



ECHOES OF CELTIC MYTHOLOGY

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Belmullet, a sleepy fishing town in County Mayo on Ireland's west coast, was once described by John Millington Synge, the famous playwright and poet, as "without appeal to the imagination." Covered on an isthmus between Broadhaven Bay and Blacksod Bay on Ireland's west coast, the town eschews the lure of the open Atlantic Ocean on the other side of the peninsula, preferring instead to look to the calmer waters of the bays for sustenance. Fishing has been a lifeline since long before Sir Arthur Shaen began building what soon became a tiny village of thatched roofs in 1715.

Synges *The Playboy of the Western World*, widely regarded as his magnum opus, was indeed based on the playwright's experiences in the area around Belmullet. For a town without appeal to the imagination, he certainly squeezed every ounce of inspiration he could from a place he had dismissed just a couple of years previously.

Imagination often works in this way. We dismiss something – a place, a person, a pastime, a piece of art – as insipid or simply quaint yet plain, only to return and view that very same thing in a whole new light for reasons that seem beyond basic comprehension. A good example of such a thing is the sea.

Around the time St. Patrick was active as a missionary in Ireland – that is, around fifteen or sixteen centuries ago – a humble fisherman named Aifraic went to work one day near what is now the town of Belmullet. Heading to the shore he saw four swans – the children of Lir, Lord of the sea – dancing on the waves and singing sad songs. The children were famous for their beauty and were the most beloved of the tribe of the old Gods of Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Their grief was the result of suffering an extended period of purgatory at the hands of Aoife, Lir's second wife, who, jealous of the fact that Lir's children were born to him by her late sister, and Lir's first wife, Aoibh, condemned the two sets of twins to 900 years of living in the bodies of swans.

"OUT WITH YOU UPON THE WILD WAVES, CHILDREN OF THE KING! HENCEFORTH YOUR CRIES SHALL BE WITH THE FLOCKS OF BIRDS."

The children still retained their human mental faculties, however, and Aifraic went to see them every day. They came to love each other, and the fisherman, who moonlighted as a poet and storyteller (indeed, the prefix 'Aí' means "poetic inspiration" in Old Irish Gaelic) told the story of their suffering to neighbors at evening gatherings. The tale eventually spread across the Kingdom of Connacht in the West of Ireland, where the known world ended and the great Ocean began. Beyond the waves, so they say, lay the Otherworld, Hy Breasal – the haven of lost souls.

It is claimed that if you still believe in the old Gods and Goddesses of the Celtic world, it is possible to do as Aifraic did and hear the songs of the children of Lir. If your boat approaches the island of Inisglora, off the Erris peninsula near Belmullet, you may still hear their beautiful laments from the waves. Only one of our human senses, sound, is stimulated. The eye is left unprovoked, though one cannot help scanning the horizon for the source of the call, while the wind in the air continues to bring the same sweet, salty air to the nose and tongue as it did before the ear became so excited.

"CELTIC SPIRITUALITY IS AWAKENING SO POWERFULLY NOW BECAUSE IT ILLUMINATES THE FACT THAT THE VISIBLE IS ONLY ONE LITTLE EDGE OF THINGS. THE VISIBLE IS ONLY THE SHORELINE OF THE MAGNIFICENT OCEAN OF THE INVISIBLE."

John O'Donohue, Eternal Echoes: Exploring our Yearning to Belong

One could point toward meteorological conditions or a trick of the mind to explain the voices in the wind (the Celtic nations are, after all, the windiest in Europe and some of the windiest in the world, lands where every draft, breeze and gust seems to carry a whisper sent to tease us into believing, perhaps only for a moment, that some soul has absentmindedly left the door to the Otherworld slightly ajar for a while after popping outside for some fresh air), but to completely reject any possibility of a more transcendental reality that lies outside of what can be seen would do a great disservice to our innate yearning for truth beyond our immediate experience.

Mythology, that soft blend of entertainment, ideology and religion, was, of course, originally unwritten, and poets such as Aifraic were oral storytellers. Like those moments when one believes in the reality, or rather the legacy, of the children of Lir based on the perception of a call from the ocean or lakeside, mythology in its truest form was and is an entirely oral and aural phenomenon. This is in spite of the fact that today we are more likely to consume mythology as a visual experience, focusing on words written on a page rather than sounds carried through the air.

Had Aifraic and others like him not divulged their stories to others, those myths would no doubt have been lost to those same winds that today still hint at a heroic past. Even Homer, without a doubt the most eminent storyteller in the history of mythology, drew on a large well of rhapsodic oral poetry in his native Greece.

Celtic Thunder offers a route back toward what mythology was when Aifraic went to work one day and met the children of Lir, back to what mythology was before mass production and uniformity. The aural experience is elevated above the other senses, followed by the visual. Words are to be heard, not read, and when they are heard they are to be heard through song. And just as J.M. Synge had to look twice to find inspiration tucked away in a corner of the Celtic world, what we have is a thread of Ariadne – through a labyrinth of modern distractions, we can wind our way back to where we started, back to something truly worth sharing.

