'd seen there, and it felt like one of those childhood Saturday matinees, all popcorn and intergalactic blockbuster and snogging on the back row. *The Empire Strikes Back* was released the same year, but this was no *Star Wars*, although it was raised from the mediocre by Brian Blessed's explosive Vultan laugh, which echoed round the auditorium like a banshee. And this wasn't the first time that Hollywood had visited Fishguard.

One dark night in 1954, a local lad was walking along the coast at Strumble Head when he saw a gigantic ghostly white shape out at sea. It looked like a monster sperm whale, but it couldn't be, for he'd only ever seen one when he was crossing the Atlantic. He watched it drift slowly round the cliff and vanish from sight. It must have been a spirit or apparition brought on by an excess of beer. Except he was stone-cold sober, and the whale was very real.

Well, sort of. It weighed 20 tons, was 20 metres long and 6 metres high, with a mechanical steel-frame to represent the middle section, but with no head or tail. It was one of two prop whales, the co-stars of *Moby Dick* that John Huston was filming five miles out at sea from Fishguard Harbour. The script by Ray Bradbury had been tweaked by a rising young Welsh writer, Roald Dahl.

Moby Dick's co-star, Hollywood heart-throb Gregory Peck, was sat on the half-whale's back in his role as the obsessive Ahab, when a rope broke. Free from the tugboat that was hauling it, the metal monster drifted off into the fog, rocking from side to side in the strong waves. Peck lost his footing on the wet surface and landed in the freezing cold sea. He wrote later in his autobiography that he

believed he was about to die, and could just see the headlines: 'Movie Actor Lost on Rubber Whale,' as the star of *To Kill a Mockingbird* followed Ahab to a watery grave. Fortunately he was rescued by the coastguard and returned to the vicarage where he was staying, and to the unrequited affections of the vicar's daughter. The whale, however, was never seen again, except by the sober lad on Strumble Head, whose name was William Batine James.

The novel *Moby Dick* was published in 1851, two years after William was born. So, in 1954, he would have been one hundred and five years old when he saw the whale. In fact he was twenty-seven. He'd been twenty-seven for seventy-eight years. Time isn't linear when you're a ghost, wandering around, forgotten, drifting in and out of sight. That's what happens when you leave and never return alive. You become the imperfect memory of those you left behind, who only remember the stories about you.

William grew up at Pencnwc, Dinas, raised into a life of farming, family, chapel, weather, shipwrecks, storms, culm making, pig sticking, travellers, reading and radicalism. As a child he saw the *Fari Lwyd*, not the usual horse's skull on a pole, but the *march cynfas*, a canvas horse that visited the farms on Pencaer and terrified the life out of his nonconformist father. He watched a sailing ship break up on the rocks as the crew climbed the rigging, only to be rescued by the local fishermen who roped them together and dragged them to shore. Life was hard and short on land and sea. William lost too many siblings before he was twenty. He grew restless. Somewhere out there in the mists of Cardigan Bay was something better. A utopia, perhaps?

When William became a ghost, he drifted aimlessly, with no one to haunt. In fact, it was he who was haunted, not by phantoms or spectres, but by his own dreams and desires, his endless search for perfection. During his teenage years he watched the horizon. Occasionally he glimpsed Ireland which he imagined was the lost land of Atlantis, and beyond was the mythical island of Hy Brasil, and even further west lay the land where dreams came true. His girlfriend Elizabeth warned him to be careful of pursuing dreams. She'd read Melville's book and told William not to become obsessed with pursuing great white whales. She wanted them to run a flower shop, or a drapery business, where they bought rolls of cloth from the wholesalers in Carmarthenshire to make into Welsh plains and export them to the States where they would be sold to native people to add their own designs and decorations.

William and Elizabeth had grown up together and she had always been the practical one, so he listened to her. Her father, a customs officer in Penfeidr, paid the deposit on a shop in Fishguard, while William took employment as a commercial traveller at Mr Thomas' drapers shop in Llanelli, where he showed sample books to tradesmen and merchants like Mr E. Evans of London House and H. S. Howells of Hall Street. 'My best customers,' he called both of them. Then he told Elizabeth he was earning enough to make a new life in America, then send for her and they would live the dream together. She told him he was as mad as Ahab. They married at Cardiff Registry Office on 5th Feb 1871, and six days later he sailed from Cardiff docks on the *Avon*, a coal ship. She gave him a *ci-corc*, a cork dog, made of two beer corks for its head and body, matches for legs, neck and ears. If he arrived safely, the luck would pass into the dog and keep him safe in the new world. He was twenty-two. Elizabeth was twenty.

After seventeen days of gut-churning seas, William arrived in Toronto, and found a job in a city department store, finer than any in London, or so he convinced himself. He wrote home asking for money but his requests went unanswered, so he crossed the border to Chicago, enlisted for five years with E Company of the Grey Troop of the 7th Cavalry, and was assigned to post civil-war reconstruction. By the summer of 1871 he was stationed at Fort Lincoln, near Mandan in the Lakota territories of North Dakota, where the legendary Prince Madog was believed to have settled after he fled the civil war in Gwynedd in 1171 in a ship held together with stags' horn. Some believed the Mandan spoke Welsh. They didn't, but William dreamed he was a son of Madog.

He was assigned to help survey a route for the North Pacific Railroad, then he helped build a fort to protect the gold prospectors who swarmed through the Black Hills. But this was Lakota land, and their leader *Tháthánka íyotake*, known to the invaders as Sitting Bull, was about to lead his people into battle to protect the buffalo and themselves.

And this is where memory becomes hazy. William was promoted to sergeant, but he was still short of money and filled with hiraeth. He had never told the family he had enlisted. He dreamed of running a small-town shop with Elizabeth, where they would import cloth from Wales to sell to the Lakota. He had more confidence in them than his own officers. Why were the Europeans taking native land when there was so much elsewhere? What was the value of gold to the dead? Was he part of

an invading army bent on wiping out the Lakota? His grandparents had watched an invasion in Llanwnda in 1797, when French soldiers tried to take his people's land and farm. This was madness.

He wrote home to his brother in November 1874: 'This is the last time I'm going to write to you if you don't reply so I must wish you all good health and hope we will meet in heaven above. Goodbye forever.'

in April 1875, he wrote again: 'I don't suppose you will write to a Brother in a strange Country so far from home. Out of site out of mind.'

Sitting Bull, emboldened by a vision in which he foresaw soldiers falling like grasshoppers from the sky, attacked the 7th Cavalry on June 25, 1876 at Greasy Grass in Montana. General Custer and two hundred and sixty eight cavalrymen of the Grey Troop were killed; fifty five were wounded, and six died later. Most were buried on the battlefield, with wooden stakes to mark their graves, then reburied beneath headstones, but few were identified. Many were European, but only one was Welsh. 'The body of said Wm. B James was supposed to be among those recovered and buried on the battlefield, but was not recognised,' wrote Lt Charles C. de Rudio at Fort Lincoln on 2 November 1876.

William was twenty-seven when he died and only a few months from being demobilised. So he took a passage home. A ghost didn't need money to buy a ticket. His family in Fishguard never knew he was dead, nor that he was home. Elizabeth had moved back to Newport to look after her parents. Every evening he watched her, unseen but sensing she felt his presence. For thirty years the farm executors searched for him, little knowing he was home. His parents and siblings died, and in 1904 the estate was estimated to be worth £6,266, almost a million today. But what's money when you can't touch it?

One evening, William peered over Elizabeth's shoulder at an advertisement in the newspaper for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. They had visited Cardiff for six days in 1891 and paraded through the city while buffalo grazed peacefully in Sofia Gardens. Now Bill Cody was back. They were to perform in Aberdare, Abergavenny, Aberystwyth, Carmarthen, Dolgellau, Oswestry, Porthmadog, Rhyl, and on 14 May 1904, in Pembroke Dock. And there would be a re-enactment of the battle of Greasy Grass in which William died.

He stood on the station platform as three black trains hired from Cambrian Railways unloaded some five hundred people, one hundred and eighty horses, eighteen bison, and a herd of Texan Longhorns. They erected a 20,000 seat canvas arena with dressing rooms, stables and a blacksmith shop. And the Lakota built their teepee village, as they recreated the myth of the Wild West in the Wild West of Wales. William searched his memory but recognised none of this.

At two o'clock the Star-Spangled Banner rang out, the cowboy band started to play and Buffalo Bill, wearing buckskins and a stetson, rode into the arena on a white stallion. There was an exhibition of trick riding, lasso displays, sharpshooting from Cody's adopted son Johnny Baker, an attack on a settler's cabin, the capture of the Deadwood stage, and the US military firing artillery. The gunfire pounded in William's head as Buffalo Bill appeared as General Custer, and when the battle began, William recognised one of the Lakota.

A couple of years after Greasy Grass, Bill Cody had invited Sitting Bull and his Lakota warriors to play themselves in a re-enactment of the battle in which they had fought. It would be a tribute act to frontiersmen, natives, and soldiers, an American variety show that would take the audience into the wild west without fear of being shot, robbed, or stampeded by cattle. Sitting Bull believed this may be a way to present the true nature of his people to a world that misunderstood and mistreated them, but during his first appearance, he was jeered and spat on, and after four months he quit. He returned to the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota where he was shot in December 1890, shortly before soldiers rode into Wounded Knee creek and killed around three hundred Lakota. Many were imprisoned, until Cody arranged for their release on condition they joined the Wild West Show.

William couldn't take his eyes off the Lakota man who was riding round the arena in Pembroke Dock. He had last seen this man at Greasy Grass almost 30 years before, when he was no more than a fresh-faced boy. Amidst the battle, William saw himself reflected in the boy's face and for a fraction of a second he lost concentration. Elizabeth had always told him his daydreaming would be his great white whale. The boy's face was the last he saw. And here was that same face, older but unmistakable.

One of the performers in Pembroke Dock was Wasú Máza, Iron Hail, or Dewey Beard, who had worked with Cody for fifteen years. He had killed a soldier at Greasy Grass as a twenty-year-old boy. He was at Wounded Knee, too, when he was shot twice in the back and once in the leg by the invading soldiers, watched his mother, father and brother die, along with his wife and baby son. He later became a film actor and native rights activist, the last surviving witness of both Greasy Grass and Wounded Knee.

As William watched the Wild West Show in Pembroke Dock, he remembered two years earlier watching Mr William Haggar filming a train at Burry Port, one of the first movies made in Wales. And a few years later he saw the *Mauritania* unloading passengers at the newly opened Goodwick harbour. He watched as young men marched through the streets to the war in France, and a few years later, more soldiers embarked on the ferry to fight in Ireland.

But perhaps strangest of all was the day in 1954, when he saw a great white whale floating off Strumble Head. As he walked down to the harbour he overheard John Huston telling Gregory Peck that he was going to build a new *Moby Dick*. And that's when William realised that his life would never end and he would be twenty-seven forever. Elizabeth's lucky *ci-corc* had kept him safe, and Fishguard would haunt him for as long as there were stories, and people to dream.





Chapter 6

The Swan Girl and the Travellers

'If I knew where I was, I'd know where I want to go'

Deb Winter, Fishguard storyteller.

Autumn 2020.

She scratched her back against a groyne on the beach at Wdig, wiped a drip from her long nose, and wriggled her webbed toes inside her orange wellies while Phoebe Bridgers sang 'Smoke Signals' through her headphones. A solitary child was netting shrimps, two lovers were locked in an unaware embrace, and an elderly couple held hands while licking ice creams. She had an hour to kill before catching the ferry to Rosslare from her disunited kingdom, not that national identity meant anything to her. She was a traveller, without passport or identification papers, with no proof of who she was or where she came from. All she had was a one-way ticket and an urge to experience the romance of Stena Line. Which was a bit silly, because her bank balance was far from romantic and she could have flown to Ireland for free.

She peered through the mist towards where the horizon was hiding, and saw in her mind's eye *Oidheadh Chlainne Lir*, the Children of Lir. Aodh, Fionnghuala, Fiachra and Conn had been cursed by their stepmother Aoife to travel across Éireann for centuries, living sad and stateless lives as *Eaai* or Swans. When their enchantment ended they transformed into three old men and an old woman who spoke the language of white birds.

She took a sketchbook from her backpack and drew Lir's children as four old wrinkled faces singing emigration ballads over an open coffin. They were quite unlike the picture-book illustrations of long-necked pre-Raphaelites with golden locks and flowing white dresses, the personification of the domesticated mute swans the British monarchy used to roast for dinner. Lir's Children must have been wild whooper swans, much like herself with her white-dyed hair, red nose, black bobble hat, off-white parka, camouflage trousers and orange wellies. She may have been born a farmer's daughter in Pencaer but the blood of a traveller whooped

through her veins. She was named after the ballad, Molly Bawn, and she spoke the language of the birds.

One of her ancestors, Grassi, lived by Llyn Glasfryn in the north lands of Pen Llŷn, where she had the job of opening and closing the sluice gates whenever anyone needed water. It was dull and dreary work, so Grassi told herself fairytales to alleviate the boredom. One day she was peering into the mist, lost in daydreams, when the waters overflowed and she was swept into the lake. Her neck stretched, her arms sprouted feathers, her nose turned orange, she hissed and spat and transformed into a swan. For three hundred years Grassi was cursed to swim round and round the lake, whooping and weeping, occasionally emerging in a spectral white gown which terrified the servants at Tŷ Glasfryn.

Molly stopped daydreaming and stuffed the sketchbook in her backpack, rolled up her trousers, kicked off her wellies, and waded into the water. Paddling in the shallows was a man wearing goggles, dressed in a padded Berghaus jacket and a pair of shorts so short he could have been mistaken for a 1980s footballer, but without the mullet. He pulled a piece of dripping wood out of the sea, lifted his goggles and inspected it closely. She stretched her neck and peered over his shoulder.

‘Late 1700s,’ he said without turning to face her, ‘when the French invaded, a piece of a crate. Maybe from that Portuguese wine ship. Hoped it might have been older, perhaps from a birch tree in the forest that grew here. Mint?’

‘No thanks, I just ate a tin of laverbread. Hope you don’t mind me asking, but what you doing? Sorry, I’m nosey.’

‘Underwater archaeology. Deep mapping. Tracing the contours of the land up to 7,000 years ago, long before this was all sea. I’m hoping to get the money to hire a boat and drill into the seabed, but it’ll cost £80,000. You wouldn’t be a wealthy patron, by any chance?’ He turned to her, and his face visibly dropped.

‘Sorry,’ said Molly, ‘I only have enough to pay the ferryman. So if this was land, what was it like? Were there lakes? Waterbirds? Swans?’

‘River valleys stretched out towards Ireland. Forests, swamps, open bush, and yes, further north there was a great lake. I’ve found iron age deer antlers, bear prints and mammoth tusks. Imagine, herds of mammoths roamed here.’

‘Yes, and Bendigeidfran made a bridge with his body over the two rivers so his army could cross over and rescue his sister Branwen from an arranged marriage with the Irish king, back when Pembrokeshire was part of Ireland.’

‘Ah, you know your *Mabinogion*?’

‘No, it’s too weird for me. Mam liked to tell me the stories at bedtime. She was from Pen Llŷn. They’re all storytellers there, like in Ireland. So what do you do with all this wood and antlers and stuff?’

‘I’m compiling a database on the marine archaeology of Cardigan Bay in order to advise the county council and government bodies to beware of speculators and developers. They don’t take a blind bit of notice, of course. They have no respect for the sea because it has no financial value to them. They all voted Brexit. My dad’s Irish and mum’s Welsh. There’s no border out there, just water, no matter what those Eton schoolboys in Westminster say. Have you been to the refugee camp at Penally? That’s what happens when you draw borders in the water and label people as migrants. I need a beer.’

Molly pulled a bottle of Bragdy Llew Blodeuwedd out of her backpack, handed it to the archaeologist and waded back to the shore. She turned to wave goodbye, but he was examining a piece of seaweed. And he had a beard. He was clean shaven a moment ago. She was sure.

She watched the cars and lorries waiting to be loaded onto the vehicle deck of the Stena Europe where they were packed in like pilchards in a tin. Molly’s dad used to do this, and when he quit, she applied for his job, seduced by the romance of the ferry. She liked the idea of tradition, work passing from father to daughter, like her Māori friend Wikitoria who was raised from a baby to run her parents’ harbour ferry in Aotearoa. Wikitoria was born of water, a landless child in a country where rivers have the legal rights of a human. Molly explained this to the ferry company at the interview, but they told her she had to fill in the application form like everyone else and go on a training course, even though her dad had taught her everything he knew. So she decided that one day she would fly to the other side of the world.

She climbed to the top deck and watched as Strumble Head melted into the mist. In the cosiness of the cafe, passengers drank coffee, doom-scrolled their phones, and glued their eyes to the big screens. No one noticed the white-haired girl waving

to a mermaid who was taking a swig from a bottle of madeira. The mythical and the mundane sit hand-in-hand on the ferry.

She sank into one of four artily designer armchairs, rummaged in her backpack for a sketchbook, and began to draw the passengers while carefully avoiding eye contact. What was it like to be human? How would these land creatures manage in her waterworld, without boundaries or comfortable chairs to console them? What's the point of legs when wings or fins were far more sensible? Perhaps they're scared, poor dabs. Maybe they haven't evolved enough. Or they simply don't think about it at all.

She was staring through the window at the passage of time when she became aware of two men standing by the empty chairs in front of her. One old, one young, both with the same small smiles set in big faces.

'Would we be alright to sit here?' the young one asked.

'Sure, help yourselves,' she replied, thinking this was an opportunity for the community engagement she so disliked. 'Where've you travelled from?'

'Bristol. We sell dad's jewellery at the market there. Want a look?'

He draped a necklace and a bracelet across his palm.

'Sweet, aren't they? I buy them in pieces wholesale and dad threads them together,' said the young man, 'We're a good team. Aren't we, da?'

'Where you going?' she asked, her inquisitiveness getting the better of her.

'Trim,' said the young man, 'Though it's not home. We have a house there. We're not from anywhere you'd know.'

'Try me?'

'Da's family were travellers. His great-grandad was a tinsmith from Pencaer. Da only settled when he met mam and then I came along. Travelling's in the blood. This old ferry is our donkey and cart now.'

'We had a donkey when I was little,' exclaimed Molly, 'Mam said she kept it to remind her of dad. I'm a traveller, too. Well, a flyer. And I'm from Pencaer, though my home is the water. Your da' doesn't say much, does he?'

'He's shy around you, aren't you da'? Can't shut him up usually. He's only quiet when he's painting. Show the lady one of your pieces, dad.'

Molly had never been called a lady before. She was proper chuffed.

The old man looked mysteriously at her, fumbled in his shoulder bag and pulled out a matchbox cut to look like a toy theatre, with a painted scroll turned by two matches. As the scroll moved, a girl transformed into a swan.

Molly stared into the old man's watery eyes, 'It's exquisite. Is it a story?'

'Dad speaks in stories,' said the son, 'He's a seanchaí. He can tell a tale as fine as Eddie Lenihan. Learned them when he was travelling with his parents. He changed his surname after all the discrimination in England. 'No Irish' in the windows, and the whole racist 'Mick' thing. Go on, da', tell the lady a tale.'

The old man's eyes sparkled, he looked up, and words flowed like red wine.

'It was the 1850s, and a traveller lad like myself, a great ancestor of mine you might say, worked at a farm near Capel Salem, Pencaer, near where you were born, Molly. He was out snaffling a few lobsters from the pots at Carregwastad, when a swan landed on the rocks. He crept closer and raised his gun for he thought the bird would make a fine roast, when it removed its wings and feathers and out stepped a young woman. And she was naked, but I shouldn't be telling you that, should I? He knew the stories about swan girls, so while she was swimming in the sea, he took her wings and feathers, thinking he would own her. She walked out of the water, stared into his eyes and told him to return her clothes. He refused, and said he loved her. She told him he knew nothing about her, so there was a lot of flirting and she followed him home. He lit the fire to keep her dry, but she sat in a tub of salt water. He fed her rich foods, but all she ate was seaweed. He gave her pretty dresses which were rough against her skin. In time they had children with long curved necks who preferred to swim than go to school.

One day she told her man there was a glass mountain on an island in the ocean between Wales and Ireland, and on top of that mountain was the nest of a bird so rare it laid only one egg and in that egg was enough gold to make them rich. Well, the man wanted the gold, but how would he reach the mountain? She smiled, changed into a swan, he climbed on her back and she swam to the island. But how would he climb to the top of a glass mountain? She turned herself into a ladder

and told him not to tread on the last rung on the way down. So up he climbed and took the egg, but he stepped on the last rung and when she turned back into a girl, her hand was broken. She dressed herself in her wings and feathers, placed the egg back on the nest and flew away out to sea. And she's still flying. And the man is still crying.'

Molly was enchanted, 'Where did you hear that tale?'

'Mam heard it from her great-grandmother who worked as a servant at Trenewydd near Strumble Head. The farmer was a kindly woman and she gave work to travellers from Ireland, and made beds for them in the nine barns, providing they accompanied her to Capel Salem on Sundays. She employed two lads who'd fled the famine, and one of them married my great grandmother after he saw her on the cliff at Carregwastad singing to the people hidden by the mist. He called her his mermaid, for she made necklaces and bracelets, and gave them to the children as *calennig* when the fiddlers came to play and the chairs and tables were rolled back for the dancing. She built a great mountain of glass lobster floats by the front door, and grew vines over the front gate to stop people calling unannounced. And she made a *Mari Lwyd* to entertain the children in Cwm Gwaun at Old Christmas. She layered hedges, sowed black oats, built stone walls, made culm, spread potato dung, bound the barley and prepared the neck feast. And she loved the pig sticking, because that was when old Shemi Wâd came to tell tales.'

Molly became excited, 'My mam knew Shemi's stories. Tell us one?'

The seanchaí continued, 'My friend James Glandŵr the metal worker told me that old Shemi once grew a giant cabbage so big that he didn't have a pot big enough to cook it in. One night at the Rose and Crown he asked James if he had a big pot. James told him that there was a giant copper cauldron back home in Ireland made by forty tinsmiths, and it was so big they couldn't hear each other hammering from one side to the other. Shemi asked James why they wanted such a big pot. James grinned, 'because one day they knew some silly old fool would grow a cabbage too big to boil''.

The old man produced from his backpack a homemade book of Shemi's tales that Bili John had written down in Welsh. Molly leafed through the book, memorising as much as she could. She stared spellbound into the old man's eyes, 'Can you speak the language of the birds? Asking for a friend.'

He held her gaze with those black caterpillar brows and said, 'I was with a family last week who were bidding farewell to a young girl who was leaving for work in Wellington in New Zealand. They asked her for a song and she pulled the phone from the pocket of her jeans and googled an old emigration ballad, and when she sang, everyone started crying, and she was crying herself by the end. Sad to see our young people leaving again. She was a lot like you, Molly. White hair, flying away over the ocean. She spoke to the birds, too.'

The old man grinned like a hundred cats, and she couldn't help but smile back. No point in asking how he knew her name. She gave him the sketch she had drawn of him while he was telling, and said she was going for a little air. She stood at the prow of the boat, and watched the black storm clouds fill the sky as a few petrels skimmed the waves. She knew those two traveller men had the same blood as hers, and that without ID or a passport, she may not be allowed into Ireland. She didn't know whether she'd crossed the border, or whether she was in Europe or still on the Plague Island. Not that it mattered. The sea has its own culture. She stared into the mist, and sang an old emigration ballad, which sounded a lot like Phoebe Bridgers' 'Motion Sickness.'

Molly raised her arms and smelled the sea air,
thought of her friend Wikitoria on her ferry in Aotearoa,
dangled her hand in the harbour water, free as a bird,
and by the time her thought was over,
she had melted into the mist.





Chapter 7

Iola and the Yole Girl

*Na oure gladès ana whilke we dellt wi' mattoke, an zing t'oure caulès wi plou,
wee hert ee zough o'ye colure o' pace.*

*In our valleys, where we were digging with the spade, or as we whistled to
our horses in the plough, we heard the distant sound of the wings of the
dove of peace.*

From a submissive spoken by the Yole people of Forth to the Lord
Lieutenant of Ireland, at Ballytrent, Wexford, in 1836.

A seal watched as a fisherman dropped his anchor off Dinas Head, threw three lobster pots and a net overboard, wrapped himself in his oilskins, pulled a sou'wester over his eyes, lay down in the prow, took a swig of gin from his flask and closed his eyes. The seal grasped her opportunity. She bit a hole in the net, and was away in the blink of a squid's eye with a mouthful of herring.

When he awoke, the fisherman noticed the seal, hauled out on a rock wiping fish guts from her whiskers. He picked up a green glass float, raised his arm, and was about to hurl it at her when he noticed the position of the sun. It was almost two o'clock, and he had been booked to collect some visitors from Parrog Bach and take them to Wdig to catch the ferry. He made more money from tourist trips round the bay than from fishing, especially when he spent so much time mending the holes the seals tore in his nets. And now he'd never be able to row to Parrog in time, and wouldn't get paid at all. He was taking aim with the glass float, when he heard a voice.

'Throw me a rope.' The seal was leaning on one flipper while fanning herself with the other.

'Seals can't talk,' muttered the fisherman, his arm frozen in mid-air, as he examined his flask to see how much gin he'd drunk before he fell asleep.

'Of course we can talk. Your people just don't listen,' said the seal. 'Throw me a rope, and I'll get your visitors to the ferry on time.'

So the fisherman knotted one end of a rope, tied the other end to the boat and threw it into the sea. The seal dived in, picked up the rope between its teeth, towed the boat to Parrog Bach, collected the visitors and delivered them to the ferry, all in the blink of a whale's eye. The people were so pleased to meet a real seal, they paid the fisherman double. And so the seal and the fisherman worked together, and with the money they earned ferrying visitors around, they bought enough herring to fill their bellies without going fishing.

'Isn't that one of Shemi Wād's stories, Mam?' said lola, as she lifted an orange plastic float from the water into *Rosina*, their brick-red fishing boat.

'He told that story about himself. He was lazy,' said Mam as she hauled a pot onboard and pulled out a large lobster. 'Like yourself!'

'I'm not lazy. I like to watch time pass.' lola lifted the lobster from the pot, wrapped an old fishing line round its claws and dropped it in the ice bucket.

lola and Mam lived in a terraced house at Cwm yr Eglwys next to the ruins of the church that had been wrecked in the storms of the 1850s. They hauled *Rosina* into the graveyard and gave the lobster to her owner Dai John, who had retired from the sea, but couldn't bear to part with his one true love. He made a deal with Mam that *Rosina* was hers providing she paid him rent in fish rather than cash. Catch nothing, pay nothing. Mam agreed but made Dai promise that lola would inherit their business empire when she turned twenty-one. Dai mumbled under his breath and crossed his fingers behind his back.

Fishing was women's business in Cwm yr Eglwys. The herring were long gone, but there were enough mackerel and lobsters, and they dug for mussels at low tide. lola sold them to the pubs and restaurants in town, but each month she was paid less. One evening, she was waiting for a landlady to pay cash from the till when she noticed a **quare** expensive couple being served dinner, a red lobster on a plate surrounded by generic greenery from a plastic bag bought from Costcutter. They looked like the sort of people who brought their own food with them in a camper van, and only spent money in the town when they wanted an occasional treat of fresh lobster in an authentic captain's cabin. The sort of visitors who paid a small fortune for a trip round the bay to see the seals yet grumbled at the price of fish. They never noticed the invisible girl whose mother had caught their dinner off Dinas Head the day before.

'The lobster sett whole on the table has its special qualities, he yeldeth exercise, sustenance and contemplation: exercise in cracking his legges and claws; sustenance by eating the meate; contemplation in beholding the curious work of his compleate armour both in hue and workmanship.'

George Owen of Henllys, 1603

lola thought of Mam struggling to earn a living. Her imagination overflowed, her **blooed** boiled, and the lobster rose from the plate, nipped the noses of the two fancy people, washed off its red coat in the ladies' loo, and dived into the toilet pan. The people complained to the waitress that their dinner was undercooked and demanded their money back. The following week, Mam struck a deal with a lorry driver who drove the lobsters to fancy hotels in European holiday resorts, places lola could only dream of.

Words swirled round lola's **brian**, but not Pembrokeshire Welsh or English or any vocabulary she'd learned at school. This was the language she had spoken from birth. Mam thought it was an overactive imagination. The fisherwomen said it was gibberish, but lola knew she had been born in the wrong body.

The first word lola spoke after the midwife cut the cord was **mulke**. Her parents repeated 'milk' over and over again, and tried to teach her to say 'llaeth', but she stubbornly demanded **mulke**. When she first saw the family goat she called it '**Gurthe**,' and after that, all goats were 'Gertie.' She called people **vroene**, friends. She played **keek**, not peepo. Seaweed was **wor**. Everything was **quare** bad or **quare** good or just **quare**. Her parents called her their **quare** girl, for they couldn't understand where a toddler could have heard all these words. Once, they found her swimming out at sea with a large seal. They rowed out in *Rosina*, dragged lola on board, and shook her with anger and relief. She pointed to the land and repeated the word, '**lhoan**'.

One day lola overheard her parents arguing. Mam said there was something wrong with the girl, and that it was all her husband's fault, singing those strange songs to her. Later that day they couldn't find their daughter. They ran up and down the beach shouting her name and knocking on doors, until Dad found her talking to a girl in a blue frock and a **kircher**, a bonnet that hid her red hair. The girl was hammering two pieces of flint together.

‘What’s your name?’ asked lola

‘Yole,’ said the girl.

‘You can’t be, I’m lola.’

‘Yole are my people. It means Old in my language.’

‘Mam says lola means beautiful.’

‘Then we are both beautiful and old,’ said the girl.

‘Where are you from?’ asked lola

‘Out there,’ the girl pointed towards the west, ‘though it was all forests and swamps, rivers and lakes when I was a child. There was no sea then.’

The two girls stared at the reflection of the sun in the eastern sky. The Yole girl stopped chipping at the flint, and gave it to lola. It was sharp at one end and had a hole through the other.

‘It’s a needle. For stitching your mother’s nets back together.’

Dad watched his daughter talking to this strange girl with blue ribbons in her hair, wiped a tear from his eye with his shirtsleeve, sang *Ee mýdhe ov Rosslarè* quietly to himself. That evening there was another argument, and come daylight, he walked out the door. His spare trousers and clean shirt were draped over the back of the chair, his shaving razor still in the washing bowl, and *Rosina* stood alone on the beach in need of a lick of paint. Some of the fisherwomen said he’d run off with a floozie from Tenby, others that he had walked into the sea singing that strange song, but most believed he’d returned to the otherworld. He wasn’t a local man. He turned up one day, *fustered* lola’s mam, and moved into her cottage. A *quare* man, they said, a man of the *lhoan*, who preferred stonewalling to lobsters. The fisherwomen shook their heads.

Mam wiped away her tears, tied a blue ribbon in lola’s hair, sat her amongst the green glass lobster pots, taught her how to mend nets and raised her as a fish-girl. And that’s when she told Shemi’s story of the fisherman and the seal.

As lola grew, the fisherwomen agreed there was something strange about the child. Her body was on land but her mind was out to sea. Maggie Cwm Gwaun was

convinced that lola spoke the language of the fairies, or was from the submerged land, or the underworld of Annwn, or even Tír na nÓg. But then, Maggie was considered to be away with the fairies herself. She lived in a teepee, played a drum, wore a purple gossamer dress and flowers in her hair, danced on the full moon and saw the little people every day by the stream at the bottom of her garden. And they had wings.

Dai John never said a word to contradict Maggie’s stories until one day when he and Mam were repainting *Rosina*’s hull brick red. Without looking up he suddenly said that the little people came to his farm. They weren’t small. They were human sized. *Tylwyth teg*. They had visited ever since he was lola’s age. Maybe she was one of them? Mam asked him why he thought this, but Dai wouldn’t say any more in case *y bobl bach* never came again. Mam didn’t laugh. Dai was weathered by the years, kind to the core, and not at all mystical. He knew lola spoke a lost language, and she didn’t call the little people *fairies* or *tylwyth teg* or *y bobl bach*. She knew them as *ammache*.

When lola turned sixteen, Mam said she could take *Rosina* out alone to check the lobsterpots. On her way home one day, she stopped on the beach at Parrog to see if the two ladies who ran the old black and white striped cafe wanted a lobster. The ladies had always been kind to her, and gave her a few pennies in return for the empty bottles that visitors left on the beach. She helped them make a mosaic of the bottle caps that spelled ‘Beach Cafe’.

lola bought a lemonade, and had a *saak* in the sunshine. She was feeling a little *drazed*, in a *fash*, you might say, if you spoke lola’s language.

Yole the flint-girl sat next to her and pointed at the shining brick-red *Rosina*.

‘You’re leaving?’ asked Yole girl.

‘I was never from here,’ said lola staring at the horizon.

‘You’re looking for your dad?’

‘I want to know why he left.’

‘My people will look after you,’ and she pointed at a watching seal.

‘Throw me a rope,’ spoke the seal.

‘Seals can’t talk,’ said lola with a grin.

‘Of course we can talk. Your people just can’t hear,’ replied the seal.

‘Mam told me all about you. And I don’t need help, I can look after myself.’

‘You won’t last long out there without flippers, fins or gills. You’ll die of cold. Look at you, you’re as thin as a pipefish.’

lola stuck her tongue out at the seal, climbed into *Rosina*, knotted a rope and threw it into the sea. The seal took the knot in its teeth and towed *Rosina* into the mist towards the horizon to who knows where.

Yole girl shaded her eyes as the boat faded away. She remembered when her family sailed towards that mystical land they believed was Atlantis. That was a thousand years ago. Her family had migrated from Frisia and Normandy, through Kent, and crossed the sea to Wexford. And now she was back in Pembrokeshire, dressed in her blue frock and *kircher*, still a young girl, but inside forever *Yole*. Old. She was *Ee mýdhe ov Rosslare*, a maid of Rosslare.

The seal towed *Rosina* through the mist until they came to the pier at Ballygeary, where lola climbed out and set foot on the *lhoan*. The *zin* shone brightly and a little *hempeen* sang sweetly from a branch, as she turned to watch the seal tow *Rosina* back towards *Cwm yr Eglwys*, lola’s *bellee* rumbled with *hungherth*, so she walked into Kelly’s tearoom and bought spiced corn *breed*, *buskés*, and a bottle of *mulke* to make *strabut*, oatmeal porridge. The *mulke* reminded her of a scab on a cut childhood knee.

She *mingle-mangled* along the road, passed funeral crosses tacked to trees, and heard a weird bleating she knew was a *gurthe*. A *haar galshied a vierd durst a bargher*, a hare stared at her while a weasel crossed the road, and words flooded through her like *blooed*, the language of her birth.

People on the road greeted her with a smile, never *bolsker*. She took a job on a farm, where the women taught her how to grow *neeps*, beans, peas and barley, and how to brew *letch*, beer from wild hops. They dressed her in a lilac *kircher*, a frock tied across the waist, and a bonnet that covered the blue ribbons in her hair. The men wore wide-brimmed hats, waistcoats, short trousers and long socks, and

everyone took an *enteete*, a nap in the afternoons. They sang carols and went mumming at Christmas round Enniscorthy, dressed in uniforms as St George, St Patrick, Oliver Cromwell, the Doctor, and Beelzebub. lola was Little Devil D’Out.

She was *amain*, doing well, living off the *lhoan* as she always knew she would. She could read the earth like a book. When she dug a hole, she could tell if the soil had been disturbed before, and she knew the history of a farm by the age of land drains. And that it was wise never to fell a lone thorn tree, and to always speak kindly to a weasel. Her skin became the colour of copper.

One day a man walked down the road singing:

‘Cham góeen to tell thee óa taale at is drúe
Aar is ing Rosslare óa mýdhe geoudè an drúe
Shoo wearth ing her haté óa ribbonè at is blúe
An shoo goeth to ee faaythè earchee deie too
Ich loove ee mýdhe wee ee ribbonè blúe
At coome to ee faaythè éarchee arichè too
Fan ‘cham ing ee faaythè éarchee arichè too
To estóthè mýdhe wee ee ribbons blúe

As the man stood in front of her, she saw he had a weathered face with a huge grey moustache, a tousel of white hair, and a belly that stretched his shirt to the limits of its stitches. His voice charmed the birds from the trees. lola stood tall, *brazon* and *bra*, bold and brave, and sang back:

I’m going to tell you a tale that is true
there is in Rosslare a maid good and true
she wears in her hat a ribbon that is blue
and she goes to the faith every day too
I love the maid with the ribbons blue
that comes to the faith every morning too
when I’m in the faith every morning too
to meet the maid with the ribbons blue.

And the man knew her, *Ee mýdhe ov Rosslare*, the maid of Rosslare.



Over the Water to Anywhere

Deb Winter

Deb runs Straeon Gwaun, Fishguard's storytelling club, and is one of the foremost storytellers in Wales, having won the Gwobr Esyllt Award in 2021 at *Beyond the Border International Storytelling Festival*. I interviewed Deb twice for the book, and she was so hugely entertaining and insightful, I gave her the option of writing the transcripts in her own words, which she did.

I can never resist a ferry – it doesn't matter where it's going, that's not the point. Maybe it's in the blood: Viking genes, traveller genes, how could I say no to a boat trip? If there's a stretch of water with another land on the other side, why wouldn't you go? The feeling of exhilaration as you board and smell the engine oil and smoke and salt air, see the coils of rope on the deck, hear the blast from the funnel – we're off! Past the headland, past the lighthouse, past the mythical island you can't see at this moment but you know is there and off to the open sea where the kittiwake is more at home than you are and the dolphins laugh as they speed past.

Home is such an elusive concept for those of us who were moved from place to place as children, never feeling that you belonged anywhere. I think that's why I feel such a sense of freedom and escape on a ferry: it's a freedom from that sense of not belonging, because you're not *meant* to belong on a ferry. Nobody belongs to this in-between-boat: we're all travellers, we're all strangers, all stranded between leaving and arriving, on a deliciously slow boat offering you the chance to just 'be', without striving.

Air travel feels unnatural: one minute you're in a rain-swept wind-tunnel in Heathrow then in no time at all you're walking into a wall of heat at Athens. You've arrived but there's been no 'travelling' – you're just goods moved from A to B. But a slow boat to China gives you time to navigate the change of country, the change of culture, to think about where you've been, where you're going.

Family and the ferry were the main reasons I moved to Fishguard/Abergwaun. I know very little about my Irish roots apart from what Auntie Kathleen told me, that my great-grandfather, Patrick Mahoney, was a travelling man from Cork, but

on going over to Ireland I had a feeling like the one you get when you meet a really close friend/lover-to-be for the first time – a feeling of recognition, as if you’ve known them all your life.

Ireland’s a great country for the solo traveller: you’ll never want for someone to talk to. It’s a wonderland for the collector of stories. I defy anyone to travel slowly around Ireland and not come home with a backpack crammed with tall tales. I can only talk about my own experience, but I also found people more accepting of the possibility of magic and myth existing alongside the prosaic every-day reality.

One summer’s day I was camped behind a deserted beach and there was a person-sized rock pool that looked so tempting, so I took my clothes off and slid into the seaweed. The sun came out, so I just sat there, blissfully lounging in cool water with the sun on my face, my long and rather wild, uncombed hair trailing into the pool. Suddenly, a young man appeared from the sand dunes and he just stopped and stared, really stared, with his mouth open.

I said, ‘Good morning.’

He said ‘Oh! You really had me going there! I really t’ought you were a mermaid.’

It was a lovely moment and as he walked off, we both had great big smiles stretched over our faces because he had believed, really believed, in his mermaid, if only for a few minutes.

One morning on the Sheep’s Head Peninsula I set off walking with the drizzly-mist low as the heather, then, as the sun began to burn off the cloud, the rocky footpath through the gorse made magical by shape-shifting mist. I chanced upon a large pool, almost a lake, with mist lying low over the surface but as it burned off the wispy white shapes turned into two white swans gliding on the water. I lingered like the mist, enchanted, then, as I climbed over a rocky outcrop to the other side, a man in a black hat emerged out of the drifting mist and asked me if I’d seen two swans on the pool. Without preamble he told me that many centuries ago, a monk had lived alone in a tiny stone cell by the pool for thirty years and this hardy hermit was held to be so spiritually wise that the King of Spain had sent his two beloved sons to study with him. Tragically, the two princes drowned whilst swimming in the pool – but at the moment of drowning their souls became two white swans. He said there had always been two white swans

on that pool for as long as anyone can remember. Then the stranger just disappeared into the mist again.

Walking across the bog road in County Mayo, again with the mist creeping over the heather, I was startled by a voice that was coming from near my feet. I stopped, expected to see one of the good folk, hoping it wasn’t a puca, only to see a tiny, wiry old man in a pit of his own digging, cutting peat with a spade. He told me to look out for the tail-fin of an aeroplane that had come down near there many years ago and gradually been sucked down into the squelchy bog. To this day the image is so strong in my mind that I think I saw the tail-fin: but it may just have been that he painted such a vivid image with his description of the sunken plane that I think I saw it. I know that I got hopelessly lost, thought I’d never see Wales again, but then miraculously emerged from the fog on a high cliff right next to a silver sculpture of flying swans: the children of Lir. Ireland delivers magic, I tell you. Just go there and drift through the countryside like the mist and Interesting Things will happen to you too.

As for the man I met at the legendary sessions at Ellen’s pub (so deep in rural Sligo that you have to follow paper arrows pinned to telegraph poles to find it), who offered to sail me to the Lake Isle of Innisfree, but who failed to notice the storm clouds and capsized us into the Lough, all I can say is that his intentions were good (mostly), and that if I meet you I’ll tell you the whole story, which is worth the hearing. And Ellen’s pub is the only pub I’ve ever been in where people banged on the tables yelling for poetry: ‘Yeats! Yeats! Yeats!’ until a man leapt up and recited reams of Yeats by heart. Then ‘Kavanagh! Kavanagh! Kavanagh!’ Only in Ireland, I venture. I remember a frail, spindly man who was at least a hundred years old being physically held up by his friends whilst he played the fiddle, jamming with a lesbian singer-songwriter from Sligo Music School and a Belgian magician on the flute, as I sat drinking Guinness squashed between a poet-friend of Stevie Smith’s and a grave-digger. Oh, I do love Ireland.

Also in County Sligo I was invited to a ‘rambling house’: my first experience in Ireland of the sharing of music, stories, poetry, homemade food and hooch in someone’s home. We rambled late into the night. This was more than a pub session – this was being drawn into a circle of friends, stranger as I was, and for that evening, I belonged.

This is what I aspired to when starting Straeon Gwaun – Fishguard Storytelling. A place where the sharing of stories and music would lead to strangers becoming friends, or at least, coming together in that warm accepting place where hearts are opened to whatever stories are shared by the tellers. I'm happy to say that this seemed to happen and that we were beginning to have to cram people in under the piano or hang them from the curtain rails due to lack of space. For me it has felt like creating a 'storytelling family' that has room for anyone who wants to join it because that is what stories are for: to bring us together. Musicians are greeted like gods bearing gifts at our story nights, to allow our minds to rest between stories as we digest them and because music is a shortcut to the heart.

Welsh folk tales and songs performed live at Straeon Gwaun help to keep the national oral tradition going and the stories from the rest of the world have never been more needed to remind us we are all part of one human family. Stories from across the world explore the same human needs: for food, love, a home, a sense of belonging; for music, art and story to feed our minds.

These Irish-Welsh projects that encourage us to reach across the water to our nearest neighbour have brought a lasting legacy of stories that link us in a positive way in difficult times. My hope is that the ferry will always be there and that we'll find a way for it to carry Irish storytellers in the flesh to Wales and Welsh ones to Ireland for the future. I'm sure the stories will still find their way across the borders as stories have always done but storytellers travelling slowly in another country will collect stories as surely as magnets attract iron filings.

There's no time to tell you the half of them; so I can only tease you with mention of the builder who accosted me with Wittgenstein and soda bread and who had a peregrine falcon suspended from his living room ceiling; the midnight children on the sand-dunes who took me to see Queen Maebh's tomb; and the young woman inspired by the feisty pirate-queen Grainne Mhaol who gave me a heron's feather and elicited from me a vow to come to the aid of Ireland against her enemies should I ever hear a note from the flute her musician friend had made from the heron's thigh-bone.

When you go to collect your own stories, be prepared to slow down. In fact, be prepared to stop entirely. Ireland is the only country where I've been hooted at by a tractor for going too slowly. The fact was that I'd been lost, somewhere in

Galway, and waved at the only other car on the road, approaching me at the crossroads. We both stopped, wound down our car windows and began to talk. After an hour, engines were switched off, as my new friend told me the story of the non-existent signpost. The village had petitioned the traffic department in Dublin for a signpost at the crossroads, fearing that an ambulance would never find its way to them in an emergency. Two years later, after the many bureaucratic procedures had been navigated, a signpost was duly erected, only to be taken down six months later by the Health and Safety department, on the grounds that it might prove a distraction to drivers and cause them to crash. We'd just moved on to chatting about her grand-daughter's career as a stonemason in New Zealand when the tractor came up behind me and hooted vigorously, as our stationary cars were blocking the road.

'Oh!' cried my new friend, 'I forgot to ask you what you'd wanted!'

Me: 'I'm lost. Can you tell me where I am?'

Lady in car: 'Where do you want to go?'

Me: 'I don't know. But if I knew where I was, I could work out where I wanted to go.'

I never did find out where I was, or work out where I wanted to go. I just travelled on, and all was well.



Transcripts

These people all contributed to the film *Uisce Dŵr Water*, and their stories and experiences inspired some of the themes and events in the tales in this collection.

Hedydd Hughes: teacher, folk historian, Mari Lwyd builder

When you think about storytelling, I remember going to the church hall in Fishguard, Mr Jones was there and we were all seated cross-legged on the floor and he was telling a story back there, I remember that ... I think it was at Sunday School when we should have been listening to other types of stories... we were told a Shemi Wâd story, I don't know.

Nanny Goat Street: It's a part of the chapel, not a street. Nobody will know in twenty years' time where Nanny Goat Street was. It's not a street.

Degan had a chapel in the little cove in his farm and apparently he was one of the few survivors of *Cantre'r Gwaelod* when that went into the sea and he was a hermit who established himself in the culture [...] and people came to him to improve their health. There's nothing to see there now, but it's on all the maps, the site of Degan's Capel and the site of Degan's Well. Within living memory my mother-in-law [...] when I was a child, she said that she used to come to Pontarchain for an annual Sunday School Tea Party ... to a little cove which has no signpost, no parking, and you wouldn't imagine it ever occurred if people hadn't told me of it ... and speaking to my friend recently, he explained her old great-grandmother needed water from that well to bathe her eyes. We go on pilgrimages to Pontarchain now, we think it's the best little cove on the Pembrokeshire coastline, and lots of people do still have a warm place in their hearts for that, because of something that was once there.

Many of the families in Fishguard are of mixed origin, there's quite a bit of Irish blood in them, and all in the community have laid side by side and mingled and married and all the rest of it and now it's not possible to separate them, they're just people, and that's an aspect of the community that you wouldn't have in another area ... and that would not have occurred if we had not been an Irish port.

Now and again I just jump on the ship and go. I wouldn't want to go on many

stormy nights ... the wind blowing about your head ... are they really going out in this? And many of the families that are involved with or have members employed with the ferry are also connected with the RNLI. Mr Williams who is a retired captain has been connected to the RNLI for a very long time.

Christine Willison: storyteller, artist, writer, chicken-keeper.

There have been storytellers over the centuries and one famous one was Tom Furlong who lived in Fishguard, he lived in a shed behind some of the big grand houses on Main Street, and every night, local people knew that all they needed to do was take a bottle or a jug to Tom's shed and he would tell them a tale, and he was well known as a practical joker as well.

We have shared stories with people in Ireland. We've gone to Ireland, to Waterford, Wexford, where people have traditional stories, and we've shared our Pembrokeshire stories ... it is an ongoing tradition.

Stories are here, we're not losing them... the difference between a written story and a told story is the audience, and the impact on the way a teller tells the story and the colour they give it and the character.

This is my home. I live in a traditional Pembrokeshire longhouse and I keep chickens and it reminds me of a story about a farmer who lived right here on Pencaer, so it's a very local story, and one night he was putting his chickens away when he came across a mermaid...

Richard Hughes: diver, and keeper of the 1940s films.

On the last club dive in October of 2002 off Strumble Head, at 35m we drifted across the remains of a very old wreck ... we concluded that it must have been a war vessel which soon brought about the murmurings that this was a ship lost in the last invasion of Fishguard in 1797. It was not a French vessel ... this could be a Portuguese wine ship called *Friends* that was lost in that area in December 1796 [...] wrecked at Porth Sychan bay and although the entire crew was lost, much of the cargo of wine barrels were afloat and salvaged. This would have certainly raised the attention of the customs officials so the locals made short work of recovering the cargo and hiding it away in the local farmhouses. It would be nice to think that

although our ship was not a war vessel involved in the Last Invasion of Britain 1797 [...] that it did play a prominent part in the battle towards getting everyone half-cut and bringing the invasion to a successful outcome for us.

Fish-traps were still in use [...] into the nineteenth century when large shoals of herrings were the mainstay of the economy of the twin towns of Fishguard and Goodwick. The fish would have been captured on a falling tide (the highest spring tides would be best) when the outgoing shoals could be driven towards the barriers by people shouting and making a commotion in the water; the retreating tide would leave many fish stranded and they could then be scooped up and captured in baskets or nets or [...] women's skirts. Although these old heaps of slimy stones along the muddy strand line have little obvious attraction to the regular holiday-maker we should acknowledge their significance in connecting the marine heritage of Twin Towns with that of far-flung communities the world over. People who lived by the sea came up with the same ideas and shared in the same activities with a common purpose.

Martin Bates: archaeologist for Cardigan Bay and the Irish Sea

The earliest occupation of Wales if we go back to the last ice age is about 40,000 years ago. But we don't see any archaeology in Cardigan Bay and Pembrokeshire because it's under the sea, it's dry then, and then gradually the sea floods in so about 8,000 years ago the coastline in Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire and up to North Wales is pretty much where it is at the present time, give or take half a mile in places. So the big change has happened by 8,000 years ago, before the neolithic, long before the dolmens in Pentre Ifan, it's still the time of hunter gatherers.

One of the things I quite like about thinking about these landscapes out there is that today, dolphin watching obviously, big thing, pods of dolphins, they live in Cardigan Bay, they don't go anywhere else ... if you go back to the late ice age period, the late pleistocene, those would have been replaced by herds of mammoths who would be doing exactly the same thing as the dolphins, just moving round this landscape in the same way ... and they would have been replaced maybe by red deer and so forth as the climate warmed. I think there's a very nice and unexplored relationship between these herd animals from the late pleistocene and the modern dolphins. It's a nice story.

It's a big grey space out there... Underlying that there should be some sort of a ghost of a signature of what was there before the sea invaded and changed the topography. We can produce a map of where we think the rivers may be....in one case we can see a big lake...the last of the hunter gatherers, these mesolithic people liked lakes, they lived around lakes, they fished, they waterfowled, if anywhere is going to have mesolithic archaeology, it's going to be this lake. The sea formed a superhighway for these people because it was much easier to move around along the coast and on water than it is to move through dense forest, and we see that all the way through to the post medieval people.

Flint isn't native to this area [...] it's coming from Ireland, the closest flint. Go back 30,000 years ago and there's a giant ice flow coming down the Irish Sea. Between Newport and Fishguard there are deep channels created at the time of glaciation. You know the street that runs down to the estuary, Long Street, turn right onto the estuary, there's a peat deposit there that was land before the sea came in and there's a lot of flint and tools, tiny little blades, flakes, debris ... so people are making bows and arrows for the first time.

One of the most interesting things is to see a map drawn from a different perspective. If you draw a map and put Orkney at the centre and you put Britain around that you get a completely different view, it makes you think about geography differently. We're so focused on seeing every atlas has Britain sticking up, and Ireland on the left, and that's the way we see it all. Turn it upside down and that makes you think of it in a different way. It does make you think about borders.

Holly Dunn: Project officer, Seatrust.

Seatrust is a marine wildlife conservation charity and we're based here in Goodwick in Fishguard harbour and our main aim is just to get local people involved with their wildlife... We first started off as a research unit and marine mammals was our top priority, because they are a great indicator species for the health of the ocean. They're a top predator, and if they're not getting their food it means something is going on further down the food chain. We get the Pembrokeshire big five, harbour porpoises, common dolphins, bottle nosed dolphins, Risso's dolphins and Minke whales. We have a regular ferry study following the route from Fishguard to Rosslare and keeping track of the animals we see there.

Unfortunately the fish in the seas have lots of threats, but the main big ones are climate change, plastic pollution... There's also habitat loss, degradation, marine development. We have a lot of marine redevelopment going on in our oceans at the moment, which is great because we want to lessen our use of fossil fuel.

I actually see the sea as more of a universe-type metaphor because you've got the whole thing and then different eco-systems and different habitats working within that sea and if you take one thing out of one of those systems it all becomes unbalanced... And it's so important because the sea produces 70% of the world's oxygen, so every second breath we have is pretty much from the sea. So it's important to keep that system in balance.

There's just so much going on out there that people don't know about, and that's what we're here to teach them, because if we lose our oceans, we lose the world, there's no surviving if there's no oceans.

James January McCann: Irish and Welsh speaker

Stick me on a ferry to Ireland and I see the Irish coast, 'Ah I'm home.'

There's a very clear divide between the countries, partly because of the sea but also because the languages and cultures are very different, and the sea is the obvious visual sign ... It's a gateway. Cross it and you're in a different place.

He [Osian, James's son] went over the sea once, and he can't remember much about it except he went over the sea in a big white boat... Every time we go into Tesco's, in the undercover carpark he (Osian) says it's like that big boat... Tesco's is like going to Ireland.

Great-grandfather brought the family over and I'm not sure whether he was born in Ireland or not, but he definitely considered himself an Irishman. My father was brought up in England but he considered himself an Irishman, and we did the traditional thing of going back home every year to Ireland on holiday, seeing the family... Ireland has always been home, though I lived in England till I was 18, and lived in Wales ever since, but Ireland is home.

Irish was dead in County Wexford by the start of the 20th Century, and then you had Hibernian English, which is increasingly being standardised into generic American English, so a lot of the Irish expressions I grew up hearing in childhood, you'd definitely sound like a country boy if you used them now.

I'm very confused... you grow up Irish in England, then go to Ireland and you're seen as English, which was a large part of the impetus to learn Irish. Then moving to Wales and becoming a Welsh speaker and basically being accepted. This is James and he's Welsh now. He may be Irish and he may be from Portsmouth originally but he's Welsh now... and that's just lovely, because Wales is the only place I've ever felt at home. Because being the Irish kid in England wasn't great. I speak Irish every day with my children, I've never lost that sense of Irishness.

Caeti-Elena Ianuari Mhic Cana: Irish and Welsh speaker.

I can remember telling Osian [her son] all the stories on the way back from Ireland, we had a little cabin and that night... we told him about Branwen and Matholwch, because we were on that sea it made sense that story. Oh my God, here's where Bran crossed the sea here, and I think he wanted to go out into the sea and do it like that.

I don't know, the sea always connects the stories, don't they?

Deb Winter: storyteller and writer and organiser of Straeon Gwaun

I'm also so aware that Ireland was a place of many leavings. One of the most moving moments was going to the Irish Music Festival at Cavan, and in the late-night pub session, people were taking turns to sing ballads, as they do. And a seventeen-year-old girl, very trendy with jeans and a mobile phone bulging in her pocket, stood up and sang one of the old emigration ballads. It was so moving, and she was actually literally leaving the next week, and the parents and grandparents in the pub had tears rolling down their faces. 'We never thought we'd see our young people leaving again', they said to me.

The five peninsulas of Cork are like the five fingers of Mother Ireland's hand stretched out to let her children go, but then, looked at in another way, she's also reaching out to welcome them home again.

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