

# **Brendan's Fabulous Voyage eBook**

## **Brendan's Fabulous Voyage by John Crichton-Stuart, 3rd Marquess of Bute**

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## BRENDAN'S FABULOUS VOYAGE.

*[A Lecture delivered on January 19, 1893, before the Scottish Society of Literature and Art.]*

Brendan, the son of Finnlogh O' Alta, was born at Tralee in Kerry, in the year 481 or 482.[1] He had a pedigree which connected him with the rulers of Ireland, and thus perhaps secured for him a social prominence which he would not otherwise have enjoyed. Nature seems to have endowed him with an highly wrought and sensitive temperament. Putting aside altogether the idealism which caused him, like so many others of his time and race, to give himself to the Church, he displayed throughout life a restlessness which led him to constant journeys, sometimes of the nature of migrations, and the constant inception of projects to which he did not continue long to adhere; and in the statements about him there are elements from which I conjecture that he was probably of the class of persons who furnish good subjects for hypnotic experiments. When he was a year old he was handed over to the care of the nun Ita, when she dwelt at the foot of Mount Luachra. With her he remained until he was seven years old, when she sent him to Bishop Erc, by whom he had been baptized, but during the whole of her life, which lasted nearly as long as his own, he never ceased to regard and to treat her with all the affectionate reverence of a son. His education was continued under Erc, until he grew towards manhood, when he visited other parts of Ireland for the sake of study, but it was to Erc that he returned to be ordained to the Presbyterate. At that period there was a sort of passion among the Celtic clergy for retiring into deserts after the manner of the monks and hermits of Egypt, and the islands of the Western and Northern ocean, if they could show nothing like the burning sands of Africa, supplied deserts enough of a different sort. It was only in accordance then with a common custom of his day, that Brendan, after his ordination, set out by sea with a few companions, to find a place where to found a monastery. It is to be remarked also that this was just about the time of the migration of the Royal Race of the Dalriads to the country which has ultimately received from them the name of Scotland, and the project therefore bears a strong resemblance to that in which Columba succeeded about 60 years later. If Brendan had not failed, perhaps Columba would not have come. The wanderings or explorations of Brendan and his companions appear to have lasted several years, during which it may be presumed that they were in the habit of laying up somewhere for the winter. It was doubtless partly owing to the restlessness which was a part of his nature, that he finally settled nowhere, and returned to Ireland.

[Footnote 1: Reeve's *Adamnan*, 221.]

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In Ireland he did a good deal of work, but Ita urged him to try and do good elsewhere, and he went over with some of his friends to Britain, possibly in connection with movements affected by the career of the historic Arthur, who was killed at Camlan or Camelon in 537. The Christian Irish at that time certainly made endeavours to assist the Christian party among the Britons. The nun Edana was making her attempts, either in person or by her disciples, to found her girls' schools in the south of Scotland, and it is not impossible that Ita thought that she might also accomplish some good by sending forth a male emissary. In connection with Brendan's sojourn in Britain, there is a most curious mention of the use of a Greek Liturgy somewhere in the British Church. There is a statement that Brendan was at the head of the celebrated Welsh monastery of Llancarfan. He also went over to Brittany to see Gildas the Wise, who was bewailing the woes of his native land on the shores of the Morbihan. He ultimately returned to the Western Islands, and there succeeded at last in founding two monastic settlements, one in Tiree, at a place which the writers call Bledua, and one in an island called Ailech, which it seems to me may possibly mean Islay. Then he went back to Ireland, and started another monastery in a desert island in Loch Oisbsen, which was given to him by Aedh, the son of Ethdach. Hence, however, he again moved in 559, and founded the great monastery of Clonfert, an act which is the principal achievement of his life.

He was friendly with the principal persons of his own race, time, and class. He seems, as I have said, to have possessed the peculiar temperament, which some call sensitive and others mediumistic, and which leads to the phenomenon generally known as second-sight, for, putting aside all other records about him which point in the same direction, it is recorded of him, not only by Adamnan, but also by Cuimine the Fair, that on one occasion when he came over, along with Comgall of Benchor, Kenneth of Aghaboe, and Cormac o' Leathain of Durrow, to visit Columba, who was then staying in Himba (Eilean na Naoimh, one of the Garveloch islands, lying between Scarba and Mull), and Columba at their request celebrated before them on the Sunday, he afterwards told Comgall and Kenneth that during part of the ceremony Columba had seemed to him to be standing at the bottom of a pillar of fire streaming heavenwards.

He lived to an extreme old age, and was in his 96th year when the end came. When he felt that it was at hand, he went to see his sister Briga, and I quote the sentences which follow, on account of the quaint naturalism which inspires them. 'Among other things, he taught her concerning the place of her resurrection. "Not here," saith he unto her, "shalt thou rise again, but in thine own land, that is in Tralee. Therefore, go thou thither, for that people will obtain the mercy of God by thy means. This is a place of men,

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not of women. Now is God calling me unto Himself out of the prison house of this body." When she heard that, she was grievously afflicted, and said, "Father beloved, we shall all die at thy death. For which of us could live when thou wast absent living? Much less, when thou art dead." Brendan said farther, "On the third day hence, I shall go the way of my fathers." Now that day was the Lord's Day. Thereon, after the sacraments of the altar had been offered, he saith to them that stood by, "In your supplications, commend my going forth." And Briga speaketh and saith, "Father, what fearest thou?" He saith, "I fear that I shall journey alone, that the way will be dark—I fear the unknown country, the presence of the King, the sentence of the Judge." After these things he commanded the brethren to carry his body to the monastery of Clonfert secretly, lest, if they did it openly, it should be kept by them among whom they should pass. Then when he had kissed them all one by one, he saith unto holy Briga, "Salute my friends on my behalf, and say unto them to beware of evil speaking, even when it is true, how much the more when it is false." When he had so spoken and foretold how some things would be in time to come, he passed into everlasting rest, in the 96th year of his age.' He died, May 16, 577.

By combining with all the collected and credible statements concerning him illustrative matter from the history of his times and the biographies of his contemporaries, it would no doubt be possible to write a life of Brendan, which would be both of considerable bulk and of considerable interest. But there would be nothing particularly startling or striking about it. Apart from the interest of public events contemporary with his long career, the monotonous variety produced by his vagabond nature, and such psychical interest as might possibly attach to stories of his mediumistic temperament, it would be rather hum-drum. Brendan, however, has had the ill luck to be selected by some unknown antient Irish novelist as the hero of a romance of the wildest kind, which has certainly spread his name, if not his fame, in quarters which in all his travels he could never have anticipated. Even in the Canary Islands, the natives apply the term 'Isla de San Borondon' to a peculiar effect like mirage, showing a shadowy presentiment of land, which is sometimes seen off their coasts. His character as an hero of romance, somewhat of the type of Sinbad the Sailor, if not of that of Gulliver, has even injured him as a subject of serious study. There has been a sort of custom, to which may be applied a celebrated phrase of Newman, 'aged but not venerable,' of confounding the hero of the romance with the real man. It would be just as proper to identify the hero of the *Pickwick Papers* with a certain Mr. Pickwick, whom it was, oddly enough, the duty of one of Dickens' sons to call as a witness in an English law-suit not many years ago. Even Homer sometimes nods—at

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least according to the critics, of whose opinion Lucian credits him with so low an estimation—and the great Bollandists had their historical equanimity—much as experience must have already taught it to bear—so upset by the brilliancy of the fable that they have omitted to print the real life at all, a life which is, at the worst, no more startling than a good many with which they have enriched their pages—e.g., those of Patrick, Brigid, and Columba—and after a denunciation of what their authorities call the *vana, fictaque vel apocrypha deliramenta*, 'the silly, lying, or apocryphal ravings,' simply proceed to give a compilation of isolated notices drawn from a variety of different sources.

Prof. O'Curry, in his *Lectures on the MS. Material of Ancient Irish History*, page 289, mentions four ancient Irish romances in the form of voyages, of which the voyage of Brendan is one. He gives an epitome of that of the sons of Ua Corra, which seems at least in parts to be almost equally wild. But that of Brendan has certainly been the most popular. M. Achille Jubinal, who edited one Latin and two French translations of it, says that it also exists in Irish, Welsh, Spanish, English, and Anglo-Norman. The Spanish, English, and Anglo-Norman I have never read, and of the Welsh I have never heard. Of the Latin I once made a complete translation from the Latin text published by Jubinal, but I have lost it, and have had to do the work again so far as necessary for the present lecture. I remember, however, that from several features, I came to the conclusion that the Latin text was a translation from Irish, and the Irish text must present considerable variants, as Dr. Todd in his book on *St. Patrick, Apostle of Ireland*, page 460, cites from 'An Irish Life of St. Brendan,' but which must evidently be the fabulous voyage, four incidents, of which one is about the finding of a dead mermaid, another about one of the voyagers being devoured alive by sea-cats, and the third about an huge sea-cat as large as an ox which swam after them to destroy them, until another sea-monster rose up and fought with the cat, and both were drowned, none of which incidents occur in the Latin. However, to the Latin version my defective knowledge must confine me, and there is enough of it for one lecture, and to spare. I may, however, say that by the Latin text I do not here mean only the text published by Jubinal. The present Bollandists were good enough, some years ago, to edit for me the 'Codex Salmanticensis,' which contains both the romance and the Life, and I find in the romance serious divergences from the text given by Jubinal; they are of a kind which, in my judgment, stamp it beyond all doubt as a later and corrupt edition, but I have largely compared the texts, although not word for word.

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Well, I am now going to deal with the 'silly, lying, or apocryphal ravings.' The romance relates that on one occasion when Brendan was in a place called the Thicket, there came to him a man called Barint O'Neil, of the race of King Neil of IX. Hostages. This man told him that his disciple Marnock had left him, and founded an hermitage of his own in an island called Delight some, whither he himself afterwards went to visit him. While he was there, they were one day together upon the shore, where there was a small boat, and then, to translate the precise words, 'he said unto me, "Father, go up into the ship, and let us sail westward unto the island which is called the Land of Promise of the Saints, which God will give unto them that come after us in the latter time." We went up into the ship therefore, and clouds covered us all round about us, so that hardly could we see the stern or the prow of the ship. After the space, as it were, of one hour, a great light shone round about us, and there appeared a land wide and grassy, and very fruitful. And when the ship was come to land, we went out, and began to go about, and to walk through that land for fifteen days, and we could not find the end thereof. We saw there no plant without a flower, and no tree without fruit, and all the stones thereof are precious stones. And upon the fifteenth day we found a river running from the west eastward. And when we considered all these things, we doubted what we should do. We were fain to pass over the river, but we waited for counsel from God. While we discussed thus between us, of a sudden there appeared before us a man in great brightness, who called us by our names and saluted us, saying, "It is well done, good brethren, for the Lord hath revealed unto you that land which He will give unto his Saints. For it is an half of the island up to this river; but unto you it is not given to pass over. Go back therefore whence ye are come." When he said thus, we asked him whence he was, and by what name he was called. And he said unto me, "Why dost thou ask me whence I am? and by what name I am called? Why dost thou not rather ask as to this island? For even as thou seest it now, so doth it remain since the beginning of the world. Hast thou any need of meat or drink? Hast thou been overcome of sleep, or hath night covered thee? Know therefore of a surety: there is always day here without blindness or shadow of darkness. For our Lord Jesus Christ is the light thereof, and if men had not done against the commandment of God, they would have remained in the loveliness of this land." When we heard it, we were turned to weeping, and when we were rested, we straightway took our journey, and the man aforesaid came with us even to the shore where our ship was. But when we got us up into the ship, the man was taken away from our eyes, and we came into the darkness aforesaid, and until the Isle of Delight some.' Barint goes on to relate his conversation with Marnock's disciples, and how they told him that they often knew by the fragrance of Marnock's garments, when he had been away from them for a while and returned, that he had been in that garden of God, where, as it is expressed, 'night gathereth not, nor day endeth ... for the angels of God keep it.'



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Incited by this narrative, Brendan proposed to some of his disciples to set out in search of the Land of Promise, and after fasting for forty days for three days at a time, they finally embarked from the neighbourhood of Tralee. There is a very curious description of the *corach*[2] or skin-boat in which they embarked. It was, it is stated, 'very light, with ribs and posts of wicker, as the use is in those parts, and they covered it with the hides of cattle, dyed reddish in oak-bark, and they smeared all the seams of the ship without; and they took provisions for forty days, and butter for dressing hides for the covering of the ship, and the other things which are useful for the life of man.' Two of the MSS. add (and are justified by subsequent passages):—'They set up a mast in the middle of the ship, and a sail, and the rest of the gear for steering.' The voyagers were fourteen in number besides Brendan, but at the last moment three other brethren came and entreated to be taken, saying that if they were left where they were, they would die of hunger and thirst. Brendan consents, but predicts that while one of them would come to a good end, two would come to a bad.

[Footnote 2: After the manner of the antient Celts, but which is not, I believe, altogether extinct either in the Highlands or in Ireland, and of which I remember having seen one once in actual use in Wales.]

They set off in the direction of the summer solstice, by which must, I think, be meant the northerly western point where the sun sets in summer, and are forty days at sea—it will be noticed that the periods in this story are nearly always of forty days. At the end of this time they come to a very high and rocky island, with streams falling down the cliffs into the sea. They search for a landing-place for three days, and then find a narrow harbour, between steep walls of rock. On landing, they are met by a dog, which they follow to a town or fort, but see no inhabitants. They go into a great hall set with couches and seats, and find water prepared for washing the feet. The walls are hung with vessels of divers kinds of metal, and bridles, and horns mounted with silver. Brendan warns the brethren against theft, especially the three who had come last. They find a table laid, and spread with very white bread and fish. They eat and lie down to sleep. In the night Brendan sees a fiend in the shape of an Ethiopian child tempting one of the three last comers with a silver bridle. In the morning they find the table again spread, and so remain for three days and nights. Then they prepare to leave, and Brendan denounces one of the brethren as a thief. On this the guilty brother draws the silver bridle out of his breast, and cries out, 'Father, I have sinned: forgive it, and pray for my soul that it perish not.' The devil is cast out, but the brother dies and is buried on the island. As they are on the point of embarking, a lad brings them a basket of bread and a vessel (*amphora*) of water, which he gives to them with a blessing.

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They start again upon the ocean, and are carried hither and thither, eating once every two days. At last, on Maundy Thursday, they reach another island, where are many abundant springs full of fish, and flocks of white sheep as large as cattle, sometimes so thick as to conceal the earth. There they remain until the morning of the Eve of Easter, when they take, and apparently kill and dress, one sheep and one lamb without blemish. The reference is evidently to an identity of custom with that which still prevails in all the southern countries of Europe, of preparing the flesh of a lamb on Holy Saturday, in honour of the Paschal Lamb, which flesh is blessed on the Saturday, and used to break the fast of Lent on the next day.[3] When all is ready there comes to them a man with a basket of bread baken on the coals—evidently meaning Passover bread. This man now becomes a regular although occasional feature in the narrative, and is called their provider (*procurator*). He foretells their journey for some time, and how they will be until a week after Pentecost in a place which is called the *Eden of Birds*.

[Footnote 3: In Italy at least, in order as far as possible to combine the strict fast of the Saturday with a fulfilment of the words of Ex. xii. 8, 'And they shall eat the flesh in that night.' It is usual to have an image of a lamb in sugar or other confectionary, which is also blessed during the day, and eaten at supper.]

Thus furnished, they go to an island close by, which he has pointed out to them as the place where they are to remain until the following noon. This island is destitute of grass, and with but scanty vegetation, and there is no sand upon its shores. All goes well until the next day, when they light a fire to boil the pot, whereupon the island becomes restive, and finally sinks into the sea, although they all manage to escape into the ship. "'Brethren," saith Brendan, "ye wonder at that which this island hath done." "Father," say they, "we wonder sorely, and great dread hath taken hold upon us." He said unto them, "Little children, be not afraid, for God hath this night shown unto me the secret of this thing. Where we have been was not an island but the first fish of all that swim in the ocean, and he seeketh ever to bring his tail unto his mouth, but he cannot, because of his length. Jasconius is his name."

This is the only incident in the whole romance which is actually grotesque. But from the solemnity with which it is narrated, it is evident that it did not appear to be grotesque to the author. It seems to have taken the fancy of the early and mediaeval public, and even of the iconographic public in a special degree. The word *whale* has commonly been applied to the beast, and as the same episode occurs in the story of *Sinbad the Sailor*, Jubinal has set himself to speculate how that story, or the *Arabian Nights* in which it is incorporated, came to be known in Ireland. I confess I do not

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agree with him. In the first place, the notion is not particularly recondite, and it has at least this possible foundation in fact, that, as I have been told by sailors, the back of a whale of advanced years, when asleep at the surface, may be and has been mistaken from some distance, greatly owing to the accretions upon it, for the top of a reef. Again, a somewhat similar notion occurs in Lucian's *Traveller's Tale*, which was much more likely to be known to the Irish fabulist. Lastly, I must observe that all this is gloss. The word *whale* (cete) is never applied to the animal but always *fish* (piscis) or *monster* (bellua) or *beast* (bestie), and the whole thing, with the notion of its vast size, and the attempt to join the tail to the mouth, which brings it into connection with the emblem of eternity, which is due, I believe, to the Phoenicians, but which we ourselves so often use upon coffins and grave-stones, seems to bring it into connection rather with the idea of the Midgard-Worm, the great under-lying world-serpent which figures so largely in the mythic cosmogony of the Scandinavians. I suggest that this is the notion, of which the romancer may have heard from Scandinavian sources; and there is even a kind of indication that it was associated in his mind with the idea of paganism, as Brendan is made to speak elsewhere of God having made the most terrible (*immanissimam*) of beasts subject unto them.

On leaving the spot where the monster had sunk, they first returned to the provider's isle, from the top of which they perceived another near at hand, covered with grass and woods and full of flowers, and thither they went.

On the south shore of this island they found a river a little broader than the ship, and up this they towed her for a mile, when they came to the fountain-head of the stream. It was a wondrous fountain, and above it there was a tree marvellously beautiful, spreading rather than high, but all covered with white birds, so covered that they hid its foliage and branches. (The notion is perhaps taken from a tree loaded with snow.) 'And when the man of God saw it, he began to think in himself what or wherefore it should be, that such a multitude of birds should be gathered together in one place. And the thing distressed him so, that he wept, and fell down upon his knees, and besought the Lord, saying, "O God, Who knowest the things which are unknown, and makest manifest the things which are hidden, Thou knowest how that mine heart is straitened; therefore I beseech Thee that it may please Thee to make manifest unto me, Thy sinful servant, this mystery which now I do see with mine eyes. And this I ask not for an desert of my worthiness, but in respect of Thy mercy." When he had so spoken, behold, one of the birds flew from the tree. From the ship, where the man of God was sitting, his wings sounded as with the sound of little bells. He perched upon the top of the

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prow, and began to spread his wings for joy, and looked kindly upon the holy father Brendan. Then the man of God, when he understood that the Lord had had regard unto his prayer, saith unto the bird, "If thou be the messenger of God, tell me whence be these birds, and wherefore they be gathered here." And it said, "We are of that great ruin of the old enemy; but we have not fallen by sinning or consenting; but we have been predestinated by the goodness and mercy of God, for wherein we were created, hath our ruin come to pass, through his fall and the fall of his crew. But God the Almighty, Who is righteous and true, hath by His judgment sent us into this place. Pains we suffer not. The presence of God in a sense we cannot see, so far has He separated us from the company of them that stood firm. We wander through the divers parts of this world, of the sky, and of the firmament, and of the earths, even as other spirits who are sent forth [to minister]. But upon the holy days of the Lord, we take bodies such as Thou seest, and by the ordinance of God we dwell here, and praise our Maker. As for thee, thou and thy brethren are a year upon the way, and yet there await you six. And where this day thou hast kept the Passover, there shall ye keep it every year, and afterwards shall thou find that which thou hast set in thine heart, even the land promised unto the Saints." And when the bird had so spoken, it rose from the prow, and returned unto the others. And when the hour of evening came, they all began to flap their wings, and to sing as it were with one voice, saying, "Praise waiteth for Thee, O God, in Zion, and unto Thee shall the vow be performed in Jerusalem, through our ministry." And they repeated that verse even for the space of an hour, and the song and the sound of their wings was like harmony (carmen cantus) for sweetness. Then holy Brendan saith unto his brethren, "Refresh your bodies, since this day the Lord hath satisfied your souls by His Divine rising again." And when supper was ended, and the work of God done, the man of God and they that were with him gave their bodies unto rest until the third watch of the night. And the man of God woke and roused the brethren for the watches of the night, and he began holily to sing that verse, "O Lord, open Thou my lips." And when the word of the man of God was finished, all the birds sang out with wings and voices, saying, "Praise ye the Lord, all His Angels, praise ye Him all His hosts." Likewise at even for the space of an hour, they sang ever, and when the dawn glowed they began to sing, "And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us," with the same harmony and length of singing as in the Morning Praises: likewise, at the third hour that verse, "Sing praises to our God, sing praises, sing praises unto our King, sing ye praises with understanding:" at the sixth hour, "May the Lord cause His face to shine upon us, and be merciful unto us:" and at the ninth hour they sang, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." So by day and by night these birds gave praise to God.'

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I have read this passage at length, not only because of its intrinsic merit, but also because of its evident meaning. It is obvious that it is meant to propound doctrines similar to those which a distinguished writer has recently discussed under the title, *Happiness in Hell*. It is remarkable that the Codex Salmanticensis omits the whole passage in this sense. Possibly it did not suit the views of the transcriber.

In a week the provider came to them bringing more food and drink, but warned them not to drink of the fountain, as its waters were stupefying. He returned again at Pentecost, bringing more, but bade them now provision the ship with water, and with dried bread. A week later they started. When they were on the shore, one of the birds came and perched upon the prow and said, 'Ye have kept the holy day of the Passover with us this year. Ye shall also keep the same day with us in the year to come. And where ye have been in the last year at the Supper of the Lord, there shall ye be upon the said day in the year to come. Likewise shall ye keep the Lord's night, the Passover Supper, where ye have kept it before, that is, upon the back of the monster Jasconius. And after eight months ye shall find the isle which is called Ailbey. There shall ye keep the birth of Christ.' And so he flew back, and as the boat sailed away, all the birds sang, 'Answer us, O God of our salvation, Who art the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of them that are afar off upon the sea.'

They were wandering upon the sea for three months, and afterwards came to the isle Ailbey, where they stayed until the middle of January. There is here described a monastery with twenty-four monks, who were fed on miraculously provided bread, and, except the Abbat, never spoke. There is rather a curious description of the church, which was square, with stalls round the walls. It had three altars, all of crystal, as were all the altar vessels, and seven lamps which were lit every evening by a fiery arrow which came in and went out at a window.

They left Ailbey, and were carried about on the sea until the beginning of Lent. They then came to an island where there was abundant vegetation, roots, and streams full of fish, but some of the brethren became insensible from one, two, or three days, from drinking the water. I own that this and the remark about the water in the Eden of Birds seems to me to be very likely plagiarised from the wine-river in Lucian's *Traveller's Tale*. Hence they went north for three days, were beating about for about twenty, and then eastward for three more, and then came back for Maundy Thursday to the isle of the provider, who again met them. All went on as before, and a week after Pentecost they started again from the Eden of the Birds.

It will thus be observed that the real times of voyaging in each year are limited to the months of February and March, and from about the early part of June to the middle of December.

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Forty days after starting in this new year they were much alarmed by a vast fish which seemed to be coming after them to devour them, but it was killed by another monster, breathing fire, which appeared against it from the East, and tore it into three pieces.

The next day they came to a large and grassy island, where they found the tail portion of the monster fish. On this island they beached the ship, pitched the tent, and stayed three months, during which the sea was too stormy for travel. They lived for the three months on part of the monster, the rest of which was devoured by beasts, but another portion of a fish was afterwards washed up, and they made a salt provision of it—though as to Brendan himself, it is remarked that he was a consistent vegetarian, having never, since his ordination, eaten anything wherein had been the breath of life. Three days after this, the sea being stiller, they set out again towards the North.

One day they saw an island in the distance, and Brendan told them that there were three companies, of children, of young men, and of elders, and that one of the three brethren last come was there to make his earthly pilgrimage. They came to shore. The island was so flat that it seemed level with the sea. It had no trees nor anything that wind can shake. It was vast, and was covered with something which the Latin text calls *scaltae*—a word which I have failed to find in Ducange or in any other authority which I have been able to consult. It is, however, evidently, from the context, some kind of ground fruit, and may perhaps be the strawberry or the Blaeberry—although the Latin for these seems to be generally *fragum* and *bacca myrtilli*. This fruit was white or *purpureus*—wherein another difficulty arises as to the meaning of *purpureus*. The individual berries were as big as large balls, and tasted like honey. In this island were the three companies, who seemed to be moving and standing in a kind of sacred dance, two moving round while the one which had taken the farthest place stood still and sang, 'The Saints shall go from strength to strength: the God of gods will appear in Zion.' It is vexatious that here the question of colour again arises, as something very picturesque is evidently intended to be described. The company of children were clad in pure and glistening white, but the Latin, which is verbally followed by the French, gives the colour of the young men's garments as hyacinthine, and that of the elders' as purple. I have consulted all the authorities upon the question that I can. The result is that it is disputed whether hyacinthine means red or blue or both, and whether the Latin purple was red or plum-coloured. I hazard the conjecture that there is here an attempt to symbolize innocence, vigour, and ripeness, and that as the first colour is certainly white, the others may be red and what we call purple.



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The voyagers landed at the fourth hour (10 A.M.) and the dance went on until noon, when the three companies sang together the lxxvii., the lxx., and the cxvi. Psalms, adding again, 'the God of gods will appear in Zion.' At 3 P.M. they sang likewise Psalms cxxx., cxxxiii., and what is called in the Septuagint the cxlvii., viz., the last nine verses of that so called in the A.V. At even they sang the lxxv., the civ., the cxiii., and then the whole 15 songs of degrees, during which they sat. When this was done, a bright cloud overshadowed the island, a cloud so bright that it blinded the sight of the voyagers, but they could still hear the sacred song going on without ceasing until midnight (*vigilie matutinae*) when they heard sung Psalms cxlviii., cxlix., and cl., and then what are called '12 Psalms according to the Psalter, up to "The fool hath said in his heart,"—an apparent reference to the present Roman Breviary arrangement by which the xth is united (as in the Septuagint) with the ixth, and the vth transferred out of its order. As day broke, the cloud passed away from over the island and the companies sang Psalms li., xc., and lxxiii., and at 9 A.M. xlvii., liv., and cxvi. From what this peculiar arrangement of the Psalms is taken, I do not know. It is not that of the Monastic Breviary, nor of the Roman, nor of the Greek Church, nor is it that of the Mozarabic, at least at present, but from its excessive irregularity, in which it resembles the Mozarabic, I guess that it may belong to some Ephesine rite, as introduced by Patrick into Ireland, and that it is here set down at length because it was becoming obsolete in the days of the writer. Then they went to Communion. After this, two of the company of young men brought a basket full of the purple fruit, and put it into the ship, saying, 'Take ye of the fruit of the strong men's isle, and give us our brother and depart in peace.' Then Brendan called the brother to him and said, 'Kiss thy brethren, and go with them that call thee. I tell thee, brother, that in a good hour did thy mother conceive thee, who hast earned to dwell with such a congregation.' So they bade him farewell with tears, and when he came to the companies, they sang, 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity,' and then the *Te Deum*, and the voyagers set out again upon their way.

The voyage now continues with two or three comparatively trivial adventures. For twelve days they lived upon the juice of the scaltae, after which they fasted for three days. Then a bird brought them a branch of an unknown tree, bearing a bunch of bright red grapes, whereon they lived for four days, and then fasted for three more. On the last of these they sighted the island where grew the grapes. It was thickly wooded, with trees bending under the weight of the fruit, filled with all manner of good vegetation, and exhaling an odour like that of an house full of pomegranates (*mala punica*). Here they landed, pitched the tent, and stayed for forty days.

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After they left this island they were much alarmed by the sight of a griffin flying towards them, but it was killed by another bird which fought it in the air, and its body fell into the sea. They reached the isle Ailbey in safety, and there passed the midwinter as usual.

The following years are passed over with merely the general statement that they went about much in the ocean, and passed the usual seasons in the usual places. It is mentioned that one midsummer the sea was so clear for about a week that they could see the marine animals lying at the bottom; and when Brendan sang, these came up and swam round the ship.

It must be, as far as the chronology of the romance can be said to be fixed, intended to be represented as in the February of the seventh year, that the narrative again becomes continuous. They saw one day a pillar standing in the sea, which appeared to be near them, but which they did not reach for three days. Its top seemed to pierce the clouds. At the distance of about a mile it was surrounded on every hand by a sort of network, of a material like silver, but harder than marble. They drew in the oars and mast, and passed through one of the interstices. The sea within was as clear as glass, so that they could see the bottom, with the lower part of the pillar and the network resting upon it. The pillar was of absolutely clear crystal, so that the light and heat of the sun passed through it. It was forty cubits broad on every side. On the south side they found a chalice of the material of the network and a paten of the material of the pillar. After passing again out of the network, they sailed for eight days towards the North, and here begins what may be called the diabolical portion of the story.

They saw one day a wild and rocky island, without grass or tree, but full of smiths' forges. The wind bore them past it at about a stone's throw, and they could hear bellows roaring with a sound like thunder, and hammers striking upon anvils. Presently they saw one of the inhabitants come out of a cave. He was shaggy and hideous, burnt and dark. When he saw the ship, he ran back howling into his workshop. Brendan immediately bid hoist the sail and have out the oars. While this was doing the creature appeared again with a glowing mass of fused metal (*massam igneam de scoria*) in pincers, which he hurled at them. Where it struck the water about a furlong from them, it made the sea boil and hiss. They had only escaped about a mile when they saw beings swarming out upon the shore, throwing about molten masses, some after them and some at one another, and then all went back into the forges and set them blazing, until the whole island seemed one mass of fire. The sea boiled like a boiling cauldron, and all day long the travellers heard an awful wailing. Even when they were out of sight of the island, the howls still rang in their ears, and the stench made their nostrils smart. 'And Brendan said, "O ye soldiers of Christ, make you strong in faith not feigned, and in the armour of the spirit, for we are upon the coasts of hell. Watch, therefore, and play the man."



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The next day but one, they found the wind bearing them down upon another mountain in the sea, black as coal, reaching steep down to the sea, and whose top they could hardly see, but yet wrapt in soft mists. When they came near it, the sole remaining of the three last come brethren jumped out of the ship and waded to shore. Suddenly he showed signs of terror, and cried out that he was being carried away and could not return. The brethren in horror pushed the ship away from land, and started towards the South. When they looked back they saw flames shooting up from the top of the mountain, and then sinking in again, and again surging up. It is a phenomenon familiar to any one who has watched the top of a volcano—often even of iron-works—and which has been splendidly described in the account of the burning essence of life in *She*. From this sight they fled and journeyed for seven days toward the South.

We now reach an incident founded upon that fact from the contemplation of which the human mind perhaps shrinks more than from any other. But the literary treatment of it is so curious and striking, and is rendered all the more so, at least to me, because I am aware of only one other attempt to grapple with it in the whole cycle of human invention, and that in the very highest sphere of imaginative literature, that I think that you will forgive me if I deal with it, and give at any-rate a part of it in full. 'And after these things,' says the novelist, 'the Father Brendan saw as it were a very thick mist, and when they drew nigh thereto, there appeared unto them a little shape as it had been the shape of a man sitting upon a stone, and before him a veil of the size of a bag hanging between two forks of iron, and thus the waves beat him about as it were a boat when it is in peril in a tempest. And when the brethren saw it, some of them thought that it had been a bird, and others thought that it had been a ship. Then the man of God answered them, "Brethren, let be this strife, and turn the ship unto the place." And when the man of God drew nigh thereto, the waves round about stood still as though they had been frozen. And they found sitting upon a stone a man shaggy and mis-shapen, and from every side when the waves came upon him, they smote him up to the crown of his head; and when again they fell away from him then was seen the stone whereon the unhappy one sat. And the wind moved about from time to time the cloth that was before him, and it smote him upon the eyes and upon the forehead. And when the blessed one asked him who he was, and for what fault he was set there, and how he had merited such punishment, he said, "I am that most unhappy Judas, the worst of bargainers. Neither for any desert of mine do I have this place, but through the pardon and pity of the Redeemer of the world, and in honour of His holy resurrection, have I this rest" (now, it was the Lord's Day), "and when I sit here it seemeth to me as though I were in the Garden of Eden, by reason of

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the torments which I shall have this even, for when I am in torment I am like a bit of lead molten in a crucible day and night. In the midst of the mountain which ye have seen, there is Leviathan with his crew, and I was there when it swallowed up your brother, and therefore hell was glad, and sent forth great flames, and thus doth it ever when it devoureth the souls of the wicked. But that ye may know the measureless goodness of God, I will tell you of my rest. I have here my rest every Lord's Day from evening to evening—," and then follow some words as to other days which are evidently corrupted both in Jubinal's text and in that of the Salamanca MS. Then it continues, "'But the other days I am tormented with Herod and Pilate, with Annas and Caiphas; and therefore I beseech you for the sake of the Redeemer of the world, that ye be pleased to plead for me with the Lord Jesus that it be granted me to be here until to-morrow at the rising of the sun, that at your coming the devils may not torment me nor carry me away unto that evil heritage which I have bought unto myself.'" This is done. There is some talk, from which it appears that the cloth is one which Judas once gave to a leper, the forks some which he had given to Priests whereon to hang pots, and the stone whereon he sits, one with which he had once filled up an hole in a public highway. The whole episode closes thus:—'At the breaking of the day, when the man of God began to take his journey, behold, an infinite multitude of devils covered the face of the deep, speaking with dreadful voices and saying, "O man of God, cursed be thy coming in and thy going out, for our prince hath scourged us this night with grievous stripes, because we brought him not that accursed prisoner." And the man of God saith unto them, "Let that curse be not upon us but upon you, for blessed is he whom ye curse, and cursed is he whom ye bless." The devils said, "That unhappy Judas shall suffer double pains these six days, because ye have shielded him this night." The saint saith unto them, "Ye have no power, neither your princes, for power is of God." And he said, "In the name of the Lord, I command you and your prince that ye put him to no greater torments than ye have been wont." They answered him, "Art thou the Lord of all, that we should obey thy words?" The man of God saith unto them, "I am the servant of the Lord of all; and whatsoever I command in His Name, it is done; and I have no ministry save of them whom he giveth me." And so they followed him, continually blaspheming, until he was borne away from Judas; and the devils went back and lifted up that most unhappy soul among them, with a great rushing and shouting.'

This subject is one that ought not to be treated at all. It ought to be left veiled in the unknown, as it has been left for us by the Infinite Mercy from Whose revelation we know all that we know about it. As a matter of fact, I am only aware, as I have stated, of one other writer besides this Irish romancer, who has treated it. That writer is Dante. At the lowest depth of his Inferno sits Satan munching Brutus, Cassius, and Judas in his threefold mouth. Brutus and Cassius have their heads and upper parts hanging outside the mouth.

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'Quell' anima lassu, c' ha maggior pena,  
Disse 'l Maestro, 'e Giuda Scariotto,  
Che 'l capo ha dentro, e fuor le gambe mena.'

The traditional epithet which the world has justly attached to the name of Dante Alighieri is 'the Sublime'. I am almost afraid to say it, but we all know how proverbially short is the distance between the sublime and the ridiculous. And I venture to submit to the private personal thought of each of you whether it be not merely the horror of the subject and of the conception, and the almost stupefying grandeur of the poetry, which separates this idea from the grotesque; and whether, if the thing be to be touched at all, the old Irish fabulist has not produced a conception both more tender and more truly tragic.

They then go for three days southward and find a small precipitous rocky island, quite round, and about one furlong in circumference. Here they find a narrow landing-place, and dwelling on the summit an hermit aged one hundred and forty years, of which he had passed ninety in the island. He had no clothes except his own hair, which was long and white. He was an Irishman named Paul, and had known Patrick. For thirty years he had lived on fish brought him by a beast, presumably an otter, in its fore-paws, along with fuel wherewith to cook it, and which he kindled by striking a flint, and for sixty years upon the water of a spring. He gave them of the water of the spring, and bade them go their way, telling them that in forty days they would keep the Passover as usual, and so also Pentecost, and thereafter would they find 'the land holier than all lands.'

They remained therefore on the open sea during all Lent, living only on the water of the hermit's spring, and passed Easter and Pentecost in the usual places. But this was the last time. Their provider came to them and said, 'Get ye up into the ship and fill your bottles with the water of this fountain. I also now will be the companion and leader of your journey, for without me ye cannot find the land which ye seek, even the land which is promised unto the Saints.' As they embarked, all the white birds sang in chorus, 'The God of our salvation make your way prosperous' (Ps. lxxvii. 20, Vulg.). They went to their provider's island and there took in provision for other forty days and set forth. And now comes the discovery of the Land of Promise, which I had better read in full:—

'And when forty days were past, and the evening was drawing on, a great darkness covered them, so that scarcely could one see another. Then the provider saith to holy Brendan, "Father, knowest thou what is this darkness?" The Saint saith, "Brethren, I know not." Then saith the other, "This darkness is round about that island which ye have sought for seven years. Behold, ye see it; enter ye into it." And after the space of an hour, a great light shone round about them, and the ship stood upon the shore. When they went out of the ship, they saw a land, broad,

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and full of fruit-bearing trees, as in the time of autumn. They went round about that land as long as they were in it. They had no night there, but the light shone as the sun shineth in his season. And so for forty days they went about through that land, but they could not find the end thereof. But upon a certain day they found a great river which they could not pass, running through the midst of the island. Then saith the holy man unto the brethren, "We cannot pass over this river, and we know not how large is this land." While they thought upon these things, behold, there came to meet them a young man with glorious countenance and comely to look upon, who kisseth them with great joy, and calleth them every one by his own name, and saith, "O brethren, peace be unto you, and unto all who have followed after the peace of Christ," and after this he said, moreover, "Blessed are they that dwell in Thine house, O Lord: they will be still praising Thee." After these words, he saith unto holy Brendan, "Behold the land which ye have sought of a long time. But for this cause have ye not been able to find it since ye began to seek it, because the Lord Christ hath willed to show unto thee divers of His hidden things in this great and wide sea. Return thou therefore unto the land of thy birth, and take with thee of these fruits, and of precious stones as much as thy ship may hold. For the days of thy pilgrimage are drawing near at hand, that thou mayest sleep with thine holy brethren. But after many times this land shall be made known unto them that shall come after thee, when it shall be helpful in the tribulation of the Christians. The river which ye see divideth this island, and even as now it appeareth unto you ripe in fruits, so is it at every time without shadow or foulness. For the light shineth in it without failing." Then holy Brendan saith unto the young man, "Lord father, tell me if this land shall be ever revealed unto men." And he saith, "When the Almighty Creator shall have made all nations subject unto Him, then shall this land be made known unto all His elect." And after these things, Father Brendan took a blessing from the young man, and began to return by his way whereby he had come, taking of the fruits of that land and of sorts of precious stones; and when he had sent away the man that provided for them, who had prepared meat for him and for the brethren season by season, he went up into the ship with the brethren, through the darkness, whence he had begun to sail. And when they had passed through it, they came unto the Isle Delight some, and when he had been entertained there for the space of three days, he took a blessing from the father of the monastery, and then under God's leading came straight to his own monastery.'

It remains to make some remark upon the character and possible sources of this curious composition.

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In connection with fabulous voyages, it is natural to think not only of Lucian's *Traveller's True Tale*, but also of *Gulliver's Travels*, but these are skits, satirizing with wild wit certain features of life which lay before the authors. The gravity of Brendan's *Voyage* renders it impossible to place it in any such category. It can hardly be said to contain any grotesque adventure except that of the monster's back, and from the way in which this is told, it is evident that it did not appear grotesque to the narrator; and the religious tone of the whole thing forbids any such explanation.

On the other hand, I cannot perceive any hidden meaning in it which would assign it to the same class of allegorical romance of which Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the most famous example.

It is impossible that it could ever have been intended to be believed. Some of the incidents are so obviously fabulous—for instance, that of Judas,—that such an hypothesis would be simply to condemn the author as a profane forger, and his tone is much too pious for that; besides which, there would have been no possible motive; and again, although this romance stands alone or nearly alone in the popularity which it has attained outside its own country, as Professor O'Curry remarks, it does not stand by any means alone within the native literature of that country, albeit its literary merit may place it above all or nearly all the old Irish compositions of its class. It is, however, an extraordinary fact that it has actually been sometimes taken for sober truth. This has not been, I think, so much the case in Ireland. There are, it is true, one or two incidents in the *Life* which may be remotely identified at bottom with incidents in the *Voyage*, there is even mention of the Land of Promise, but I am more inclined to regard these as, more or less, distorted legendary statements about Brendan's real career, afterwards seized upon, magnified, and worked in by the romancer, than as incidents of the romancer appropriated and nationalized into comparative possibility by the biographer. Thus the Land of Promise may have been a fond title for the imaginary site of a monastery for which he was seeking in the Western Isles. But even in Ireland the son of Finnloagh O' Alta seemingly obtained a character for certain adventures which must have been taken from the fable, and the Martyrology of Donegal gravely refers to the *Voyage* as well as to the *Life* as an authority upon the subject, although I confess I can hardly believe that Cuimin of Condeire was not jesting when he wrote the verse—

'Brenainn loves constant piety,  
According to the synod and congregation;  
Seven years on a whale's back he spent;  
It was a difficult mode of piety.'

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It was, however, outside Ireland, in countries where less was known of the facts, and the Voyage was isolated from other works of its class, that this romance was most largely accepted as serious matter of fact. The possession of St. Brendan's Isle whenever it should be discovered was, according to M. Jubinal, actually made the subject of State documents, and he names no less than four maritime expeditions which were despatched in search of it, the last from Santa Cruz in Tenerife in 1721, at the instance of Don Juan de Mur, Governor of the Canaries, and under the command of Caspar Dominguez. I must, however, avow that I have great difficulty in believing that such an expedition as this could have been motivated by any other hypothesis than that the romance was the legendary record of some really existing island in the Atlantic.

The mention of such a belief brings me to the consideration of another and very different form of what I may call the naturalistic school of interpretation. This theory throws overboard the whole of the elements of the class commonly called supernatural, and even treats the identity of the voyagers as a matter of comparative indifference, but it sees in the wild narrative a distorted and legendary account of some actual voyage and some actual adventures and discoveries in the Atlantic. By some the Canary Archipelago, with perhaps Madeira, the Cape de Verde Islands, and some parts of the African coast, if not even the Azores, have been supposed to be the original scene of the wanderings of some early navigators, even if not of Brendan, and the Burning Island with its savage inhabitants, and the infernal volcano would of course be interpreted of the great volcano of Tenerife. But a more interesting interpretation is that which sees in the voyage of Brendan a distorted account of some ancient voyage by the Western Islands, the Orkneys and Shetlands, the Faroe Isles, Iceland, and finally to the coast of America. I need not remind you that the earliest voyages to America of which we have historical accounts are those of the Norsemen, who, as early as the year 1001, proceeded so far South as to come into a land where the vine was growing wild, and which they consequently named Vineland. It matters comparatively little to the naturalistic interpretation of this romance whether it be based upon mutilated and gossiping accounts of the voyages of the Norsemen, or upon some still earlier adventures of which all truly historical record has perished. The shores of America here become the Land of Promise, the clouds which veil it are the fogs of the coasts of Newfoundland or Labrador, the great and impassable river which divides it, perhaps the St. Lawrence: the crystal column is an iceberg: the rough and rocky island, and the black, cloud-piercing volcano, which burnt in the midst of the Northern Ocean, are Iceland and its volcanoes; the Eden of white birds in some region, perhaps the Faroes, where sea-fowl congregate in vast flocks: and the minor isles



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are to be more or less identified with some of those of the several archipelagos, many of which, in the time of the romancer, if not in that of Brendan, possessed halls, monasteries, and hermits. It may be urged as one of the main objections to this theory that it is almost outside the bounds of possibility that a corach could make such a voyage, but it is perhaps only fair to remark that in the *Life*, although not in the *Voyage*, it is stated that after the first five years of the wanderings Brendan returned to Ireland, where, among other things, he went to see Ita, and the narrative then continues: 'She received him with joy and honour, and said, "O my beloved, wherefore hast thou tried without my counsel? Thou wilt not gain the Land of Promise borne in the hides of dead beasts. Thou wilt find it with a ship made of boards." So he went into Connaught, and embarked with 60 disciples in a ship skilfully made of boards, and toiled in voyaging for two years; and at length came to the island where he would be.' This island, however, is only one with an old man dressed in feathers, who calls it 'an holy land, polluted by no blood, open for the burial of no sinner, ... a land like Eden,' but this seems to be the only Land of Promise which was known to the biographer.

While, however, I willingly make a present of this passage to the naturalistic interpreters, I do not accept their interpretation. As I have said, I look upon Brendan's wanderings in the Western Isles soon after his ordination, in search of a place wherein to found a monastery, as the only scrap of historical basis, at any rate as far as he was concerned, which the romance possesses. The *Life* says that he reached many islands, but instances only two, one of these being the so-called Land of Promise as above, and the incidents are not of a very startling character. No one on the other hand will deny that the *Voyage* narrates a series of incidents of a very startling character indeed, and it seems to me beyond possibility that some of them, such as the Judas episode, can have even a legendary basis, or be anything but pure, unmitigated, intentional, avowed, undisguised fiction, like the incidents of any novel of the present day. It seems to me that there is in the romance more resemblance to Lucian's *Traveller's True Tale* than is likely to be accidental, and the Land of Promise indeed occupies a position somewhat similar to that held by the Islands of the Blest in that remarkable skit. Again I think that the Burning Island with its forges, and its monstrous inhabitants hurling rocks into the sea after the voyagers, and the great black volcano piercing the clouds, is very suggestive of Etna and the Cyclopes as described in the *Odyssey*. It must be remembered that Greek scholarship was a good deal cultivated in antient Ireland. My own impression is that the author, whoever he was, was a very pious man, who had read Homer and Lucian, and to whom it occurred that it would be a nice thing

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to write an imaginary voyage which might unite similar elements of interest and excitement with the inculcation of Christian, religious, and moral sentiments. For his own purposes he plagiarized them a little, and I am very far from wishing to contend that it is impossible that he may also have worked in some vague accounts of the wonders of America, which had reached his ears from the adventurous voyages of the Norsemen, if indeed his date were late enough, possibly of even earlier navigators, now to us unknown. But as a whole, I look upon the *Fabulous Voyage* as a composition which is really only differentiated by the elements due to the time and place of birth from religious novels such as those which enrich the pages of the *Leisure Hour* or the *Sunday at Home*.

20 AND 21, BEDFORDBURY, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.