

Hy Brasil: The Metamorphosis of an Island

From Cartographic Error to Celtic Elysium



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Barbara Freitag

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Studies in Comparative Literature 69

Series Editors
C.C. Barfoot and Theo D'haen

Hy Brasil: The Metamorphosis of an Island

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Barbara Freitag



Amsterdam - New York, NY
2013

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ISBN: 978-90-420-3641-3

E-Book ISBN: 978-94-012-0910-6

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Printed in The Netherlands

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have come to be without Christian Oeser's initial idea for the inquiry into the *Hy Brasil* phenomenon – it was his curiosity that led to the study. As with previous projects, I gratefully acknowledge his constant support, critical comments and meticulous review.

I am indebted to many people who supplied me with valuable information. It is a pleasure to thank in particular: Éamon de Buitléar, Jane Conroy, Corinna and Joachim Diestelkamp, Maurice Harmon, Werner Huber, Evan Jones, Richard Kirkland, Alan Kramer, Kerby A. Miller, Volker Noll, Michael O'Siochru, Aidan O'Sullivan, Dick Pfleiderer, Gabriel Rosenstock, Giovanna Tallone, Brian Waldo and Christian Weyers.

Two remarkably forbearing cartographic historians have contributed substantially to the creation of the book, and I acknowledge with much appreciation the unfailing and patient advice of Chet van Duzer and Tony Campbell. I also want to warmly thank three librarians for their exceptional support: Eugene Roche (Special Collections, UCD), Patricia Moloney (Folklore Dept, UCD) and Alan Delozier (Seton Hall University).

Thanks are also due to my former colleagues in the School of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University, who have helped with translations and with useful suggestions: they include Gabrielle Carty, Tony Coulson, Angela Leahy, Áine McGillicuddy, Dermot McMahon, Juliette Péchenart, Barra Ó Séaghdha and Iris Taylor.

Finally, heartfelt thanks to my husband Rory Meehan whose unceasing encouragement has been vital in bringing this project to fruition.

Some findings in this study have already appeared under the title “The Discovery of an Imaginary Island: Irish Fiction Visits *Hy Brasil*”, in *Ireland: in Drama, Film and Popular Culture*, eds Sandra Mayer, Julia Novak, Margarete Rubik, Trier: WVT, 2012, 175-81.

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Ui Breasail (The Isle of the Blest). By permission of the Linen Hall Library Postcard Collection, Belfast; Misc-0054.

PREFACE

This study has but one concern: Brasil Island, better known as Hy Brasil; the phantom island that was thought to exist in a relatively precise location to the west of Ireland, albeit in an area difficult to reach. Shrouded in mystery, the elusive island has been – and still is – hailed as the Celtic Elysium of the ancient Irish, but also as the Christian Paradise, more specifically, as the “Land of Promise” which St Brendan successfully set sail for. Yet it was also marked prominently on over three hundred nautical charts and, in pursuit of commercial gain, several expeditions were undertaken in search of it. Allegedly, seafarers from Bristol even found the island. Its significance, then, appears to span the worlds of Celtic mythology, Gaelic medieval literature and English maritime history.

Moreover, the island emerges as a significant theme in English and Irish literature, and nowadays it continues to play a role in popular culture. Thus Brasil Island’s history reaches back over almost seven hundred years, in the course of which it has variously occupied the minds of cartographers, seafarers, antiquarians, geographers, historians, writers, poets, artists and, more recently, bloggers.

Intrigued by its various guises and curious to discover how the vision came into being and what fed it over such a long period, I set out to examine all the available material concerning the island. The objective of this book, then, is twofold: first, to establish when, where and why the island originated, and, second, to trace its literary history, especially with the intention of exploring the conflicting interests behind the writers’ use of the Brasil Island as a topic.

The main themes of this study are evident from its division into five parts. Part I charts the Mediterranean cartographic history and the intriguing naming of the island. Part II investigates English attempts to Anglicize the island and the politico-historical situation surrounding its maritime exploration. Part III is devoted to Irish folklore, enquiring into the oral traditions by scanning external as well as indigenous Irish sources for the occurrence of Brasil Island. Part IV searches for the island in the early literary tradition, exploring Celtic otherworlds and

clerical sea voyages in medieval literature. It proceeds to trace the development of the Brasil Island trope in English and Irish literature during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Part V deals with Irish efforts to Gaelicize the island and analyses the origin of the concept of *Hy Brasil*, the Hiberno-English spelling for *Í Breasil* or *Uí Bhreasail*, and how this came to be imbedded in the Gaelic tradition. It pursues the Brasil Island trope in modern literature and the arts and concludes by examining the more recent development of *Hy Brasil* as a motif in the arts and popular culture.

Eighteenth-century literary texts are discussed here in some detail, partly because some of these are difficult to access, but mainly because it was my desire to examine extensively the material and the social contexts from which these works sprang. And indeed a close reading of these texts provides some intriguing insights into the different mindset of English and Irish authors.

Throughout the book I shall generally refer to the island by the name of Brasil Island, but make no attempt to standardize its spelling. Variant name-forms will appear as they stand in quotations from works by other authors. As the island has been represented in many different guises there is little point in differentiating between “enchanted”, “imaginary”, “mythical” or “phantom”, and thus all four terms will be used here almost interchangeably.

PART I

THE CARTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF BRASIL ISLAND

CHAPTER 1

MEDITERRANEAN MAPPING AND NAMING

Medieval geography in Europe was principally based on authority and tradition and the maps it produced were in the main symbolic. The vogue *Mappae Mundi* were allegorical representations of the universe and had little to do with the representation of the earth's surface as we know it, but much more with religion and legend. Their geographical information was mostly drawn from antique sources, classical and Christian. In these often bizarrely shaped schematic diagrams, there is no pretence of showing land and water proportionately. Prominence is given to the Holy Land, often at the centre, and to Paradise, located in the East, which is nearly always positioned at the top of the map.

However, more realistic geographical representation began with marine charts. In the late thirteenth century, nautical maps called "portolan charts" began to be produced. These charts were named for the *portolano* or pilot book and they were predominantly concerned with coastal features: with headlands, bays, river mouths, ports and adjacent islands. The aim of the portolan makers was cartographic accuracy because their charts were put to practical use. As first-hand intelligence based on actual observation and information obtained from, and specifically compiled for, seafarers, they provided invaluable navigational help for the increasing Mediterranean trade and shipping. When commercial interests drew them into the Atlantic, the Mediterranean traders had the portolan charts extended northwards to take in the British Isles and Northern Europe as well as the newly discovered – or sometimes imagined – Atlantic island groups.¹ By fitting together various coastlines, Europeans in time developed a surprisingly faithful representation of the coasts frequented by their mariners.

¹ Tony Campbell, "Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts", *Imago Mundi*, XXXVIII (1986), 67.

None of Europe's Atlantic seaboard people took part in the very early exploration of the Atlantic; it was an enterprise launched from deep within the Mediterranean, chiefly by Genoese and Majorcan navigators.² Unsurprisingly, then, in the infancy of Atlantic navigation, sea-charts were produced almost exclusively by Italians from Genoa (later also from Venice) and by Catalan mapmakers whose main cartographic school was in Majorca. And it was one of these who in the mid-fourteenth century first marked a large round island called "insula de brazile" to the west of Ireland.

Roughly about the same time, other Mediterranean mapmakers applied the very same name to an island hundreds of nautical miles away from Ireland, and a little later we find two, sometimes even three, different Brasil Islands in different parts of the Atlantic Ocean marked in one and the same chart. The free distribution of the name is confusing and has indeed caused consternation. So much so, that when discussing *Brasil* as a geographical appellation, Walter Scaife remarked in 1890 that this toponym had something of a will-o'-the-wisp character, "for on various maps it may be seen designating a great Antarctic continent, extending to the South Pole, or a small island near the arctic circle; or it may be as far west as the southern part of South America or as far east as the vicinity of the coast of Ireland". Even the form of the name, he observed, "is almost as various as the positions in which it is found ...", and he lists the following thirteen variations: *Brasilia*, *Bresilia*, *Prisilia*, *Prisilli*, *Brasielie*, *Brazili*, *Brasil*, *Brassil*, *Brazil*, *Brazill*, *Brazile*, *Presillg* and *Brasi*.³ In the course of this chapter we shall have occasion to return several times to Scaife's article, but shall leave out cartographic references to the Southern hemisphere and instead concentrate entirely on the Atlantic islands of that name, which held their place in the maps for the next five hundred and fifty years until the last of them was finally removed from the charts in the late nineteenth century.

Because of the numerous locations in which islands of that name crop up, it is often commented that Brasil Island was constantly

² Felipe Fernández-Armesto, "Spanish Atlantic Voyages and Conquests before Columbus", in *Maritime History: The Age of Discovery*, eds John Hattendorf *et al.*, Malabar, FL, 1996, I, 138.

³ Walter B. Scaife, "Brazil, as a Geographical Appellation", *Modern Language Notes*, IV (1890), 209-13.

straying about the Atlantic Ocean, shifting here and there in unconvincing if persistent fashion, but that it always wandered back to Ireland. It seemed that Mediterranean mapmakers were determined to put this island somewhere in the Atlantic, and thus whenever newly acquired empirical knowledge of an area rendered its locus on the map untenable they shifted it to a different position in uncharted waters or returned it to Ireland. Usually the multiplicity of locations is attributed to duplication, to deference towards the authority of earlier map makers and a general reluctance to eliminate islands whose exact position had not been established. Indeed, if one were to give Brasil Island on maps only a cursory glance, this is the impression one would get.

However, a somewhat different picture emerges when we examine the cartographic records more carefully. A comparison of the various localities and occurrences on maps reveals that we are not dealing with one, but with several Brasil Islands, each of which has its own distinct history. Their separate identity is further emphasized by different physical configurations. And slowly it dawns on us that the Brasil Island phenomenon goes far beyond the sphere of cartographic history. It turns out to be a story about the race for economic and political dominance by competing maritime powers, involving secrecy and deception.

Let us begin by fixing their different locations. Apart from one or two odd ones out, we find that Brasil Islands regularly occur in four different regions in the Atlantic. The most southerly of these is in the Azores, roughly in latitude 37°N. We furthermore find one indicated west of Brittany, one west of Ireland and one east of Newfoundland. Our starting point is the Irish Brasil Island as this is the focal point of our enquiry. And the first most compelling questions to be addressed are why the Mediterranean mapmakers marked an island westward of the Irish coast where there is none, and what prompted them to give it this particular name.

Brasil Island off the west coast of Ireland

When mapping out new territories, portolan makers strove to draw information from as many sources as possible. They incorporated older maps and local knowledge into their charts, and in time, they would revise these by a process of practical checks and comparison

with other charts.⁴ But with Ireland, lying on the outer margins of the ancient world and unconquered by Roman legions, older maps hardly existed.⁵ To the ancients, the West was a region of vague mystery where, on the far horizon, they pictured mysterious islands beyond the setting sun. So when we turn to classical geographical lore, we often find that human imagination outran the records of actual exploration. Thus, beside actual discoveries we also find islands of a mythical nature in the Atlantic: the *Elysian Fields*, the *Isles of the Blest*, the *Fortunate Islands*, *Thule*, *Ogygia*, the *Garden of the Hesperides*, *Atlantis* are some of the names given to them. It would appear that the basis for a firm belief in islands lying to the west and north of Europe was bequeathed to the Mediterranean mapmakers by these ancient tales and fables.⁶ Ptolemy, the second-century Greek astronomer, who provided the earliest specific geographical data for Ireland, was of the opinion that the seas were full of islands, and he is said to have assigned 25,000 of them to the Atlantic Ocean.⁷

On an Anglo-Saxon map, dating back to the last decade of the tenth century AD, a whole plethora of empty islands is marked to the north-west of Ireland.⁸ And Edrisi, the twelfth-century Arab geographer, who put the overall number of Atlantic islands at twenty seven thousand, assigned seven of these to the Irish Atlantic coast, omitting, however, to give their names.⁹

⁴ J.E. Kelley, Jr., “Non-Mediterranean influences that shaped the Atlantic in the early portolan charts”, *Imago Mundi*, XXXI (1979), 18.

⁵ The earliest maps in which Ireland is represented are those of the British Isles and charts of the western coasts of Europe and world maps. No particular map of Ireland is known of a date earlier than 1489: see Michael C. Andrews, “The Map of Ireland; A.D. 1300-1700”, *Proceedings and Reports of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society*, 1922-23, (1924), 13.

⁶ John L. Allen, “From Cabot to Cartier: The Early Exploration of Eastern North America, 1497-1543”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, LXXXII/3 (September 1992), 501.

⁷ However, only seventeen names are recorded: see Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America*, Boston and New York, 1884-89, I, 47. Ptolemy's original manuscripts are lost, but a Latin translation survived. His work has preserved practically all that was then known about this “most westerly” land, beyond which all was shrouded in darkness.

⁸ Thomas J. Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic: Their History and Fable. A Contribution to the ‘Atlantis’ Problem”, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 3rd series, XXX/sect. C (1912), 223-60, Plate XX.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

In the indigenous legendary lore of Ireland, too, there is talk of Atlantic isles; one hundred and fifty of these are said to lie off its western shore according to the early Irish tale *Echtra Brain maic Febal* (“The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal”), where a fairy-woman chants:

There are thrice fifty distant isles
 In the ocean to the west of us;
 Larger than Erin twice
 Is each of them, or thrice.¹⁰

So obviously, in days gone by, the presumption prevailed that the Atlantic Ocean was studded with islands. Naturally the early map-makers would have expected to find nothing but islands to the west and north of Ireland. This expectation must have led to the fusion of classical and medieval lore with actual geographical knowledge and data from discovery. It would seem that an example of this is the curious convention of early Mediterranean cartographers of putting a huge ring-shaped bay packed with tiny islands about the middle of the Irish west coast. We find this *gulfo de issolle CCCLVIII beate e fortunate* first in the *Secreta* by Marino Sanuto of Torcello (c. 1260-1338).¹¹ It is unlikely, however, that Sanuto himself made any of the maps which illustrate his book. Cartographic historians believe that Pietro Vesconte was responsible for these. In atlases (of c. 1321) which Vesconte left under his own name we find the bay with 368 islets off the west of Ireland.¹² The number of islets varies on other maps where it is sometimes given as 300, 358 or 367. Occasionally the bay remains unnamed, but mostly it appears as *Lacus fortunatus* and its islands tend to be named *beate fortunate* or *sancte beate*.¹³

¹⁰ *Ancient Irish Tales*, eds Tom P. Cross and Clark H. Slover, New York, 1996, 591.

¹¹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchung über die Historische Entwicklung der Geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt und die Fortschritte der Nautischen Astronomie in dem 15ten und 16ten Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1836-52, I, 400, 439.

¹² Campbell, “Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts”, no. 49.

¹³ Michael C. Andrews, “The British Isles in the XIVth and XVth Centuries”, *Geographical Journal*, LXVIII/6 (December 1926), 476; Heinrich Winter, “The Fra Mauro Portolan Chart in the Vatican”, *Imago Mundi*, XVI (1962), 17; Heinrich Winter, *Das Katalanische Problem in der Älteren Kartographie*, Hamburg, 1940,

Obviously the few islands in that area were magnified out of all proportion and ancient tales of the *Insulae Fortunatae* were responsible for the designation.

When the Mediterranean cartographers put Ireland and its offshore islands on the map, they did not have to rely entirely on fictional geography. Thanks to early established trade links they had some actual knowledge of the Irish coasts, too. Irish trade relations with southern European countries are quite well documented from the Norman invasion onward, and therefore the continental European merchants and mariners who were doing business with Ireland must have begun to familiarize themselves with offshore islands, coastal outlines, promontories to steer by, shallow banks, rivers, harbours, and so on. This would most certainly be true of several Italian cities that were carrying on a direct trade with Ireland as early as the twelfth century, so their map-makers would have had ample opportunity to obtain information from their own mariners as well as from people in Ireland.¹⁴ Crucially, though, we do not know from whom they garnered their local information; whether it stemmed from the native Irish, the Norse, or the Normans. The Irish archaeologist and folklore field-worker Thomas J. Westropp (1860-1922) pointed out that most of the Irish places marked on the early Italian charts were well known to the Anglo-Normans. Accordingly, place-names abound all around the southern half of Ireland while few can be identified from the northern half. And as name-forms like *le deng* (Dingle), *le bano* (Bannow), *l'eocolo* (Youghal) etc. demonstrate, a French, or rather Norman, influence underlies these maps from the very first, while distinctive Irish names remain unrecorded.¹⁵

What is more, Westropp also drew attention to the fact that the early maps contain names which are neither Norman nor Irish, but are

109; Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America*, I, 48; Heinrich Winter, "Notes on the Weimar Portolan", *Geographical Journal*, XCII/2 (August 1938), 151.

¹⁴ Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic", 259. Traces of merchants from Florence, Lucca, Pisa, Sienna and Parma are found as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Ireland, but none from either Venice or Genoa: see also Andrews, "The Map of Ireland", 18.

¹⁵ Thomas J. Westropp, "Early Italian Maps of Ireland from 1300 to 1600, with Notes on Foreign Settlers and Trade", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 3rd series, XXX/sect. C (1912-1913), 363-64, 412-17; Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic", 259.

evidently toponyms of southern European extraction. In some cases they represent straightforward translations: for example, “The Bull Rock” in Kerry is marked as *Toro*, its neighbouring island, “The Cow” is down as *Vache*, “The Old Head” in Cork is called *Cap veio*, etc. But other sites are given names that bear no resemblance whatsoever to the local versions, as is the case with “Bolus Head”, a headland opposite the Skelligs, which is marked as *Lespor d'irlanda*, or *Y.S. Sama Zinqui*, which appears to be “St Senan’s Isle” or “Iniscatha”. The two corollaries of this are, first, that it is quite erroneous to assume that names on the nautical charts are all somehow derived from the Irish language or represent a phonetic transcription of an Irish name and, second, that, as there is no corresponding island named in the Irish tradition, a Mediterranean origin of the toponym is more than likely. Accordingly, Westropp assigned Brasil Island to the south-western European tradition, pointing to the conspicuous place it occupied on the maps of Italy, Spain, France and other countries.¹⁶

Considering Brasil Island from a geographic point of view, then, we could simply dismiss it as a cartographic fallacy. But we could also pursue a different line of enquiry. We could investigate the possibility that some time in the not-too-distant past there actually was an island there: that within the period of Atlantic navigation Brasil Island did exist but has since sunk beneath the surface of the waves. As we shall see shortly, there are several reasons for believing in the existence of a now vanished island. After all, some gentlemen seem to have squandered their family’s fortunes in fruitless attempts to find the elusive island. For example, in the early fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Arundell of Filley, “having injured his fortune by a wild adventure in attempting to discover an imaginary island called Old Brazil …, sold his manor and barton, and removed to the parish of Sithny”.¹⁷ We also hear of a Sir “Richd Buckley of Anglesey” who had fruitlessly undertaken the discovery of “O’Brazille” by “twice manning out a ship of his own from Beaumaris”.¹⁸

¹⁶ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 249, 255.

¹⁷ *The History of Cornwall: From the Earliest Records and Traditions to the Present Times*, eds Fortescue Hitchins and Samuel Drew, London, 1824, II, 206.

¹⁸ *A History of the Isle of Man Written by William Blundell 1648-56*, ed. W. Harrison, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1876, I, 7.

So let us return to the portolan chart in which, as far as we know, Brasil Island makes its first appearance. It is a pity that both its author and its exact date are in question. Some attribute it to Angelino Dulcert, a Majorcan mapmaker of Genoese origin, others to his colleague Angelino Dalorto, who is thought by some to be the same person as Dulcert, as their maps show such a remarkable accord in style, form and content. A copyist could have corrupted the name, or he himself might have done it in order to give his name a more Catalan sound on settling in Majorca, as Fridtjof Nansen argued.¹⁹ While there are valid arguments for the conviction that Dulcert is no other than Dalorto, a more recent study of their charts offers very good evidence that they are indeed two different cartographers.²⁰ Because of this uncertainty, we come across references like “Dulcert/Dalorto” or the “Dalorto-group”. While it is regrettable that a question mark hangs over the identity of the cartographer who first gave us Brasil Island, it is arguably of greater importance to know that the chart, although produced on Majorca, is considered as Genoese because it “obviously belongs to the Genoese school”.²¹ Exactly when this map first appeared is also a little uncertain, but most cartographic historians now put it at 1330. The map is preserved in Florence and forms part of the Prince Corsini Collection.²²

On this map Brasil Island appears as a large, near-circular disc of land, set in the Atlantic Ocean off the southern coast of Ireland at approximately latitude 51°N, and both shape and location appear virtually unchanged on all subsequent charts. The circular form comes with some variations, though: it may appear like a heavy black ring enclosing small dots (these appear first on the “Catalan Atlas” of

¹⁹ Fridtjof Nansen, *In Northern Mists: Arctic Exploration in Early Times*, London, 1911, II, 226. For a further discussion of this notion, see also Charles Verlinden, “Portuguese Discoveries and International Cartography”, in *Maritime History*, 100.

²⁰ This is the conclusion of a Doctoral thesis to which Chet Van Duzer drew my attention: Sandra Sáenz-López Pérez, “Imagen y Conocimiento del Mundo en la Edad Media a Través de la Cartografía Hispana”, Department of Medieval Art History, Complutense University of Madrid, 2007. However, Tony Campbell disputes this. He agrees with Ramon J. Pujades i Bataller, an archivist, highly skilled in the paleography of the period, who argues strongly (see *Les Cartes Portolanes*, Barcelona, 2007, 490-91) that just one individual is involved.

²¹ Verlinden, “Portuguese Discoveries”, 100.

²² Campbell, “Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts”, no. 166. For further reference to this and all the other charts consult the *Appendix*.

1375);²³ sometimes the disc is divided into two parts by a curved strait, giving it the look of a horizontal belt and occasionally this channel runs from north to south, dividing the island vertically (first indicated by the Pizzigani Brothers in 1367);²⁴ or its edges may be serrated (a feature introduced by Cesanis in 1421).²⁵ Much has been read into these variations; some have proposed that the dots represent islands or volcanoes. Others more inclined to favour mythological explanations have suggested that they stand for “The Seven Cities”, an idea which not only ignores the fact that the number of dots ranges from six to ten, but also that on early charts we find several other similarly dotted islands. Nansen and a few others wondered whether the channel in the middle might represent Styx, the river of death.²⁶ However, not only are other dubious islands given the same shape, but they are also fitted with the same belt, and one would hardly expect to find several Styxs on one and the same map.

This point is illustrated clearly by Andrews, who presented us with nine drawings of typical forms given to the British Isles by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century cartographers. His types IIIa. (Dulcert/Dalorto), IIIb. (Villadestes) and IIIc. (Becharius) show Brasil Island as a big ball lying due west of Ireland.²⁷ “Ultima Thule” (marked as *I. de till*), the island that Pytheas of Massilia (*fl.* 300 BC) gave to classical scholarship and which fired the imagination of scholars for fourteen hundred years,²⁸ also appears as a round island of the exact same size off the north-east coast of Scotland. Turning to type IIId. (Benincasa), we find that both Brasil and Thule are represented with an east-west strait, while *scurce*, another mythical (elliptic) island to the north-west of Scotland, which showed no dividing line in any of the previous charts, is now also provided with such a channel. Geometric patterns obviously belong to cartographic conventions. Early chart makers used features like circles, ovals, straight lines and other artificial forms

²³ *Ibid.*, no. 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 119.

²⁶ Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, II, 228.

²⁷ Andrews, “The British Isles”, 481.

²⁸ Vincent H. de P. Cassidy, “The Voyage of an Island”, *Speculum*, XXXVIII/4 (October 1963), 595. This equally non-existent island to the north-east of Scotland is also a characteristic feature on many portolan charts. It is variously marked as *Insula de tile*, *Ultima Tile*, *Tille* or *Thule*.

to signal a doubtful island or its uncertain position.²⁹ Such shapes differentiated the island from those that were explored and mapped in detail. From this we may deduce that from the very beginning the portolan makers were harbouring doubts about the existence or location of Irish Brasil Island.

The roundness of Irish Brasil Island is graphically represented on maps and it is also verbalized in written accounts. In a Spanish Basque chronicle written by one Garcia de Salazar (1399-1476), the island is described as round, low-lying and situated at twenty-five leagues from the coast.³⁰ Two early sixteenth-century Spanish geographers believed it to be at a different distance from Ireland. Fernández de Enciso placed it at seventy leagues away from Ireland, and he also knew that the Island of Brasil is at fifty-one degrees and that it is almost round, being twelve leagues in length and nine leagues in width.³¹ Alonso de Santa Cruz agreed with the distance from Ireland and also put it at seventy leagues.³² Amazingly, Roger Barlow, the first Englishman who in 1526 embarked on a voyage to South America and who translated Fernández de Enciso's *Suma de geografia* into English, but included in it his own travel account, retained the information about Brasil Island. After having given his own observations on the British Isles, he added Enciso's data:

Weste of yreland is an ylonde called the ilande of brasyll which stondeth in 51 degrees. Hit is almost rounde, of longitude it hath 12 leges and of latitude 9. ffrom Yreland to this yle of brasyll is 70 legis.³³

²⁹ William H. Babcock, *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic: A Study in Medieval Geography*, New York, 1922, 57; Lawrence D. Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, London, 1970, 43; Konrad Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's in ihrer Bedeutung für die Geschichte des Weltbildes*, Berlin, 1892, 218.

³⁰ The text is more fully dealt with in Chapter 2 (see pages 43-45).

³¹ Quoted in Harvey L. Sharrer, "The Passing of King Arthur to the Island of Brasil in a Fifteenth-Century Spanish Version of the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal*", *Romania*, XCII (1971), 67. It is of interest to note that Fernández de Enciso's book was prepared in 1518 for Charles V of Spain.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

³³ *A Brief Summe of Geographie by Roger Barlow*, ed. Eva Germaine Rimmington Taylor, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, LXIX, London, 1932, 50.

Taking a closer look at the name given to the island on the very first map (Dulcert/Dalorto of 1330), we find that it is actually given two alternative designations: “Insula de montonis sive de brazile”.

The inscription of the first choice, “montonis”, is difficult to make out and has been read and interpreted in different ways. Some think it is an error for “moltonis” or perhaps “moutonis”, representing the ancient fancy of an Isle of Sheep with which the Faroes are sometimes connected.³⁴ Alternative interpretations are “montorius”, “montoniis”, and other derivations, most of them evoking the idea of mountains, not sheep. This notion is somewhat strengthened by some of Graciosus Benincasa’s charts which indicate the legible legend “montorio” beside Isola de braçill. Conti di Freducci, a slavish copyist of Benincasa, likewise used “montorius” and Aloysius Cesanis added “mons orius” to the name in his atlas of 1574.³⁵ But, in truth, none of these readings is in any way enlightening, and as in the vast majority of cases we only find the second alternative it certainly looks more promising to concentrate on “brazile”.

In the early Middle Ages, *brasile* was a coveted and very valuable commodity. It was a dye whose name is derived from its colour, namely a fiery red: “Weight for weight it was more valuable than gold, and the demand for clear strong colours for the clothes of ... rich men ... made it an ideal adventurer’s product.”³⁶ Etymologically speaking, all the early references to the term and its variants are from Middle Latin (*brasile*, *brasilium*, *bresillum*, *braxile*, *brazile*, *braxillum*, *brisiacum*, *brisillum*), while the versions beginning with a *p* are a Germanic spelling variant. As early as the twelfth century it is mentioned as a commodity in various commercial and legal documents from Northern Italy, France and Flanders, but the earliest instance of it originates from Genoa. It occurs as *brasile* in the Genoese *Liber iurium* of the *Historiae patriae documenta*, dated 1140, and from Genoa also stems the first occurrence of its variant spelled with a *z*, that is, *brazile*, which we find in the *Codex diplomaticus*

³⁴ Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, II, 226-30.

³⁵ Richard Hennig, *Terra Incognitae: Eine Zusammenstellung und Kritische Bewertung der Wichtigsten Vorcolumbanischen Entdeckungsreisen an Hand der darüber Vorliegenden Originalberichte*, Leiden, 1956, IV, 325; Babcock, *Legendary Islands*, 56; Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika’s*, 218-19; Westropp, “Early Italian Maps”, plate XLIV.

³⁶ Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 54-55.

seven years later.³⁷ Towards the latter half of the twelfth century, it crops up amid a long list of materials in a trade agreement between Modena and the Duchy of Ferrara in Italy in 1193, and again between Bologna and Ferrara in 1198.³⁸ Records of Dublin bear witness to the fact that this product was imported into Ireland at least since the beginning of the fourteenth century.³⁹ How well known the dye was can be seen in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where it is referred to in a way that shows it to have been widely used: "Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyn with brasile, ne with greyn of Portyngale."⁴⁰ But even more than two hundred years before Chaucer, the French poet Chrétien de Troyes (*fl.* 1160-90) had gentlemen wear leg garments dyed with brasile, "cauces taintes en bresil".⁴¹

Let us briefly return to Scaife, who was puzzled by the sheer number of occurrences of the toponym *Brasil* on sixteenth-century maps. Not only was it applied to different territories, but it also designated different geographical features, like islands, continents, rivers and towns – a fact which militates against the often-heard assumption that it was a case of progressive development from a local to a general designation. Scaife concluded his study with the observation that the "geographical history of the word is so curious and its origin so obscure, that it might interest the philologists to examine into its origin".⁴²

There was absolutely no doubt about the origin of the term in the mind of the Italian geographer Revelli: it was a Genoese word that supplied the geographical name. With reference to its rich red colour he pointed out that *brasile* and its variants are cognate with *brazi* (pl. of *braze*), the Genoese term for glowing coal or embers. In impressive

³⁷ Volker Noll, "Brasil: Herkunft und Entstehung eines Toponyms", *Vox Romanica*, LV (1996), 188-202; Wilhelm Heyd, *Geschichte des Levantehandels im Mittelmeer*, Hildesheim, 1984, 577.

³⁸ Hennig, *Terrae Incognitae*, IV, 327; Friedrich Kunstmüller, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas: Nach den Ältesten Quellen Geschichtlich Dargestellt; Mit einem Atlas Bisher Ungedruckter Karten*, Munich, 1859, III, 84.

³⁹ Westropp, "Early Italian Maps", 393.

⁴⁰ Epilogue to "The Nun's Priest's Tale", in *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, Oxford, Melbourne, and Cape Town, 1979, 54-55.

⁴¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval le Gallois ou le Conte du Gral*, Mons, 1866, I, 94: <http://www.archive.org/bookreader/ie7/print.php?id=percevallegallo00manegoog&ser> (accessed 27 May 2011).

⁴² Scaife, "Brazil, as a Geographical Appellation", 213.

support of his claim he called attention to the fact that in the district of Genoa we still find a place called *Brasile*, which is documented as far back as the twelfth century.⁴³ Now only a tiny hamlet, in the Middle Ages it used to be a place for people who had important positions in the government of the Republic of Genoa.⁴⁴ At this point it is indeed useful to remind ourselves that the first portolan makers who put Brasil Island on the map also came from Genoa or from the Genoese school of cartography.

The dye *brasile* was mainly extracted from the logwood tree of the genus *Caesalpinia brasiliensis*, commonly referred to as “brazilwood” (It. *Legno del Brasile*). In ancient and medieval times, this was imported to Europe from the Near East. When the Portuguese explorers in the New World discovered a tree (*Haematoxylon brasiletto*) which yielded a similar red dye at a much lower cost, they named the country where brazilwood grew Brazil.⁴⁵ The notion that the same dye might also have been responsible for the naming of the Irish Brasil Island has been rejected on the grounds that the logwood tree does not grow in northerly regions.⁴⁶ However, what is less well known is the fact that the red dye was also obtained from at least two other sources. It was prepared from a scale insect (*coccus ilicis*) found on several species of the Kermes oak tree which flourishes in many European countries, and also from *Rocella* or *Orchella* weed (also *orchilla*, *archella*, etc.), a genus of lichen which yields a particularly rich purple tincture.

According to some sources, the craft of dying with *orchella* was discovered in the Levant, about the year 1300, by a Florentine merchant of the family of Oricellaru, or Rucellai, later called “de Brasir”,⁴⁷ who turned his discovery into a thriving business.

⁴³ Paolo Revelli, *Christoforo Colombo e la Scuola Cartografica Genovese*, Genova, 1937, 380-81.

⁴⁴ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bolzaneto> (accessed 12 August 2009).

⁴⁵ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago, London, etc., 1976: Micropaedia II, s.v. “brazilwood”.

⁴⁶ Von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchungen*, I, 439-46; Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 214-15; Scaife, “Brazil, as a Geographical Appellation”, 209.

⁴⁷ Thomas Mortimer, *A General Dictionary of Commerce, Trade, and Manufactures; Exhibiting their Present State in Every Part of the World; and Carefully Compiled from the Latest and Best Authorities*, London, 1810, s.v. “orchilla-weed”; Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 54.

Kunstmann, however, quoted a source which appears to prove that, even before the Italians, Phoenician seafarers who were already familiar with the properties of this lichen and who were searching Atlantic islands for it had named the Canary Islands *Purpuriae* after it.⁴⁸

For some time, the Italians alone supplied all Europe with *orchella* from the Levant, but upon the re-discovery of the Canary Islands in the fourteenth century, the lichen was mainly imported from there, where it grew more beautifully and abundantly among the maritime rocks. Large quantities of the lichen were gathered and shipped from these islands as it was light in relation to bulk and easily obtainable.⁴⁹ When Italian seafarers chanced upon one or several islands of a group which we now call the Azores, where this lichen grows equally plentifully, they named one of them Brasil Island. As such it first appeared on fourteenth century maps and for most cartographic historians there is no question that the island was named after the dye.⁵⁰ Shortly, we shall return to this Brasil Island, which the Portuguese later renamed *Terceira*.

There is a related northern species of the lichen, usually referred to as *Roccella* or *Orchella moss* (*Roccella fruciformis*), which grows in colder climates and can be found on the western coasts of the British Isles. In the Hebrides, where it is known as *crotal*, it was used, for a considerable time, to dye many of the early tartans. It was gathered in Irish waters, and even as far north as Iceland.⁵¹ That Columbus was on the look-out for *orchella* is clear from his diaries, where he enters “collecting brazil” in the accounts of his third and fourth voyages, commented Lawrence Hills, who underlined his argument by noting the equipment Columbus carried with him – slung bags and knives – which suggest that these were lichen-gathering and not tree-felling

⁴⁸ Kunstmann, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁵⁰ Sofus Ruge, “Die Entdeckung der Azoren”, *Jahresbericht des Vereins für Erdkunde zu Dresden*, XXVII (1901), 168; Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 215; Kunstmann, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, 8. Babcock thought that either the dye was responsible for the naming of the island or else the name was borrowed from Brasil Island west of Ireland: see *Legendary Islands*, 56. Hennig argued that the island was named after the dye, but did not believe it was discovered by the Italians: see *Terrae Incognitae*, IV, 327-28.

⁵¹ Mortimer, *A General Dictionary*, s.v. “orchilla-weed”.

expeditions.⁵² It follows naturally that the search for this valuable commodity would have also led to the naming of the Irish Brasil Island. Indeed some evidence will be presented later that establishes the likelihood of this conclusion (see Chapter 2, “The Bristol Voyages and King Arthur on Brasil Island”, pages 45-46). As with the South American country and the original name for Terceira, Hills considered it likely that the dye provided the name for the Irish island. The toponym may simply have been no more than a marker indicating “look here for brasile”.

This sounds like a reasonable explanation of the name, but the difficult question remains which island it was supposed to designate. We have already seen that no island of that name occurs in the Irish tradition, but furthermore there is actually no such island where the mapmakers indicated one. As there is no evidence of a mighty earthquake capable of sinking a whole island, the argument has been put forward that Brasil Island existed in the past and is now submerged. Several geographical sites have been suggested, all of which are principally areas of shallow waters to the west and northwest of Ireland – *Porcupine Bank*, *Imaire Buidhe* (“Yellow Ridge”) and *Rockall*, which earlier appear to have been higher out of the water.

Like many others, but applying a totally different logic, Graham Hancock made a strong case for a connection between Brasil Island and the Porcupine Bank. A follower of inundation theories, he considered it highly unlikely that medieval mapmakers would have known about the submerged Porcupine Bank. To place Brasil Island exactly in its spot rather suggested to him that the Mediterranean portolan makers worked from a source map. The fact that there is such substantial agreement on the position of Brasil Island (as well as other allegedly mythical islands) in all the early portolan charts indicated a common derivation, and for that reason he argued that there must have been a now lost corpus of pre-Ptolemaic maps that showed many islands which, due to cataclysmic changes and floods, have sunk below the surface of the water.⁵³ Interesting as this suggestion may be, as long as he cannot substantiate his claim by cartographic evidence Hancock’s ideas regrettably, remains conjecture. But surely his

⁵² Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 54.

⁵³ Graham Hancock, *Underworld: Flooded Kingdoms of the Ice Age*, London, 2002, 504-21.

argument is weakened by the fact that portolan chart makers were precise copyists, who treated earlier map makers with such deference that they would rather duplicate than eliminate islands.

Concerned with more practical circumstances, James Williamson pointed out that submerged banks alter the appearance of the sea and would certainly be noted by ship-masters. The colour change in water alone would warn experienced eyes of shoals. He therefore believed that reports of the Porcupine Bank may have given rise to the notion of a submerged Brasil Island. And by commenting that a fragment of Roman pottery was brought up in the net of a trawler on the Porcupine Bank, he seems to hint at the possibility that the bank was once much closer to the surface.⁵⁴ Most proponents of the vanished island idea draw attention to the fact that the sea-bottom west of Ireland is at no great depth, but then sinks down suddenly to a depth of several thousand feet. “Is there anything unreasonable in the supposition, that a portion of the shallower waters was at one time covered with islands?” asks Edwin Guest, making specific reference to the Yellow Ridge, which stretches five or six leagues all along the western coast of Connaught.⁵⁵

Admittedly, the low sea levels would suggest that once actual islands may well have existed in these areas, but could an island have completely disappeared within, say, five or six hundred years? Westropp doubted this very much;⁵⁶ however Hills considered it likely. An island “large enough to supply the northern species of Brazil could well have been above water” in the early fourteen hundreds, he argued.⁵⁷ William Frazer, too, believed that real lands have disappeared off the Irish coast in relatively recent times. He called attention to the fact that in a seventeenth-century map, which will be discussed below, Rockall is shown as consisting of two adjacent islands – a larger and a smaller one. The same two islands are also represented in the cruise of HMS *Porcupine*, which gave its name

⁵⁴ James A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII, with the Cartography of the Voyages* by R.A. Skelton, Cambridge, 1962, 20-21.

⁵⁵ Edwin Guest, *Origines Celticae (A Fragment) and Other Contributions to the History of Britain*, London, 1883, I, 125-26.

⁵⁶ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 258.

⁵⁷ Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 55.

to the other bank. Now, however, only one small, solitary rock remains above the waters in that specific location.⁵⁸

As far as Frazer was concerned, Brasil Island was almost certainly identical with the Porcupine Bank.⁵⁹ His argument is mainly based on a French map by the Geographer Royal, Le Sieur Tassin, published in 1634 and entitled a *Chart of the Islands and Maritime Coasts of Europe, in which we See the Route and Navigation of the Hollanders by the North of Ireland and Scotland during the Wars with the English for the German Ocean*. “This map has convinced me that an island must have existed at a very recent period where the Porcupine Bank now is known to be placed”, he wrote.⁶⁰ Having lauded the skilful craftsmanship of the geographer and his scrupulous accuracy, even in rather minute details, he drew the conclusion that the map is evidently the work of a man who was intimately familiar with the coasts of the British Isles. As Dutch and French sailors would have made the western seas a daily thoroughfare for their commerce, Tassin was doubtless kept informed about every single sailing point, headland or island. Quite possibly he passed over the track himself. In any case, as in many other examples, on this sailing chart, Frazer observed, Brasil Island is marked “in its proper place”, much in the position now occupied by the Porcupine Bank.⁶¹

Frazer had a further point to bolster his argument: shallow-water shells. Shells of the common periwinkle (*Littorina*) were discovered round the bottom of the Porcupine Bank. As the periwinkle requires occasional exposure to the atmosphere for its existence the bank must have been above water at some stage in the past.⁶² Westropp, too, drew attention to this⁶³ as did Praeger, who commented that the

⁵⁸ William Frazer, “On Hy Brasil, a Traditional Island off the West Coast of Ireland, Plotted in a MS. Map, written by Sieur Tassin, Geographer Royal to Louis XIII”, *Scientific Proceedings of the Royal Dublin Society*, new series, II (1880), 174.

⁵⁹ Frazer, “On Hy Brasil”, 173.

⁶⁰ William Frazer, *Notes and Queries*, 6th series, VIII (15 December 1883), 475.

⁶¹ Frazer, “On Hy Brasil”, 173.

⁶² Frazer, *Notes and Queries*, 475.

⁶³ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 246.

shallow-water shells dredged at this shoal would indicate an island with shoal water around it “in comparatively recent times”.⁶⁴

Rockall presents a similar case. This small, but very steep rock rising on a bank in the North Atlantic (in about latitude 57°N) is extremely difficult to access and has therefore rarely been landed upon. Nevertheless, dredgings were carried out there in the late nineteenth century which revealed an abundance of scallops (*Pecten*) and other shallow-water shells lying at a depth at which they could not have lived.⁶⁵ This result prompted one of the organizers of the expedition to suggest that a similar exploration of the Porcupine bank might usefully be undertaken in order to search for traces of Brasil Island.⁶⁶

These are intriguing findings, but they do not permit a safe conclusion in regard to the existence of an island on the site of the Porcupine Bank within human memory. A strong argument against the assumption is the fact that not only is there no Irish record of such an island, but also that Irish monks had already visited places as far as the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands and even Iceland⁶⁷ long before the first portolan charts were made. In the face of this, it appears altogether unlikely that they should have had no knowledge of an island lying only some 100 miles off their Atlantic shore. The submergence of the Porcupine Bank (and parts of Rockall), we must assume, more likely took place at a much earlier date, and with that we must consign the idea of a sunken Brasil Island to the realm of myth.

To sum up the cartographic history of the Irish Brasil Island: from its first appearance on the Dulcert/Dalorto chart of 1330 until it was finally removed from maps in the late nineteenth century, the island remained fairly constant in its location and shape. It was located on charts as lying somewhere to the west of Ireland, typically situated more to the southwest but occasionally it was also placed to the northwest of the country. It did, however, diminish in size over time. We can observe that from the mid-seventeenth century onwards fewer

⁶⁴ Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way that I Went: An Irishman in Ireland*, Dublin, 1980, 157-58; see also Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 246.

⁶⁵ Anon., “Rockall”, *Geographic Journal*, XI/1 (January 1898), 49.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁷ These journeys will be dealt with in Chapter 5 (see pages 109-120).

and fewer maps show the island, and from the middle of the eighteenth century it begins to appear mainly as “Brasil Rock”. But even in this new guise it clung on tenaciously, as John Purdy’s comments of 1812 demonstrate:

M. Bellin, in his Memoir of 1742, states that this rock is marked in lat. 51° It has been variously represented in different charts, although its existence has been doubted It was, however, seen in the year 1791, by the company and master of an English merchant ship, the commander of which favoured the editor of the present work with a description of it, stating that it is really a high rock, or islet ... to which he passed so near, that he could have cast a biscuit on shore. The longitude, according to his computation, was about 16°W., but we suspect that, *if it exists*, it is more to the westward.⁶⁸

The British Admiralty kept Brasil Island on their charts as late as 1873. Its cartographic demise was witnessed by the Reverend Everett Hale, who was sailing from New York to England. Visiting the bridge of SS *Siberia* in April that year, he was amused to find the island still marked off the west coast of Ireland. On his return visit in July, Hale discovered that the old chart had been replaced by a new one with no Brasil Island. He reported this to the American Antiquarian Society, commenting that he had been “in at the death” of this fabulous island.⁶⁹

While this concludes the cartographic history of the Irish Brasil Island, it is certainly not the end of its story altogether, as we shall see shortly.

Brasil Island in the Azores

Closest to the Irish Brasil Island in terms of first appearance is the specimen in the Azores. Before it was marked on any known maps, reference to it was already made in a mid-fourteenth-century travelogue, penned by an anonymous Spanish Franciscan monk. In

⁶⁸ John Purdy, *Memoir, Descriptive and Explanatory, to Accompany the Charts of the Northern Atlantic Ocean, and Comprising Instructions, General and Particular, for the Habitation of that Sea*, London, 1853, 487.

⁶⁹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages A.D. 500-1600*, New York, 1971, 104; Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America*, II, 36, n.4.

this work of fiction the first person narrator purports to give an account of a journey by land and sea through Africa, Europe and Asia. Among many other places he claimed to have visited was Brasil Island, which, judging by his route, was clearly meant to be in the Azores.⁷⁰ The monk's "travel account" clearly falls into the category of fictitious or fabulous narratives (or, more unkindly, travel hoaxes), and in any case the name of the island is all we hear of it. But the name and the early date are important. To help him compose his story the Spanish monk used maps, and the nomenclature of the various islands he mentioned is Italian of Genoese origin.⁷¹ We do not know, however, what maps he had recourse to. If the book's generally accepted publication date of between 1340 and 1350 is correct, then we must assume that a chart existed which is now lost, because the earliest known maps showing Brasil Island as part of the Azores group are those of the Pizzigani Brothers (1367)⁷² and an anonymous Catalan map preserved in Naples, dated to the second half of the fourteenth century.⁷³

The Azores are composed of ten major islands, divided into three widely separated groups. The Portuguese claim to have discovered these around 1431, with no traces of human habitation found in any of them.⁷⁴ However, as the Appendix shows, at least fifteen Italian maps appear to testify to the fact that long before the Portuguese set foot on these isles, some, if not all, of them were already known to the Italians.⁷⁵ The "Laurentian Sea Atlas",⁷⁶ only gives a name to the three

⁷⁰ Anon., *Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands, and Lordships that Are in the World, and the Arms and Devices of Each Land and Lordship, or of the Kings and Lords who Possess them, Written by a Spanish Franciscan in the Middle of the XIV Century*, ed. Clements Markham, Nendeln/Lichtenstein, 1967, 29.

⁷¹ Verlinden, "Portuguese Discoveries", 102. Verlinden, it has to be said, argues for a later publication date which he reckons to be 1385.

⁷² Campbell, "Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts", no. 99.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁴ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Micropaedia I, s.v. "Azores".

⁷⁵ Oscar Peschel, *Geschichte des Zeitalters der Entdeckungen*, Stuttgart und Augsburg, 1858, 50-51; Kunstmann, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, III, 44-45; Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 181-2; William H. Babcock, "The Problem of Mayda, an Island Appearing on Medieval Maps", *Geographical Review*, IX/4 (April-June 1920), 345; Babcock, *Legendary Islands*, 55; Charles Raymond Beazley, *The Dawn of Modern Geography: A History of Exploration and Geographical*

groups (*insule de Cabrera, insule de ventura sive de colombis* and *insule de corvis marinis*), but not to the individual islands, with one exception:⁷⁷ the single island that is given a name is marked as *Insula de brazi*. On the above mentioned Catalan map all the other islands have also received individual names while *insula de brasil* retained its name and continued to do so in a variety of forms, such as *brazir*, *brazil*, *brazili*, well into the following century.

Although the eminent cartographic historian Armando Cortesão asserted that “the cartographic evidence leaves no shred of doubt that that they were discovered much earlier”,⁷⁸ some critical voices have expressed doubts about an Italian discovery prior to that of the Portuguese, arguing that the maps may be mere fancy work derived from a mingling of several legends, oriental marvels and the classical Fortunate Isles.⁷⁹ Hennig reasoned that if the Italians had indeed found the *orchella*-rich Azores they would certainly have attempted to rediscover the islands.⁸⁰ But most other geographers and cartographic historians have no doubt that the marking of the Azores was based on their actual discovery.

Kretschmer praised the remarkable precision and accuracy with which the islands are already shown on the fourteenth-century maps.⁸¹ He also unearthed further documentation preserved in the Vatican which confirms that the knowledge of Brasil Island had spread to Spain. The document in question is an anonymous letter from the Spanish Crown asserting claim to Brasil Island, whose location is stated to be in the latitude of Lisbon: “insule … reperiuntur uacue sine

Science from the Middle of the Thirteenth to the Early Years of the Fifteenth Century (c. AD 1260-1420), London, 1906, III, 422.

⁷⁶ Also known as the “Medici Atlas”, this anonymous set of maps was probably composed by a Genoese cartographer during the fourteenth century. The atlas’ calendar starts in 1351, which has led many commentators (Kretschmer among them) to date it to that year. Cortesão puts it at c. 1370, while Campbell assigns it to the second quarter of the fifteenth century. See Campbell, “Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts”, no. 76.

⁷⁷ Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 182.

⁷⁸ Armando Cortesão, “The North Atlantic Nautical Chart of 1424”, *Imago Mundi*, X (1953), 10.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Samuel Eliot Morison, *Portuguese Voyages to America in the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA, 1940, 12-13.

⁸⁰ Hennig, *Terra Incognitae*, III, 294-95.

⁸¹ Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 181-84.

habitatore, ut *insula brasili*, que dicitur esse in linea occidental contra ulixbonam”⁸² This is indeed the location of *Teircera*, and once the Portuguese had renamed the island the earlier name slowly began to disappear. While the Portuguese exclusively used their designation, others – like Graciosus Benincasa, Arnaldo Domenech and Albino de Canepa – continued to refer to it as *I. de bracill* until the end of the fifteenth century. But although the appellation then ceased to exist for the island as a whole, the name hung on to a part of it; a prominent headland of *Teircera* is nowadays still called *Morro do Brazil* (“Mount Brazil”). Apart from the mountain, then, this Brasil Island simply fell victim to renaming.

Unlike its round Irish counterpart the shape of *Terceira* was normally shown as what Quinn compared to “the three-legged badge of the Isle of Man” with sometimes “four projections”,⁸³ and what others have likened to a swastika. Whatever the simile, the shape looks strangely artificial, all the more so when one considers that on aerial photographs the island looks almost elliptical. Curiously though, when we hear how the explorer Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563–1611) described the island on which he spent two years, we get the impression that it must have appeared differently from the sea: “It hath on the one side in manner of an elbow sticking forth, two high hills, called Bresyle, which stretch into the sea, so that a far off they seeme to bee devided from the Island.”⁸⁴ The original Dutch version of his travel account (1596) contains a hand-coloured engraving of *Terceira* by him, on which the island looks like a parallelogram with a big foot and a smaller elbow sticking out.⁸⁵

To conclude, both this and the Irish Brasil Island, one real and the other imaginary, were supposedly known to the Mediterranean people since the middle of the fourteenth century, and as already mentioned, many maps show both these islands, together with sometimes even a third specimen, lying west of Brittany, to be discussed later. In his

⁸² Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 220.

⁸³ David B. Quinn, “Atlantic Islands”, in *Atlantic Visions*, eds John de Courcy Ireland and David C. Sheehy, Dún Laoghaire, 1989, 82.

⁸⁴ *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies: From the Old English Translation of 1598; The First Book, Containing his Description of the East*, London, 1885, II, 277.

⁸⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Huyghen_van_linschoten (accessed 28 November 2010).

comparison of eighteen early nautical charts produced between 1325 and 1430, Cortesão found that one of these shows three Brasil Islands, while nine show our two islands in question, with a further three marking the Irish version only, as opposed to six which only show what is now known as *Terceira*.⁸⁶ In other words, in the early days there were more Brasil Islands marked in the Azores than west of Ireland – an interesting finding that contradicts the often-heard opinion that Brasil Island was placed to the west of Ireland whence it slowly drifted southward to end up in the region of the Azores.

Brasil Island west of Brittany

More veiled and less distinguishable is the history of this imaginary island which was also introduced into cartography in the fourteenth century. Generally placed at about latitude 48°N, the latitude of southern Brittany, it sometimes moved northwards a little closer to Ireland and at others southwards a little closer to the Azores. Its site tended to be vaguely described as being opposite Cape Finisterre, or lying west of the English Channel, or half way from Ireland to the Azores. Its shape, however, is consistent enough in that on most maps it appears roughly as a small crescent, or what is more appositely described by Morison as an “inverted umbrella”.⁸⁷ Although as a geographical entity it enjoyed a long life, its name was subject to many changes. However, unlike the case of the first two Brasil Islands, where we only come across variant spellings of the same word, this island, at various times, was given completely different designations. Mainly it was known as Maida (also Mayd, Mayde, Maydas, Maidas, L’as Maidas, etc.) or Asmaida (also Asmayda), but also as Mam, Man, de-Man, Jonzele, Vlaenderen, Ventura, and occasionally it went under other names as well. Babcock, who investigated the history of this phantom island, argued for a possible Arabic origin of its chief name,⁸⁸ a proposal that is further reinforced

⁸⁶ Cortesão, “The North Atlantic Nautical Chart”, Table II. Cortesão included the *Libro del Conoscimiento* in his survey, which brings up to seven the number of documents in which *Terceira* represents the only Brasil Island.

⁸⁷ Morison, *Portuguese Voyages*, 16.

⁸⁸ Babcock, “The Problem of Mayda, an Island Appearing on Medieval Maps”, 337.

by Hills' assertion that the Arab cartographer Edrisi had placed an island called Mam in that location.⁸⁹

This umbrella-like island seems to have made its first appearance on the Pizzigani map of 1367, which shows three Insola de brazir: the new addition, Terceira and the Irish specimen.⁹⁰ Only eight years later, in the "Catalan Atlas" of 1375, the new Brasil Island is called Mam (or Man). Nine years after that, the Pinelli map calls it Jonzele. The two Soler maps (of c. 1385) show three Brasil Islands; shape and general location are substantially those of Pizzigani and the older name of Insola de brazir is reverted to. During the fifteenth century the island was sometimes represented without any name, but mostly it is called Man,⁹¹ however, in 1430 Briaticho marked it again as Insula de brazilli. In the following century, suddenly and inexplicably, the name Mayda in its various forms was substituted for Man, and while its physical representation remained unchanged, Mayda tended to move closer to Newfoundland. Mercator of 1569 and 1587 and Ortelius of 1570 curiously changed its name to Vlaenderen.⁹² With slight variations in location and name, Mayda continued to be represented on maps of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. According to one source, it even made an appearance on a chart published in Chicago in 1906.⁹³

Overall, then, during its extraordinarily long life this island underwent many name changes and was only temporarily, during the fourteenth and early fifteenth century, marked as Brasil Island. It therefore seems more appropriate to refer to it as Man or Mayda, the names that stuck to it longest. Outside its cartographic record there is next to no mention of it; certainly no reports of its discovery or of claims laid to it. Whatever vague notions of the island existed seem to

⁸⁹ Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 43.

⁹⁰ The Irish Brasil Island is given alternative names which some cartographers have read as: "Ysola de Mayotas seu de Bracir." Kretschmer, however, who examined the chart carefully points out that, unlike the second alternative, the first name cannot be identified with any certainty: see Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 218-9.

⁹¹ Babcock, "The Problem of Mayda", 339.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 344.

⁹³ Oswald Dreyer-Eimbcke, "Mythische und Imaginäre Inseln des Atlantiks im Kartenbild", *Mitteilungen der Geographischen Gesellschaft in Hamburg*, LXXX (1990), 665.

be conjecturally derived from the name Man,⁹⁴ thus yielding no clues to the problem of how it came to be confused with Brasil Island, which remained in its usual spot west of Ireland all the while. If Pasqualini's map of 1408 is anything to go by, then the confusion may simply boil down to the mistaking of one island for another, for on this map we find a) a swastika-shaped Y. de braçil in the location of Terceira, b) an umbrella-shaped Y. de brazil in the latitude of Brittany and c) a huge round Y. de mam in the latitude of Galway Bay, where we usually find the Irish Brasil Island.

Brasil Island east of Newfoundland

Hills, it will be recalled, held that there were instances of submergence off the Irish coast in more recent times (see page 18). For example, he believed that much more of what is presently seen of Rockall must have been above water not so long ago, and he specifically regarded this bank as a location where *orchella* might have grown in the past. Although he does not make the point, the very name of the island might actually support his argument. The etymology of the name *Rockall* is still disputed, but nobody, it seems, has ever suggested the very possibility that it might derive from the *Rochella* (or *orchella*) *moss*. An even more likely place where the moss would have grown, Hills assured us, is the Flemish Cap. This shoal, which rises to within 28 fathoms of the surface and lies about 350 miles east of St John's, Newfoundland (at c. 47°N), he argued, was in all probability meant to be the intended location of the Irish Brasil Island when it was first put on the map.⁹⁵

Indeed, it is roughly in this area, that we find our fourth Brasil Island. Scaife referred to it as a small North American island "near the arctic circle", but mainly its position is indicated south of Greenland and east of Newfoundland, which is of course far away from the Arctic Circle. However, all the other Brasil Islands we have looked at so far were situated off European or North African coasts, whereas this island is in distinctly American waters. It is by no means a substitution for its Irish counterpart, with which it peacefully coexists.

⁹⁴ As the name sometimes occurs as "de man" it has been suggested that it should be read as one word "deman" which could mean "demon". For further discussion of this conjecture, see Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's*, 221-22.

⁹⁵ Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 55.

We find this specimen on at least eight charts⁹⁶ where it is marked as a roundish island off the east coast of North America, moving between latitudes 47° and 63°N. It arrived much later on the scene than the other Brasil Islands, that is approximately one hundred and fifty years after the Dulcert/Dalorto map of 1330, and had a relatively short life span, making its first appearance on the anonymous Catalan map of c.1480 and already taking its leave with the Porcacchi map of 1598. It did not disappear, however, without leaving a trace. To this day, in Canada we find a ridge called Brazil Rock off Cape Sable (Nova Scotia) and a Brazil Shoal off Grand Manan (New Brunswick). And was this perhaps the Brasil Island which Columbus recorded to have sighted on his way to America?⁹⁷

In the late fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth century, what we now know to be North America was then not considered to be firm land, but rather a fragmented area. Thus, on early maps, Newfoundland appears as a disintegrated region consisting of a plethora of islands. This, together with the fact that the region was still largely unexplored, possibly explains why the location became the ultimate assembly point for several imaginary islands which had wandered across the Atlantic from European or Northern African waters. In its new surroundings, Brasil Island variously found itself in the company of The Isle of Demons, The Isle of The Seven Cities, St Brendan's Isle, I. de Fortuna, Mayda, and Isla Verde (also Insula Viridis or The Green Isle), which some argue is an imaginary isle while others think it was probably intended to be a representation of Greenland. These islands were depicted as lying so close to one another that they become almost interchangeable. Gemma Frisius' remark: "Insula Viridis, quae aliis dicitur Brasil, in ... lat. 51",⁹⁸ may be a reflection of this confusion, but his uncertainty may also refer to Waldseemüller, who on his chart of 1513, marked Obrazill in the

⁹⁶ "Catalan Map" (c. 1480); de Nicolay (1560); Forlani (1560); Lafreri (1566); Zaltieri (1566); Forlani (c. 1566); de Jode (1589/93) and Porcacchi (1598).

⁹⁷ According to an entry in a Venetian port book of 1528, Columbus claimed to have spotted the isle: see von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchungen*, I, 443.

⁹⁸ *Cosmographia, sive Descriptio Universi Orbis Petri Appiani et Gemmae Frisii*, Antwerp, 1584, 159.

same spot where on his previous map of 1507 *Viridis Insula* had been placed.⁹⁹

If a short digression be allowed, it should be pointed out here that there is a tradition of a mythic “Green Island” in the folklore of northern Ireland, Scotland, and most prominently in the Hebrides, according to which this beautiful, verdant island is said to be located in the distant western hemisphere. It is a well known fact that Scandinavian sea-rovers began at a very early period to invade the western islands of Scotland and the coasts of Ireland, and that in the ninth century they were firmly in control of most of these regions. When, in the late ninth century, the Norwegians colonized Iceland, Christian men from Ireland, called by the Northmen “Papae”, had already formed a small settlement there.¹⁰⁰ From Iceland Greenland was discovered and a Christian community was established which was later abandoned for reasons unknown. To J.G. Campbell it stood to reason to assume that traditional accounts of the mythical Green Island went from Scotland to Iceland, and that this would supply us with a clue as to why the forbidding region of Greenland was given that name.¹⁰¹

But back to Brasil Island lying south of Greenland, which has a very intriguing story to tell: in 1497, the Genoese seafarer John Cabot, in charge of an English voyage of exploration, appears to have made several landfalls on the American continent in the region of Newfoundland. Although his discovery was not made public, news that he had actually found Brasil Island, the professed destination of at least two Bristol expeditions in the early fourteen eighties, quickly spread over Western Europe, mostly through ambassadors and foreign trading merchants who were doing business in England. Naturally, Spain and Portugal, the two nations which had already divided among themselves all undiscovered territory through a vertical partition line, would react with concern to this news.

So does this mean Brasil Island does not belong to myth, but is real after all? Is this the island Mediterranean mapmakers had in mind

⁹⁹ Josef Fischer, *The Discoveries of the Norsemen in America: with Special Relation to their Early Cartographical Representation*, London, 1903, 94, n.4.

¹⁰⁰ J.G. Campbell, “The Green Island”, *Scottish Historical Review*, V (1908), 199.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 201-202.

when they put it on the map? Let us examine the circumstances of Cabot's expedition a little closer to get to the bottom of the matter.

PART II

ANGLICIZATION

CHAPTER 2

THE BRISTOL VOYAGES AND KING ARTHUR ON BRASIL ISLAND

Starting in the fifteenth and continuing into the seventeenth century, Europeans explored the world by sea. Engaging in long-distance maritime travels, they searched for alternative trade routes to India, Cathay (China) and Cipango (Japan), for gold, dyes, silk and spices as well as for undiscovered territories to colonize. But their goals were not all about profit and political gain: explorers were also motivated, it seems, by geographical inquisitiveness and intellectual curiosity.

A very powerful incentive for Atlantic exploration proved to be the quest for islands. It was inspired by a combination of geographical lore – derived from myth, legend and rumour – and empirical geographical knowledge: a combination of imagination and experience, as John Allen calls it.¹ Christianity, too, obviously played its part in stimulating exploration, adding an incentive of its own as the search for a terrestrial paradise shows (see pages 107-111).² The Mediterranean portolan charts, which located some of the fabled westerly isles with apparent precision, would no doubt have fired the ardour of those who believed in their reality. Here unimaginable riches and delight beckoned – a prospect which allegedly helped recruit ship crews.³ Any new discovery promised glory and benefit to the explorers themselves, who tended to be rewarded most handsomely, while at the same time creating opportunities for colonization and commercial exploitation for their supporters at home. And newly discovered islands were also extremely useful as markers

¹ Allen, “From Cabot to Cartier”, 501.

² A thirteenth-century writer stated that the Garden of Eden could be reached from France by a journey of 1,425 days: see J.R.S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe*, Oxford and New York, 1988, 202.

³ Paul Herrmann, *Conquest by Man: The Saga of Early Exploration and Discovery*, London, 1954, 294.

on sea routes as well as convenient stepping places *en route* to faraway places.

By the fifteenth century, the English town of Bristol had built up its reputation as the second port in the kingdom. It had become a major commercial centre and, more importantly, a very active base of North Atlantic exploration. Its oceanic trade extended to Iceland in the north, to the Iberian Peninsula in the south and to Ireland in the west.⁴ The merchants of this port were doing a particularly lucrative business with Iceland. In return for cloth, wool, beer and wine they imported stockfish from there, much of which was sold on to Spain and Portugal. Fish formed an important part of people's diet in those days, but as fresh fish was expensive most people bought the cured product, that is, dried or salted fish. North Atlantic cod from Iceland was not only bigger and fatter (larger livers produce the "train" oil) as well as easier and cheaper to preserve than other fish (needing only light salting), but it also lasted longer and tasted better, too.⁵

The remunerative trade between Bristol and Iceland petered out in the 1460s when the kings of Denmark, rulers of Iceland, shifted their policy in favour of the Hanseatic League, which was bent on monopolizing trade in north-western Europe, but in particular that of Iceland and its fisheries. The Bristol trade fell foul of the Hanseatic League and hostilities broke out between the two sides which resulted in the latter cutting off the supply of cod to the port of Bristol in 1475.⁶ As Dano-Norwegian crown representatives in London made it clear that the English were also unwelcome in Norway, a pressing need arose to search for alternative fishing grounds in less troublesome regions. And this brought North-American waters into focus.⁷

⁴ Kenneth R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire 1480-1630*, Cambridge, 1984, 43; A.N. Ryan, "Bristol, the Atlantic and North America, 1480-1509", in *Maritime History*, 241.

⁵ David B. Quinn, "The English Contribution to Early Overseas Discovery", *Terra Incognitae*, VIII (1976), 91; Peter Firstbrook, *The Voyage of the Matthew: John Cabot and the Discovery of North America*, London, 1997, 100.

⁶ Firstbrook, *The Voyage of the Matthew*, 100; Alwyn A. Ruddock, "John Day of Bristol and the English Voyagers across the Atlantic before 1497", *Geographical Journal*, CXXXII/2 (June 1966), 230-31.

⁷ Kirsten A. Seaver, *Maps, Myths, and Men: The Story of the Vinland Map*, Stanford, CA, 2004, 83.

Thanks to their well-established Iberian connections, Bristol merchants – either by spying or buying the information – may have learned about Basque fishermen’s activities in the Atlantic Ocean. The Basques regularly brought home huge amounts of dried North-Atlantic cod from their fishing trips, but kept their fishing grounds secret. Much later they would claim that for years they had been fishing off Newfoundland, having reached America long before Columbus or Cabot.⁸ Winsor, examining this oft-repeated assertion, acknowledges the possibility that venturesome seamen from Europe may have reached American waters by then,⁹ and indeed Christian Weyers has demonstrated that there are a few indications that would allow the conjecture that the Basques actually did arrive at this part of North America during the fourteenth century.¹⁰ A little more definite are Portuguese traces, especially regarding the toponymy of Newfoundland, where along its eastern and southern coasts, from about 1450 onwards, Portuguese names form the oldest European language stratum.

Then again, the men from Bristol could have gained their knowledge of North America in Iceland when they were still doing business there. Surely, Icelandic seafarers would have talked about Leif Eriksson (*fl.* eleventh century) and his men, the Norse seafarers whose exploits are preserved in thirteenth-, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Icelandic accounts. Sailing from Greenland, these Norsemen discovered three “countries” to the south-west of it: the first stony (“Helluland”), the second wooded (“Markland”), and the third rich in wild grapes (“Wineland”), areas which roughly correspond with Labrador, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia respectively. The Norsemen occasionally inhabited these regions, but did not actually colonize them, and towards the close of the fifteenth century they

⁸ Kunstmann, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, 43. Kunstmann informs us that the Basques, for example, maintain that the harbour of Dechaine (originally *echayreportu*) was named after its discoverer who was one of theirs, namely a native of St Sebastian by the name of Juan de Echaide. But local records show that Echaide lived there between c. 1577 and 1657, which is decades after Cabot’s landfall.

⁹ Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America*, I, 74.

¹⁰ Christian Weyers, “Basque Traces in the Toponymy of Newfoundland and Various Coasts of Atlantic Canada”, see http://pi.library.yorku.ca/dspace/bitstream/handle/10315/4050/icos23_1051.pdf?sequence=1 (accessed 3 February 2011).

ceased to visit them altogether.¹¹ In order to get to these “countries”, old sailing directions state that from Iceland one needed to steer to the south-west and aim for the southern tip of Greenland.¹²

Whatever their sources of information about Newfoundland were, by 1480 at the latest, Bristol men had discovered a direct route from western Ireland to that North-American shore. By sailing westwards, they avoided the northern route via Iceland and with that any potential clashes with their commercial rivals. Presumably in order to keep their newly-found fishing grounds secret and prevent their route becoming generally known, the merchants of Bristol claimed they were fitting out voyages of exploration in search of Brasil Island. By 1480, or earlier, wrote Seaver, “The ‘Isle of Brazil’ ... was obviously the English synonym for the Newfoundland fishing banks”.¹³

The earliest document of these voyages is the notebook of a Bristol antiquary called William Worcestre, who recorded his antiquarian journeys in 1478-1480. About the western “Islands of Ireland” he noted the following:

The three Aran Isles lie off Ireland beyond Blasket Island, Sligo. They include three large islands, and among them are, it is said, about 368 islets.¹⁴

The fact that he mentioned the *Lacus Fortunatus* with all its islets would suggest that Worcestre was working from a map, an impression that is reinforced by a wonder-tale which he added in connection with another island and which is one that is found on many early sea charts (see pages 59-60). Worcestre then continued: “Blasket Island near Dingle is (c. 10 m.) about, and he who wishes to sail to the island of Brazil must [there] set his course.” The original Latin wording of this reads: “Blasquey Iland prope Dengle continent in circuitu [empty space] et qui voluerit velare ad jinsulam Brasyle debet accipere cursum [empty space] Kelleques jland.”¹⁵

Under the heading “Ireland” he entered:

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the Norse discovery of America, see Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, I, Chapter 9, 312-84.

¹² Fischer, *The Discoveries of the Norsemen*, 94.

¹³ Seaver, *Maps, Myths, and Men*, 76.

¹⁴ William Worcestre, *Itineraries*, ed. John A. Harvey, Oxford, 1969, 309.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

1480. On 15 July the ship [*empty space*] belonging to [*empty space*] and John Jay junior, of 80 tons burthen, began a voyage from the port of Bristol at King Road to the Island of Brazil to the west of Ireland, ploughing the seas for [*empty space*] and [*empty space*] Lloyd was master of the ship, the [most] competent seaman of the whole of England; news came to Bristol on Monday 18 September that the said ship had sailed the seas for about 9 months, but had found no island and had been forced back by storms at sea to the port of [*empty space*] in Ireland to rest the ship and the seamen.¹⁶

The gaps are certainly frustrating, especially when considering that Worcestre's notes tell us all we know about the voyage in question. Yet if it had not been for his notebook, the enterprise would presumably have gone unnoticed altogether. One wonders how many other voyages there were that went unrecorded.

Officially, then, the object of Captain Lloyd and his crew was the discovery of Brasil Island, this time spelled "jnsulam de Brasylle" in the original text. A first-rate captain like Lloyd would not need to sail around Ireland for nine months to fail to find an island supposedly within one hundred miles of the Irish coast, so this can only mean that he was searching for something different. In all probability he was headed for the fishing grounds of Newfoundland and Brasil Island only served as a landmark for these. The co-owner of the ship, John Jay junior, was Worcestre's nephew,¹⁷ so even if the true purpose of the voyage was known to him, Worcestre would have been placed under moral obligation not to divulge it.

By sheer coincidence, this time because of an Exchequer enquiry, we know of a further expedition in the following year, 1481. Either undeterred by the alleged failure or spurred on by the success of the previous experience, another voyage was undertaken, this time consisting of two ships, the *Trinity* and the *George*. However, Thomas Croft, Collector of Customs, who owned a one-eighth share in each of the ships, was called before an official commission charged with trading, which he was not entitled to do while he held the office of Customer of Bristol. Croft, protesting that he was not engaged in any commercial activity, explained that the salt taken on board was "for

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁷ In his notebook Worcestre entered that "John Jay, the second husband of my sister Joan, died 15 May A.D. [1468]".

the rep[ar]acion and sustentacion” of the ships. His explanation seems to have been accepted because the enquiry came to the conclusion that his voyage had been for exploration and that the ships had specifically been sent out “not by cause of marchaundise but [to] thentent to serch & fynd a certaine Ile callid the Isle of Brasile ...”.¹⁸

On their outbound voyage both ships carried large quantities of salt amounting to some forty bushels, which is nearly 1.5 tons. Normally, salt was only imported through Bristol, but not exported. It therefore stands to reason to assume that the salt was taken to Newfoundland for the preservation of cod caught on the Grand Banks. And if true, this could be a further indication that the English were fishing there even before the 1480 voyage recorded by Worcestre.¹⁹ Presumably, we will never know for sure. In any case, as far as the two ships are concerned, both returned safely to Bristol, but history does not record whether they landed anywhere or whether the voyage was considered successful or not.

When the differences between the English and the Hanseatic League were settled in 1490, the Bristolians were free to negotiate the resumption of their trade with Iceland. Yet they chose not to do so.²⁰ From this we can only infer that they were not interested in reopening the Icelandic fishery because in the meantime they had established a more lucrative cod business elsewhere. And there is certainly enough evidence to point in the direction of Newfoundland. The Spanish ambassador Pedro de Ayala stated that, from 1490 to 1496 (or 1491 to 1497), the Bristol merchants sent out two to four vessels every year in search of Brasil Island. If historians are agreed on one point it is this: all these ships would not have been fitted out simply for exploration purposes; they must have yielded an economic return.

As was the case in 1480 and 1481, for all these voyages allegedly undertaken in the 1490s we only have one source of information, in this case Ayala’s letter. He wrote from London to Spain’s sovereigns

¹⁸ *North American Discovery: Circa 1000-1612*, ed. David B. Quinn, New York, San Francisco, and London, 1971, 34-35; Firstbrook, *The Voyage of the Matthew*, 101; Patrick McGrath, “Bristol and America: 1480-1631”, in *The Westward Enterprise*, eds Kenneth R. Andrews *et al.*, Liverpool, 1978, 82; David B. Quinn, “Columbus and the North: England, Iceland, and Ireland”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XLIX/2 (April 1992), 278-97.

¹⁹ Firstbrook, *The Voyage of the Matthew*, 101.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Ferdinand and Isabella in July 1498 to report on John Cabot's discoveries. Having dealt with these, Ayala added, "For the last seven years the people of Bristol have equipped two, three, four caravels to go in search of the island of Brazil and the Seven Cities according to the fancy of this Genoese".²¹

The Genoese alluded to is John Cabot, Genoese by origin and Venetian by adoption, who had settled with his family in Bristol some time between 1493 and 1495. He appears to have been an experienced pilot and cartographer. On 5 March 1496, Henry VII granted Letters Patent to John Cabot and his three sons to fit out five ships under the English flag, and to sail in any direction except the South, "to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians".²²

Clearly, then, the main object of Cabot's voyage was to go in search of transatlantic regions unknown to Christians. The operation had to be executed with discretion, though, because with the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) all newly discovered lands outside Europe were to be divided between Spain and Portugal, to the exclusion of other European nations. Unclaimed territories to the east of an imaginary pole-to-pole line would belong to Portugal and lands to the west to Spain. As southern parts of the Atlantic had already been claimed by the Spaniards and the Portuguese, Henry obviously wished to avoid any controversy and barred the voyagers from exploring the South. But permitting them to sail in all other directions doubtless means that Cabot's goal, and the king's in supporting him, was the same as that of Columbus, to sail westward to find an ocean route to Cathay and Cipango, and to "conquer, occupy and possess" for England whatever lands they might come across on their way.

Although, in the case of success, generous rewards stood to be gained, nevertheless the ships had to be fitted out at Cabot's own expense. And this is where the Bristol merchants came in – they bore the costs. What goals they pursued in supporting Cabot's voyage we can only surmise, as we have no direct evidence of their motives.

²¹ David B. Quinn, "The Argument for the English Discovery of America between 1480 and 1494", *Geographical Journal*, XXXVII/3 (September 1961), 279.

²² Quinn, *North American Discovery*, 39.

After a failed first attempt in the previous year, John Cabot left Bristol in May 1497 with only one ship, the *Matthew*. He sailed round southern Ireland, then set course due west on a latitude and held it until he reached the American continent after thirty-five days at sea. The consensus is that he made landfall in Newfoundland, most probably, it seems, near the western end of its south shore. Coasting south and west he explored the shorelines and, in returning, he saw two islands to the right. He arrived back in Bristol in August, confident that he had reached the land of the Great Khan, in eastern Asia.²³ Henry VII must have been pleased with Cabot's report because he immediately made an award of £10 "to hym that founde the new Isle" and followed this with an annuity of £20 which was to be paid from the customs receipts of Bristol.²⁴ The new island, we note, remained nameless.

While there is no account of the voyage at first hand, no surviving maps or reports, we gain some insight through four letters written in London after his return. Three of these were written by Italians: two by Raimondo di Soncino to the Duke of Milan, one by Lorenzo Pasqualigo to his brother. A fourth letter which was only unearthed in Spanish archives in 1955, was penned in Spanish by an English wine merchant calling himself John Day (apparently an alias for Hugh Say)²⁵ and addressed to the Spanish "Most Magnificent and Most Worthy Lord the Lord Grand Admiral" (almost certainly Christopher Columbus).

John Day's letter contains the weightiest material. It was obviously written in response to a specific enquiry about Cabot's voyages received from the "Lord Grand Admiral", whom Day was "most desirous" to serve. Some of the things Cabot discovered in the region where he landed are of obvious interest to this enquiry. For instance, Day wrote that tall trees were found and also a stick "painted with brazil". However, the most critical passage in his letter reads, in translation:

It is considered certain that the cape of the said land [found by Cabot] was found and discovered in the past by the men of Bristol who found

²³ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

²⁴ Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement*, 45.

²⁵ Ruddock, "John Day of Bristol", 225-33.

‘Brasil’ as your Lordship knows. It was called the Island of Brasil, and it is assumed and believed to be the mainland that the Bristol men found.²⁶

The wording implies that it was generally known and also accepted by Columbus that the Bristolians had found Brasil some time before, and that the land, or island which Cabot found in 1497 is equated with the Isle of Brasil. In other words, Cabot’s “new Isle” and Brasil Island are one and the same,²⁷ and there is little doubt that Brasil represents the sighting of the North American coast.²⁸ If, however, Brasil Island was already known to the Bristolians, one wonders why Cabot’s discovery was then referred to as the “*new Isle*”. In answer to this, two explanations are usually offered. One is that the Bristolians had found land in, or before, 1480 but then lost track of it, in which case Cabot’s was the effective discovery because he could give its geographical position. Alternatively, the Bristolians knew all along where it was, but preferred not to divulge its location, thus enabling them to exploit the fishing grounds without attracting any foreign competition.²⁹

The rich fishing grounds are indeed referred to by Day: “All along the coast they found many fish like those which in Iceland are dried in the open and sold in England and other countries, and these fish are called in English ‘stockfish’.”³⁰ Soncino also found out that: “the sea there is swarming with fish, which can be taken not only with the net, but in baskets let down with a stone These same English, his companions, say that they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland.”

Interestingly, though, Soncino also remarks that Cabot’s mind was “set upon even greater things”, explaining that he wished to sail further “until he reaches an island which he calls Cipango ... where he

²⁶ Quinn, *North American Discovery*, 43-45.

²⁷ Some English historians, keen to prove that Cabot actually discovered America before Columbus, point to the ambiguous wording “en otros tiempos” in Day’s letter, which could be translated as “in times past” or “in past times” or “a long time/generations ago” and might thus be an indication of an English discovery in the early 1480s, if not before.

²⁸ Eva Germaine Rimmington Taylor, “Imaginary Islands: A Problem Solved”, *Geographical Journal*, CXXX/1 (March 1964), 107.

²⁹ Andrews, *Trade, Plunder and Settlement*, 46-47.

³⁰ Quinn, *North American Discovery*, 44.

believes that all the spices of the world have their origin, as well as the jewels".³¹ Thus, a distinction can clearly be drawn between Cabot's high ambitions and the more immediate concerns of the Bristol merchants.

Although Cabot's discovery was not made public, we know from the letters quoted above that before leaving the newly found land, Cabot hoisted the English royal standard and consequently took possession for the king there. And sure enough, the first known map of America, by the Spanish seafarer Juan de la Cosa, dated 1500, marks Cabot's 1497 discovery by five English flags. Apparently the North American coast was drawn by Cosa on the basis of information from Cabot himself.³² Among the twenty-two names given to capes, bays, islands, and so on, we find "Verde Island"; disappointingly however, there is no mention of Brasil Island. The latter is also missing from John Cabot's son's map. Sebastian Cabot, who maintained that he had accompanied his father on his voyage of discovery, and who later led expeditions of his own to America, drew up a world map in 1544. On this, we find Newfoundland divided up into separate islands, but none of these is called Brasil.³³

Officially, fish from Newfoundland is on record of having been brought to Bristol from 1502 onwards, and within a short space of time it became such an important fishery that Walter Raleigh could say:

The Newfoundland fishery is the mainstay and support of the western counties. If any accident should happen to the Newfoundland fleet, it would be the greatest misfortune that could befall England.³⁴

Catching and preparing the cod, setting it out to dry and salting it, involved a fair amount of heavy labour. Quinn pointed out that it was customary that in springtime extra men were picked up in Ireland by

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

³² Egon Klemp, "Plate VII: World Map by Juan de la Cosa (1500)", in Konrad Kretschmer, *Die historischen Karten zur Entdeckung Amerikas: Atlas nach K. Kretschmer*, Frankfurt am Main, 1991, 64-65.

³³ Karl Lenz, "Plate XVI: Map by Sebastian Cabot (1544)", in Kretschmer, *Die historischen Karten zur Entdeckung Amerikas*, 69.

³⁴ "Fourth Centenary of the Voyage of John Cabot, 1497", by the President, *Geographical Journal*, IX/6 (June 1897), 614.

English ships on their outward journey and brought back to their home ports when the ships returned in the autumn.³⁵

Presumably we will never know whether originally the Bristol men who sailed westwards into the Atlantic in, or perhaps even before, 1480, were actively searching for Brasil Island, as Worcestre stated, and whether the discovery of fish-surrounded Newfoundland to them was as good as having found Brasil Island; or whether from the very start they used Brasil Island only as a decoy, and possibly also as an incentive to persuade seamen to join in a voyage into the unknown, while in reality they were on the lookout for the rich Atlantic fishing grounds.

English historians, understandably, have lamented the fact that apart from the contemporary gossipy correspondence between interested parties from England and Spain there is no evidence of Bristolians having reached Brasil Island/Newfoundland in the 1480s. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, exciting proof of sorts was unearthed in unlikely quarters. A most intriguing fifteenth-century document not only seems to confirm Bristol's discovery of Brasil Island, but even puts a still earlier date on it. The document in question is a chapter in the *Libro de las bienandanzas e fortunas*, a Spanish Basque chronicle written between the years 1471 and 1476 by Lope García de Salazar (1399-1476). It only came to the attention of English historians in 1992, although Harvey L. Sharrer had published a translation of the relevant passages as early as 1971, but because it appeared in a literary journal it escaped the notice of historians for over two decades.³⁶ Salazar's account appears to prove that Bristol sailors had searched for and found Brasil Island before the first recorded voyage by Worcestre in 1480. While this document will no

³⁵ David B. Quinn, *Ireland and America: Their Early Associations, 1500-1640*, Liverpool, 1979, 6-7.

³⁶ Harvey L. Sharrer, "The Passing of King Arthur to the Island of Brasil in a Fifteenth-Century Spanish Version of the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal*", *Romania*, XCII (1971), 65-74; Ryan, "Bristol, the Atlantic and North America", 241-55. All citations from Salazar's text are taken from: "Salazar's Account of Bristol's Discovery of the Island of Brasil (pre 1476)", Department of Historical Studies, University of Bristol, 1-5: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Maritime/Sources/1476brasil.htm> (accessed 3 December 2007).

doubt give a new impetus to maritime research, it contains some intriguing revelations particularly relevant to our enquiry.

Salazar's chronicle is described as a "vast compendium of general and local historical lore", which includes one chapter that is devoted to the history of Britain. Within this chapter Salazar reworked the thirteenth-century Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal* version of King Arthur's passing.³⁷ Without offering any explanation, Salazar concluded the story by substituting the Isle of Brasil for Avalon. Arthur's final resting place is already indicated by the chapter heading which reads, "How Morgain took King Arthur on the boat to the Island of Brasil and enchanted it so that it cannot be found". After relating how Arthur, his arms and horse were taken onto the boat and taken away, Salazar added the following comments: "And it is said about this King Arthur, and the English now still say it, that Morgain, his sister, took him to the Island of Brasil, which is 25 leagues off Cape Langaneas, which is in Ireland, and that she enchanted that island so that no ship can find it".³⁸

Its enchanted status notwithstanding, Salazar obviously believed in its existence, confidently affirming that "there is no doubt that this island is there". In conversation with the English he reputedly heard tell that the spell was not an all-encompassing ban against the island's discovery. Apparently the enchantment worked only if prior to being sighted the island caught sight of the would-be discoverer, but conversely, the island could be found "if the ship can see the island before the island the ship". As proof of the island's existence, Salazar referred to the fact that "all the mariners find it on the charts" and, more importantly, that it was discovered by a vessel from Bristol.

This vital information is based, he claimed, on first-hand information from English seafarers. Men from Bristol assured him that not only had they found the island, but also that they had taken on board there a load of what they thought was firewood, which on closer inspection, however, turned out to be brazilwood. Having made a fortune from its sale, they naturally wished to rediscover the island,

³⁷ Sharrer, "The Passing of King Arthur", 65-66.

³⁸ According to the Bristol researchers Cape Langaneas (orig. *Le cap de Longaneos*) is a Basque name for Land's End in Cornwall, and it may be related to "Lyonesse", the mythical submerged kingdom which, according to medieval Arthurian literature, was believed to lie beyond Cornwall: see "Salazar's Account", 5.

but were unable to do so. Some other ships also saw it but were unable to reach it because of stormy conditions.

The passage gives us a clear understanding of what seafarers associated with and were looking for when searching for Brasil Island, and it also provides us with more definite ideas about the naming of it *brasile*. Taking another look at the correspondence exchanged after Cabot's alleged discovery of the island, we find that the letters, too, contain references to *brasile*, thus suggesting that this commodity was certainly foremost in the minds of the seafarers and their backers. Day, it will be recalled, mentioned tall trees and a stick found "painted with brazil". Soncino reported that the Bristol seafarers were convinced that brazilwood was indigenous to the island.³⁹ And an even more unequivocal statement came from the early sixteenth-century Spanish geographer Alonso de Santa Cruz, who wrote that west of the Irish coast there is "a certain island discovered by the English called Brasil because on it grow trees from Brazil", the quality of which, however, he compared unfavourably with "what is brought to Portugal from the coast of Brazil in the West Indies".⁴⁰

Overall, then, these documents appear to confirm that Bristol seafarers were searching for this island at least since the 1470s. Far more important for our investigation, however, is the fact that they strengthen the assertion that Brasil Island was indeed named after the dyestuff *brasile*. That the South American country and Terceira were named after this very commodity seems obvious, and it is reasonable to assume that the same is true of this Brasil Island. If the evidence provided is correct, then there were even two different sources of *brasile* in the region of Newfoundland: the logwood trees and the *orchella moss*, which Hills quite definitely saw growing on the Flemish Cap (see page 27).

But we still have no idea whether from the very start the Bristolians were only pretending to search for the island off the coast of Ireland while all along they were headed for Brasil Island/Newfoundland off the coast of America. Nor do we know whether the declared object of searching for brazilwood was only an

³⁹ Quinn, *North American Discovery*, 41.

⁴⁰ Sharer, "The Passing of King Arthur", 67. Translation kindly provided by Gabrielle Carthy.

excuse for not revealing their true goal of finding the rich fishing grounds.

The other noteworthy point in Salazar's text is the quite perplexing statement that King Arthur was taken to Brasil Island. This turns out to be a far more uncanny choice than it seems at first sight. There is indeed a tenuous connection between the two. And this must lead us to wonder whether Salazar knew about it.

As is well known, the legendary figure of Arthur owes his glorious fame and pre-eminent position in medieval literature to the fanciful *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-c.1155), who not only located Arthur in the line of British kings, but also elevated him to the central figure in British history. Geoffrey claimed to have based his account on an ancient Welsh text but failed to give the source. According to the *Historia* Arthur defeated the Saxons, Picts and Scots and then went on to conquer, amongst others, Ireland, the Orkney Islands and Iceland, thus establishing a huge Arthurian empire. In his final battle of Camlan, Geoffrey has him mortally wounded and taken to the unspecific isle of Avalon, never to be seen again. Although crediting Arthur with the conquest of Iceland, Geoffrey provided no records of it.

Also writing in the twelfth century, the chronicler and Bishop of Saint Asaph stated that, "about the year 505, King Arthur, after the conquest of Ireland, received the submission of the Orkneys and sailed to Iceland", which he also subdued. Equally terse is Waurin's account, written in the fourteenth century, which simply averred that Arthur carried the war into Iceland and fought with the Icelanders, whom he brought into subjection.⁴¹ We hear a few more details of Arthur's colonizing experiences in the North Atlantic from three other fourteenth- and fifteenth-century works, all now lost. One of these, entitled *Itinerary of all Asia, Africa and the North*, was written by the Dutchman Jacob Cnoyen of Herzogenbusch. He is said to have travelled the world like Mandeville "but described what he saw with better judgment". Of the second we only know its title, which is *Gestae Arthuri*, but according to John Dee's notes this work is a "rare / testimony of great import-/ance to the Brytissh / title to the Sep-

⁴¹ Benjamin Franklin de Costa, *Inventio Fortunata: Arctic Exploration with an Account of Nicholas of Lynn*, New York, 1881, 6: http://www.archive.org/bookreader/ie7/print.php?id=cihm_24345&server=ia600408.u (accessed 14 March 2011).

/trentional Regions / *Atlantis* in particular".⁴² What makes this note so particular for our enquiry is that the book evidently claimed that Arthur had conquered Newfoundland, because this is what Dee elsewhere calls "Atlantis".⁴³ The *Gestae Arthuri* was known to a number of people, most notably to the two famous Flemish cartographers Mercator and Ortelius.

The third book is entitled *Inventio Fortunatae* and was written in the 1360s by a little-known man, who is usually referred to as the "monk from Oxford", and who is identified by some, wrongly it would appear, as Nicholas of Lynn.⁴⁴ The author claimed to have travelled in the Northern countries, to have reached the North Pole and to have based his book on these travels. Some historians think that the author's travels are imaginary, but others would not rule out that he may have ventured as far as Iceland and Greenland, and that he may possibly also have visited the Viking settlements in North America.⁴⁵ While the authenticity of his travel account may be in doubt there is absolutely no uncertainty about the existence of the book itself. Several authors have quoted verbatim from it and important map makers like Ruysch (in 1508) and Mercator (in 1569) used topographical information contained in the book and noted this in the map-legends.⁴⁶ In fact the book was so renowned for its intricate description of the Arctic region that Christopher Columbus specifically asked John Day, with whom he was corresponding about

⁴² Eva Germaine Rimmington Taylor, "A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator to John Dee", *Imago Mundi*, XIII (1956), 57.

⁴³ Ken MacMillan, "John Dee's 'Brytanici Imperii Limites'", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, LXIV/1-2 (2001), 154.

⁴⁴ Kunstmann, however, quotes the following information from a manuscript preserved in Salamanca, dated 1732: "Nicolaus de Linna, Minorita, Anglus, Oxoniensis Mathematicus anno 1360 Eduardo tertio opus insigne nuncupavit inscriptum: *Inventio fortunata*, in quo Insularum Septentrionalium, suarumque voraginum descriptionem faciens incipit a gradu 53 usque ad polum teste Fr. Francisco a S. Clara (Davenport) in appendiculo, ad suae Anglicanae provinciae fragmenta, fol. 227": see Kunstmann, *Die Entdeckung Amerikas*, III, 90, n.87.

⁴⁵ Eva Germaine Rimmington Taylor, *The Haven-Finding Art: A History of Navigation from Odysseus to Captain Cook*, London, 1958, 155; Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, II, 151, 249, 289; Louis-André Vigneras, *The Discovery of South America and the Andalusian Voyages*, Chicago and London, 1976, 11.

⁴⁶ Taylor, "A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator", 63.

Cabot's discovery of Brasil Island (see pages 40-41), to bring a copy of the *Inventio Fortunatae* with him to Spain.

We owe the most detailed information about these three works to the English cosmographer John Dee (1527-1609), who gathered as much geographical knowledge as he could of the North Atlantic in an effort to back up British claims to a lawful appropriation of all lands and islands in that region, including parts of the "New World". After much research and a busy exchange of letters with eminent contemporaries, between 1577 and 1580, he presented to Queen Elizabeth and her advisors several treatises and other related materials which would allow the Queen to claim empire throughout the North Atlantic.

Dee based the historical evidence of the queen's title to these territories on the travels and conquests of the Cabots, King Arthur, St Brendan, Lord Madoc and a few other seafarers.⁴⁷ He obviously placed greatest importance on King Arthur. He even made a note in his diary that he put it to the eminent geographer Richard Hakluyt (c. 1552-1616) that King Arthur "did conquer Gelindia, lately called Friseland (Iceland)".⁴⁸ The Lord Treasurer Lord Burghly also noted in a summary of Dee's documents presented at one of his audiences with the Crown, that it "contains a brief statement of King Arthur's conquests".⁴⁹ Arthur is furthermore singled out in the final chapter of Dee's *Volume of Great and Rich Discoveries*, which is entitled lengthily, "That all these Northern Iles and Septentrional Parts are lawfully appropriated to the Crown of this Brytish Impire: and the terrible adventure and great loss of the Brytish people and other of King Arthur his subjects perishing about the first discovery thereof".⁵⁰

But despite this auspicious summary, the chapter itself contains disappointingly little information. It consists mainly of disjointed notes sent to him by the cartographer Gerard Mercator (1512-1594), who was one of Dee's correspondents. Dee had asked him about his depiction of the North Pole on the 1569 map, enquiring of him upon

⁴⁷ MacMillan, "John Dee's 'Brytanici Imperii Limites'", 155.

⁴⁸ *The Private Diary of Dr John Dee, and the Catalogue of his Library of Manuscripts, from the Original Manuscripts in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, and Trinity College Library, Cambridge*, ed. James Orchard Halliwell, London, 1842, 4. The date in his diary is 30 June 1578.

⁴⁹ MacMillan, "John Dee's 'Brytanici Imperii Limites'", 153.

⁵⁰ Taylor, "A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator", 56.

what authority he had relied for the Arctic inset. Mercator replied by quoting verbatim passages from Jacob Cnoyen's book, which also contained extracts from the other two missing works. Mercator's acquaintance with and familiar reference to these other lost works makes it difficult to disentangle the material. From the way it is presented it is impossible to establish which book contained what information.⁵¹

Taking in the totality of intelligence gathered, what we can glean from these sources is that after having lain all the winter of 530 in the northern islands of Scotland, Arthur's army crossed over to Iceland in May of the following year. He received warnings of the dangerous "indrawing" seas surrounding the North Pole, upon which he decided not to proceed any further, but he peopled all the islands between Scotland and Iceland as well as Greenland. There is also talk of great loss of life. It is said that Arthur sent out a fleet of twelve ships with 1800 men and about 400 women. They sailed northwards and got into trouble in a storm, in which five ships were driven on the rocks and lost. The rest seem to have made their way between the high rocks and landed forty four days after they had set out, but it is also recorded that 4000 of his subjects perished in the "indrawing" seas.⁵²

In AD 1364 eight men presented themselves at the court of King Magnus of Norway purporting to be descended from the people which Arthur had sent to inhabit the Northern Isles. Among them was a priest who reported that in 1360 they were visited by an English Friar from Oxford, who continued to journey further through the whole North and then put into writing all the wonders he saw in his book *Inventio Fortunatae*.⁵³ We need not concern ourselves with the marvels he described, which in his day obviously caused a sensation, because, as already noted, his description of the Pole (where, he said, stood a high black magnetic rock, surrounded by indrawing seas around which were four islands, etc.,) is quoted in other works and found its way into the graphic representation of contemporary maps. But it is not all wonder tales. His book seems to have been a

⁵¹ Mercator's original letter was lost. Dee made a transcript of it which survived, but it was damaged by fire and therefore contains many lacunae. Taylor's analysis contained in "A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator" is based on this corrupt text.

⁵² Taylor, "A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator", 58.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58-64.

characteristic blend of fantasy and genuine geographical knowledge, and of interest are some of the authentic touches which support the suggestion that he did visit Greenland and North America. In a country he described as the “fairest and healthiest of all the North” he recorded having seen wooded land and in particular he refers to “many trees of Brazil wood”.

Enterline, who examined the contents of the *Inventio Fortunatae* in some detail, concluded that the details presented suggest that the author had not only explored westward from Greenland but also southward, that is North America.⁵⁴ Taylor, too, is inclined to accept that details like brazilwood point to an actual visit to the timbered fringe of Labrador. However, she does not lend any credence to Dee’s claims of Arthur’s Northern conquests, nor does she believe that those eight visitors to the Norwegian court at Bergen were descendants of King Arthur’s colonists – she rather thinks they were a band of Norse settlers from Greenland or, perhaps, Labrador.⁵⁵ So despite his best efforts Dee not only failed to convince later authorities like Taylor, but he evidently also failed to persuade Queen Elizabeth to pursue her alleged valid claim in the New World.

The fact that Dee included St Brendan and Madoc in his list of discoverers of America aptly illustrates his willingness to clutch at any straws. For the moment we shall leave aside the Irish St Brendan because he will be discussed in Chapter 5 (pages 111-20). The other figure, Madoc, was a Welsh Prince who according to legend sailed round southern Ireland in 1170 and is said to have continued westward until he reached a country believed to be America. Madoc settled in the New World but returned to Wales for additional colonists to join him. With these on board, he vanished in the Atlantic Ocean, never to be seen again.⁵⁶ From this, argued Hakluyt lengthily, with a lurking under-current of national pride, it is manifest that the Britons discovered America long before Columbus led any Spaniards thither.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ James R. Enterline, *Erikson, Eskimos and Columbus: Medieval European Knowledge of America*, Baltimore and London, 2002, 68-70.

⁵⁵ Taylor, “A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator”, 68.

⁵⁶ Daniel Wilson, *The Lost Atlantis and Other Ethnographic Studies*, Edinburgh, 1892, 38.

⁵⁷ Geoffrey Ashe, *Land to the West: St Brendan’s Voyage to America*, London, 1962, 312.

The assertion that the Welsh reached America before other Europeans lingered on, but when in 1858 a prize was offered for the best essay on “The Welsh Discovery of America” it only attracted one entry. On top of that, this essay had to be disqualified because it appeared to prove that there was no such discovery, and with that the notion of a Welsh discovery petered out.⁵⁸ Curiously, though, the claim had a lasting after-effect, because in 1623 the south-east portion of the island of Newfoundland was given the name *Province of Avalon* “in imitation of Old Avalon in Somersetshire wherein Glassenbury stands”.⁵⁹

To summarize the puzzling situation: in the fifteenth century some writers claimed that King Arthur colonized North America; roughly at the same time Bristol seafarers sailed to Newfoundland claiming they were looking for Brasil Island, while Salazar maintained that King Arthur sailed to Brasil Island as his last resting place, and some one hundred and fifty years later Newfoundland is called Avalon.

There seems to be only one writer who alluded to Brasil Island within an Arthurian context, and this is Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) in his *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906). The book consists of simple short stories set in different periods of English history. In “Weland's Sword” Puck tells of a time in Old England when the Fairies were still around:

I've seen Sir Huon and a troop of his people setting off from Tintagel Castle for Hy-Brasil in the teeth of a sou'-westerly gale, with the spray flying all over the Castle, and the Horses of the Hills wild with fright ...! It was Magic – Magic as black as Merlin could make it, and the whole sea was green fire and white foam And the Horses of the Hills picked their way from one wave to another by the lightning flashes! That was how it was in the old days!⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁵⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalon_Peninsula (accessed 25 January 2011).

⁶⁰ See <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~rgs/puck-title.html> (accessed 10 November 2006).

PART III

BRASIL ISLAND IN IRISH FOLKLORE

CHAPTER 3

ORAL LORE

In an attempt to explain why the Mediterranean cartographers would have conceived of a seemingly non-existent island, it is often argued, that thanks to the ecclesiastical as well as trade contacts with Ireland, their attention had probably been drawn to an ancient Irish tale regarding a mysterious island off the west coast of Ireland. Its name, or what they thought they had heard of it, was then put on the charts or was translated into their own language. It is usually argued that, because of the practical bent of the portolan charts, cartographers would naturally have disregarded any vague stories about imaginary islands. But a different matter were not locatable islands that were really thought to exist, mysterious islands shrouded from view, whose exact location had not yet been established because of difficult conditions at sea.

Irish folklore abounds with mystical islands and the tales about them form part of the great mass of superstitions connected to lakes and to the sea. So the question has to be asked, whether there is among this common stock of traditional tales one about an island called Hy Brasil or Uí Bhreasail with which the Italian cartographers could have become acquainted – either through the Irish monasteries in Italy or through their seafarers who were trading with Ireland – and thus that on account of this ancient lore the island came to be put on the map.

Although not specifically referring to Brasil Island, as early as 1188, Gerald of Wales drew attention to an enchanted island in the Irish tradition. The island remained nameless and was simply referred to as the “Phantom Island”, which he described as follows:

Among the other islands is one that arose recently, and which they call the ‘phantom’ island. Its origin came about in this way. One fine day the inhabitants of the islands noticed that a large mound of earth arose in the sea where land had never been seen before. They all wondered. Some said that it was a whale or some other monstrous sea animal. Others, however, reflecting that it remained without any movement,

said “No, not at all. It is land.” They wanted, nevertheless, to remove the uncertainty, and so they selected young men from the island nearest to it in a rowing boat. When they had approached so near that they were on the point of disembarking, the island disappeared entirely from before their eyes as if descending into the sea. It appeared again in the same way on the following day, only, however, to play a similar trick on the same young men. On the third day they followed the advice of a certain old man in first throwing at the island as they approached it an arrow of red-hot iron, and then disembarking they found the land stable and habitable.¹

He remarked that “there are many proofs that fire is always most hostile to phantoms”, by pointing to the miraculous role fire plays in the scriptures. Although he himself appears to have believed in the veracity of the account, Gerald realized that some readers might have their doubts about it. Such sceptics he assured that he had put down nothing in his book “the truth of which I have not found out either by the testimony of my own eyes, or that of reliable men ... coming from the districts in which the events took place”.² From his description it appears that the island in question actually did exist and that only its origin was wondrous. Gerald omitted to mention its location, but he seems to have envisioned it in a northerly position.³ This assumption is borne out by a map of Europe which accompanies his observations and which does not indicate any islands to the west of Ireland, but situates ten small ones under the name of “Orcades” (Orkney Islands) closer to the north of Scotland.⁴ This is probably why Walter Gill took Gerald’s account of the newly-risen island to be that of the Orkney islet of Eynhallow,⁵ which also had a history of enchantment, being visible only at rare intervals and liable to vanish suddenly into the sea when approached by humans. But its spell, too, was broken one day

¹ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, London, 1982, 66.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

³ Immediately before this entry he deals with the Orkney Islands under the heading, “The northern islands, almost all of which are held by the Norwegians”, and the entry following the phantom island is about Iceland. After that he continues with the words, “Not far to the North from the islands of which we have been speaking ...” (*ibid.*, 65-67).

⁴ “Europe, circa 1200 A.D. in Gerald of Wales, *History*”, in *Ireland from Maps*, Dublin, 1980, map 2.

⁵ Walter W. Gill, *A Manx Scrapbook*, London and Bristol, 1932, II, 125.

with the result that the island lost its otherworld status and is now to be found on the Ordnance Survey Maps.⁶

Westropp identified Gerald's phantom island with one much closer to the Irish coast, namely Inisbofin, which lies off the north coast of Galway.⁷ Gerald's geographical knowledge of Ireland was somewhat sketchy – as John Lynch (1599?-1673?), eager to prove inaccuracies in Gerald's information, managed to demonstrate in other cases⁸ – and so it seems more than likely that Gerald recorded the story of Inisbofin without being certain about its location. In Caesar Otway's *Tour of Connaught*, we hear a little more of the local lore concerning the disenchantment. We learn that this once elusive island “was only spied at times, and then passed away again like a fogbank”, until one day a fisherman, without seeing or realizing it, had drifted close to its shore. No sooner had he lit a fire, of which some fell overboard, than the fog lifted and “at once, a beautiful island burst on his view ..., and he had nothing to do but push on shore”, and ever since, fixed by fire, Inisbofin has remained habitable and stable in the sea.⁹

In the past Gerald of Wales' credibility has often been called into question, but as far as the “Wonders and Miracles of Ireland” are concerned, under which heading the story appears, there is sound evidence that he drew his information mainly from native Irish sources, from written material as well as from local information. Some of the wonders he related had already travelled beyond Irish shores. In early treatises on Geography it was customary to devote a chapter to curious things or fabulous tales, commonly referred to as “Wonders” or “Mirabilia”, and outside Ireland there existed Latin versions of some of these miracles dating back to the ninth century.¹⁰ A handful

⁶ David MacRitchie, “A New Solution to the Fairie Problem”, *Celtic Review*, VI/22 (October 1909), 164-65.

⁷ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 252.

⁸ [John Lynch], *Cambreensis Eversus, seu Potius Historica Fides in Rebus Hibernicis Giraldo Cambrensi Abrogata; in quo Plerasque Justi Historici Dotes Desiderari, Plerosque Naevos Inesse, Ostendit Gratianus Lucius, Hibernus, qui etiam Aliquot Res Memorabilis Hibernicas Veteris et Novae Memoriae Passim E Re Nata huic Operi Inseruit*, (1662), ed. and tr. Matthew Kelly, Dublin, 1848.

⁹ Caesar Otway, *A Tour of Connaught: Comprising Sketches of Clonmacnoise, Joyce Country, and Achill*, Dublin, 1839, 391-92.

¹⁰ The *Historia Brittonum*, ascribed to the Welsh antiquary Nennius (between 796 and c.830), contains a curious collection of such ancient “Hibernian” fables and wonders,

of these tales are later found in the popular encyclopaedia entitled *Mirroure of the Worlde*, an English translation of *L'Image du Monde*, which was derived chiefly from the twelfth-century *Imago Mundi*.¹¹ How tenaciously the wonder stories persisted becomes clear when we see that even as late as the mid-seventeenth century, James Ware (1594-1666), in his “Antiquities of Ireland”, felt the need to take notice of them and list them under his account “Of some Wonderful Things in Ireland”.¹²

In indigenous Irish sources the marvels are also recorded. The oldest extant Irish references concerning them are contained in the “Versus Sancti Patricii Episcopi de Mirabilibus Hibernie”, which Bishop Patrick of Dublin wrote in the second half of the eleventh century, and which are clearly Latin versifications of an old Irish original.¹³ The Bishop’s verses consist of twenty-six wonders, partly resembling, partly differing from, those described by Gerald.

Apart from these early sources in foreign languages there are also several dozens of identical or similar wonder stories preserved in various manuscripts written in the Irish language, most of which were published by James Todd in 1848, as an appendix to his edition of *The Irish Version of Nennius*.¹⁴ Todd took his thirty-four “Wonders of Eire” mainly from the *Book of Ballymote*, a large manuscript compilation of the late fourteenth century. Also dating back to the late fourteenth century is the *Book of Uí Mhaine*, which has a section on such wonders. Fifteen of these were published by Kuno Meyer,¹⁵ and of these Roderic O’Flaherty translated thirteen from the original Irish

all of which are quoted in “Chronica Minora. Saec. IV.V.VI.VII”, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, Berlin, 1898, III, 219-22.

¹¹ Anon., [attributed to Gossuin of Metz], *Mirroure of the Worlde*, Westminster, 1491, 44-45.

¹² James Ware, *The Antiquities and History of Ireland; Now First Published in One Volume in English; and the Life of Sir James Ware Prefixed*, Dublin, 1705, 34-35.

¹³ Aubrey Gwynn, *The Writings of Bishop Patrick, 1074-84*, Dublin, 1955, 56-71, 130.

¹⁴ *The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius*, ed. James H. Todd, Dublin, 1848.

¹⁵ Kuno Meyer, “Irische Mirabilia”, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, V (1905), 23-24.

into Latin quatrains in his *Ogygia*, justifying their inclusion because “they are handed down to us by the antients”.¹⁶

Further evidence of these old tales comes from outside Ireland in the shape of a Norse book called *Kongs Skuggsjo, or Speculum Regale*, written about 1250.¹⁷ Following a brief and more general description of Ireland as a fertile island with a temperate climate the rest of the information is in the form of wonder-type stories. Kuno Meyer compared these with the *Mirabilia* in the *Book of Ballymote*, and with Gerald of Wales’ *Wonders and Miracles of Ireland*, as well as with Bishop Patrick’s tales. The appraisal of the latter was somewhat impaired by the fact that Meyer had only an imperfect text which breaks off abruptly half way down the last line of the nineteenth wonder.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is a remarkable correspondence between the wonders of the Norse account and those in the other publications, and several additional Norse stories not found in any of the others agree with Irish native accounts, which are, according to Meyer, “known to us from other Irish sources”.¹⁹ Based on his analysis of proper names, almost all of which are Norse phonetic renderings of spoken Irish, Meyer made the striking observation that the *Speculum Regale* is not derived from any written source, but is entirely based on oral information obviously obtained in or from Ireland.

Of all the wonders relating to Ireland, the most enduring ones are even included as descriptive legends on portolan charts, the earliest of which are found on the Dulcert/Dalorto map dating from 1339,²⁰ where it runs thus:

In Hibernia, que Irlande dicitur, sunt multa mirabilia que credenda sunt, ut narat Yssidolus. Est autem in Hibernia insula quedan parva in

¹⁶ *Ogygia, or, A Chronological Account of Irish Events: Collected from very Ancient Documents, Faithfully Compared with Each Other, and Supported by the Genealogical and Chronological Aid of the Sacred and Prophane Writings of the First Nations of the Globe*, written originally in Latin by Roderic O’Flaherty, tr. James Hely, Dublin, 1793, II, 174.

¹⁷ Kuno Meyer, “The Irish Mirabilia in the Norse ‘Speculum Regale’”, *Ériu*, IV (1910), 1-16.

¹⁸ The version in question he knew from Mommsen, also found in the “*Chronica Minora*”, 219-22.

¹⁹ Meyer, “The Irish Mirabilia”, 14.

²⁰ Winter, “The Fra Mauro Portolan”, 19.

qua homines nonquam moriuntur, sed quando nimio senio deferentur ut moriantur extra insulam deferuntur. Est alia insula in qua sunt arbores quibus aves portant et si[cut] pa(m)panos maturant. Etiam est alia insula in qua mulieres pregnantes nonquam pariunt sed quando sunt determinate ad peperiendon extra insulam deferentur se[cundu]m consuetudinem. Nulus est serpens, nula rana, nula aranea venenosa, ymmo tota terra est contraria, adeo venenosis terra, ut inde delata et dispersa, periunt.

Plainly, then, Gerald of Wales relied on genuine traditions of the Irish people to which he added specific local lore that he had collected himself. An interesting point emerging from a comparison of all the older sources is that while there is plenty of evidence for the popularity of enchanted islands, measured against the plentiful tales about inland lake islands, legends about coastal islands are clearly under-represented.

In short, then, so far, although we have a variety of sources which give us access to a whole gamut of ancient Irish marvels not one of these mentions Brasil Island by this or any of the variations of that name. None of the Irish annals refer to the island either, and we look in vain for its name in the classical bardic poetry. Dicuil, the eighth-century Irish monk and geographer, who knew all the islands around the British Isles by hearsay or by reading and who had visited himself some of them, failed to make any reference to Brasil Island in his *De mensura Orbis terrae*.²¹ And finally, Brasil Island is neither found in the Icelandic sagas nor in any other old Norse sources, although these display a knowledge of Ireland and are teeming with seafaring stories concerning real as well as imaginary islands in the Atlantic ocean.²²

With all the older sources uniformly silent about Brasil Island, we can, with some degree of certainty, rule out an ancient tradition, and the question when and how the story of Brasil Island came into being still remains to be answered.

Westropp, who was the first scholar to devote a whole article to Brasil Island, held the opinion that Brasil Island owes its origin to south-

²¹ All Dicuil says about Ireland's isles, real or imaginary, is, "There are islands around our own island Hibernia, some small and some very small" (see *Dicuili Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, ed. J.J. Tierney, Dublin, 1967, 73).

²² Babcock, *Legendary Islands*, 66.

western Europe. He thought that the first references to the island within an Irish context could be traced back to the seventeenth century. Apart from the map-name, he observed, about it there is “nothing definite written till the reign of Charles I”.²³ Let us examine the three traces which he lists as “definite”.

The first of these is a dubious *Unpublished History of Ireland* which James Hardiman referred to in his *Irish Minstrelsy or Bardic Remains of Ireland* (1831). In discussing an Irish poem translated as “Mary of Meeelick”, Hardiman commented on the original “an óiléan shiar”, which is rendered in English “yon bright distant isle”. This distant, or rather western, isle is one of those islands which the inhabitants of the Western coast think “they frequently see emerging from the ocean, and suppose to be bound by some ancient power of enchantment”, he remarked, adding that in the past the belief in such *Miranda loca* was not confined to the vulgar.²⁴ To illustrate his point he quoted from the said *Unpublished History*, whose author he omitted to mention. Hardiman claimed that it was written about 1636 and that it is kept in manuscript in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin. However, there is no trace of this manuscript in the Academy or in any other accessible archive in Dublin, nor have the seventeenth-century history specialists whom I consulted ever heard of it, and Joep Leerssen, the leading expert on all Irish materials of that vintage, indicated that it would not surprise him to learn that Hardiman himself made up the source.²⁵ So, unfortunately, the contents of this manuscript cannot be verified.

The purported author of the *Unpublished History*, musing on the fate of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, one of the legendary invaders of Ireland who seemingly disappeared after their expulsion at the hands of the next invaders, wonders if “they doe inhabitt an island, which lyeth far att sea, on the west of Connaught”.²⁶ A phantom island, he elaborates, was spotted not so long ago by several seamen as they sailed along the western coast of Ireland. One of the men, a Captain Rich from Dublin, apparently managed to get a good view of the

²³ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 255.

²⁴ James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy or Bardic Remains of Ireland, with English Poetical Translations*, London, 1831, I, 367.

²⁵ Joep Leerssen, during a conversation with me when he visited Dublin in 2010.

²⁶ Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy*, I, 368.

island, in fact he was so “neere that he discovered a harbour, as he supposed ..., but could never make to land, although when he had lost sight thereof in a mist which fell upon him, he held the same course several hours afterward”. The author alleges that not only did he have the report straight from the horse’s mouth, but that he also heard it from other credible persons. And to lend further weight to Captain Rich’s story he draws attention to the fact that such an island is even marked on maps: “allsoe in many old mapps, (especially mapps of Europe, or mapps of the world) you shall find it by the name of *O’Brasile*, under the longitude of 03°00’, and the latitude of 50°20’.”

Does this mean, then, that the *Tuatha Dé Danann* are in charge of Brasil Island? This, he concludes, may very well be the case: “So that it may be, those famous enchanters now inhabitt there, and by their magick skill conceal their island from forraigners.” The author is emphatic about this being his own idea, “yett this is my own concept, and would have taken it for no other”.²⁷

It is important to note that neither the author nor the translator of “Mary of Meelick”, nor any of the other sources Hardiman quotes from, gives the phantom island a name. Not even the “credible persons” or Captain Rich are reported to have identified it. Only the unnamed author of the manuscript calls it O’Brasile, thanks to his familiarity with the toponym on foreign maps. So, while the unfortunate captain is lost in a mist and unable to relocate the island, the scribe applies the map-name to it and is thus able to give its precise location. He then playfully connects the name with tales of the legendary invasions of Ireland stemming from the Irish manuscript tradition.

Westropp could not know that his second “definite” source was pure fiction. Again for the information he relied on Hardiman who refers to “a letter from a gentleman in Derry, to his friend in England” as the “most complete account of this fanciful island”.²⁸ The letter in question was in fact penned by the English writer Richard Head, who published it under the title *O-Brazile, or the Enchanted Island* (1675). Head invented that letter which tells the story about a Captain John Nisbet having discovered Brasil Island. We will discuss this publication in detail later in Chapter 6 (pages 141-53). Could it be

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 369.

²⁸ Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy*, I, 369.

coincidence that the invented letter-writer from Derry makes the exact same assertions as the purported chronicler of the *Unpublished History*? Both claim to have received the account directly from the worthy captain whose ship had chanced upon the island and both refer to old maps which clearly show the island.

Westropp's third source stems from the eminent native historian of the seventeenth century, Roderick O'Flaherty (1629-1718), who came from the west of Ireland. His work on the topographical history of West Connaught, written in 1684 and incidentally also edited by James Hardiman,²⁹ is an absorbing portrayal of the area, containing a wealth of local history and lore. One of the stories O'Flaherty recounts concerns a contemporary of his, a man by the name of Morogh O'Ley, who claimed to have been abducted by two or three strangers who forcibly carried him by boat to an island which they called O'Brazil. Although he did not describe the island itself, O'Ley said he could see from there the Aran Islands and other places along the west coast with which he was acquainted. Two days later his captors, who spoke both English and Irish, brought him back to the mainland where "he lay in a friend's house for some days after, being desperately ill, and knowes not how he came to Galway then".³⁰ Miraculously, some years later, he began to practise surgery and physic with wonderful success, although he had never studied or practised these before.

Hardiman comments that this story was still remembered in the Galway area almost two hundred years later, but that in the meantime it had received some additional embellishments. According to one of these, O'Ley was given a book during his stay on O'Brazil with an injunction not to open it for seven years. Having faithfully obeyed the order, he read the book at the end of the time prescribed, and at once realized that he was endowed with the gift of healing.

Hardiman's investigations into the actual background of this story revealed that O'Ley, whose inherited estate had been confiscated, had evidently turned quack-doctor to make a living. He would have invented his abduction in order to attract attention. As regards the mysterious book, Hardiman suggested that this medical treatise had

²⁹ *A Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught: Written A.D. 1684, by Roderic O'Flaherty, Esq., Author of the 'Ogygia'*, ed. James Hardiman, Dublin, 1846.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

been in the O’Ley family for generations, as they were known as hereditary physicians in West Connaught. Such a book, a manuscript, written in Irish and Latin, with the year 1434 occurring on page 76, is indeed, as Hardiman noted, now preserved in the library of the Royal Irish Academy. In memory of Morogh O’Ley’s tale, antiquarians gave it the title *The Book of O’Brazil* although, to be sure, it does not contain a single reference to that island.

Undoubtedly, the reason why the story would have been remembered for such a long time has to do with the fact that it is steeped in local folklore. People all along the coastal areas in the West of Ireland believed in the existence of enchanted islands, and as O’Flaherty testified, one of these was often seen from the Aran Islands: “From the Isles of Aran and the west continent, often appears visible that enchanted island called O’Brasil, and in Irish Beg-Ara, or the Lesser Aran, set down in the cards of navigation.”³¹ The crucial point here is that it was O’Flaherty who, with reference to its occurrence on sea charts, applied the name of O’Brasil to the island. He was obviously convinced that the Italian mapmakers used this name for an island which the Irish themselves called Beg-Ara (or Beag-Árainn). It would be unreasonable to suppose that the local Gaelic speaking people, who nowadays still refer to this phantom island as Beag-Árainn,³² would have called it O’Brasil over three hundred years ago. Unfortunately, we cannot investigate this any further because O’Flaherty’s manuscript, on which Hardiman’s edition is based, has also disappeared.³³ However, once O’Flaherty identified O’Brasil with Beg-Ara, the name “stuck”.

As regards the nature of this enchanted island, O’Flaherty was not quite sure what to make of it, offering several possible explanations: whether “it be reall and firm land, kept hidden by speciall ordinance of God, as the terrestiall paradise, or else some illusion of airy clouds appearing on the surface of the sea, or the craft of evill spirits, is more

³¹ *Ibid.* 68-69.

³² Tim Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*, Dublin, 1995, 451-56; Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, “The Mystical Island in Irish Folklore”, in *Islanders and Water-Dwellers: Proceedings of the Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium held at UCD 16-19 June 1996*, eds Patricia Lysaght *et al.*, Dublin, 1999, 249-50.

³³ Hardiman says the MS is preserved in Trinity College, Dublin, but it cannot be traced there.

than our judgments can sound out".³⁴ What is certain, however, is that despite his familiarity with the oral traditions of the area and his remarkable knowledge of historical and literary sources, this great Gaelic scholar was not aware of any specific or definite Gaelic tradition attaching to Brasil Island.

On closer inspection, then, Westropp's seventeenth century sources can hardly be taken to reveal a local tradition of O'Brasil, because each of these rely on the map-name, and none points to such a name being used by the people. We will have to scan more recent sources for definite traces of Brasil Island in the Irish tradition.

The collection of Irish folklore did not begin before the early nineteenth century. It was initiated by non-Gaelic Irishmen with an English background who had become interested in the oral rural culture of their native country and who, having learned Irish, were roaming the countryside in order to collect tales from the native Irish peasantry. These collectors were later joined by native speakers who gathered folk material in Irish and also by folklorists who collected material from Hiberno-English narration. All these compilations appeared in print during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It cannot be the object of this enquiry to discuss the merits of one type over the others: the sole purpose of examining these folklore collections is to search for the occurrence of an island named Brasil.

Thomas Crofton Croker's (1798-1854) *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* was to lead the way.³⁵ While there is no mention of Brasil Island in any of his forty tales,³⁶ we are presented with five stories about underwater dwellings in named inland lakes, and there is also one story about an enchanted island in Ballyheigh Bay, off the coast of Kerry. This Atlantic island, which is said to be the ancient burial place of the Cantillon family, sets the scene for the well-known tale of "Flory Cantillon's Funeral".³⁷

³⁴ *A Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, 69.

³⁵ Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, London, 1838.

³⁶ According to his own preface to the third edition of the book, Croker originally used fifty tales: see F. Diana's Introduction to T.C. Crofton Croker's *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, Wilton, Cork, 1998, xxi.

³⁷ Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, 186-90.

Soon after Croker came Patrick Kennedy (1801-73), a folklorist from Wexford whose publications include the whole spectrum of oral traditions from ordinary folk as well as legends from the literary tradition. The folk material is contained in *The Fireside Stories of Ireland* (1870), which comprises fifty-one stories, none of which deal with Brasil Island. Among his collections of well-known Irish legends, however, there are two books in which Kennedy makes reference to the island. Like many other scholars of his time, he held the view that the early Irish tales had a long life in oral tradition before being committed to writing by Christian scribes. He believed that these legends were told in “the old raths of our grandfathers, before the tinkle of St. Patrick’s bell was heard in our land”, and thus he considered them to be a repository of ancient traditions from which insights into pre-Christian beliefs could be culled. One of these concerned the *Firbolgs*, those mythical invaders of Ireland whose spirits Kennedy understood to be enjoying “bliss in the sunk island of O’Breasil”.³⁸ Kennedy does not cite the source on which he based his understanding, but the dubious *Unpublished History*, where the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, too, are assigned to that island, springs to mind. The more relevant point to be made, however, is that we are not discussing oral narratives of the peasantry: we are rather dealing with Kennedy’s own interpretation of the manuscript tradition. The same applies to his other publication, in which he refers to Brasil Island in connection with *The Voyage of St Brendan*. The saint, he assures us here, went in search of the “Blessed Isle of Breasil”.³⁹

Lady Wilde (1821-96) recorded abundant folk material and first-hand observations of the ordinary folk, but her *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1888) contain nothing about Brasil Island. Nor is there any mention of it in David Russell McAnally’s *Irish Wonders* (1888), although these *Popular Tales as Told by the People* contain some anecdotal accounts of enchanted islands. The book on the *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* (1890) by Jeremiah Curtin (1838-1906) does not relate anything about Brasil Island either. This folklorist gathered his material mainly from among native Irish speakers in the United States of America, where he grew

³⁸ Patrick Kennedy, *Fictions of Our Forefathers: Fion Mac Cumhail and His Warriors*, Dublin, 1859, 10.

³⁹ Patrick Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, London, 1891, 253, 299.

up, but during his visits to Ireland he also compiled folklore from Munster. William Larminie (1849-1900) in his collection of *West Irish Folk Tales and Romances* (1898) makes no reference to it either. Considering that Larminie collected his stories from native speakers along the coasts of Galway, Mayo and Donegal, it is surprising not to find a single tale about enchanted islands among them. The topic is also absent from a collection of stories by Douglas Hyde (1860-1949), taken down for the most part from Gaelic speakers of Galway and Roscommon and published under the title *Beside the Fire* (1890). Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge also collected and published Irish folklore from the west of Ireland. In none of Lady Gregory's numerous publications on the folk traditions in her native County Galway do we hear about Brasil Island, and yet in her *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920) she refers to the people's belief in enchanted islands.⁴⁰ Synge does not report having heard any tales about Brasil Island in his accounts of the Aran Islands, West Kerry or Connemara.

W.B. Yeats published three volumes of Irish folklore. Of these only the stories in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) were drawn from his own early memories of the west of Ireland, while the other two anthologies, *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892) and *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), were compiled from materials from other sources. Yeats mentions Hy Brasil twice. Reminiscing about Drumcliff, he recalls the "dread portents" of the people, one of which was seeing Brasil Island. A fisherman of the area once saw the renowned island, far on the horizon, Yeats writes, but a "vision of Hy Brazil forebodes national troubles". It is difficult to reconcile this notion of dreaded trouble with Yeats' elaborations, according to which he who sets foot in the island "shall find no more labour or care ..., but shall ... enjoy the conversation of Cuchulain and his heroes".⁴¹ The mention of Cuchulain, hero of the Ulster Cycle, suggests that Yeats was supplementing his reminiscences with his knowledge of the

⁴⁰ Lady Augusta Gregory, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, Gerrards Cross, 2006, 21-22, 26.

⁴¹ William Butler Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, Gerrards Cross, 1981, 111.

literary tales. His other reference to the island concerns Gerald Griffin's poem "Hy-Brasail – the Isle of the Blest".⁴²

To finish this short survey, the interesting Irish manuscripts in which Brasil Island does occur, by Pádraig Feiritéar (1856-1924), should be mentioned. This native Irish-speaker from Kerry avidly collected local folklore material himself, but he also copied and transcribed from many other manuscripts, leaving behind thirty-nine volumes of Gaelic manuscripts.⁴³ Among the stories he collected from the people of Corcha Dhuibhne in the nineteenth century, there is one which deals with Brasil Island. He renders the name in the title as "an bhreas-il"⁴⁴ and in the text itself he calls the island "an bhres-il". The corrupt spelling appears to reflect his uncertainty about the name, either due to unfamiliarity with it or because he considered it to be a loan word. At the same time it clearly rules out an Irish personal name, indicating instead the South American country Brazil.⁴⁵ The narrative itself sheds no light on the problem. It is a straightforward story about a few girls who are filled with wonder when they suddenly espy an island replete with fine fields and groves, where none was known to exist. When the island disappears just as quickly, they take to their heels in fright, fearful of the magical force behind the appearance. After much speculation about its nature, they are informed that they have seen "an bhres-il", the enchanted island that appears once every seven years.

In the hope of finding references to Brasil Island, I leafed through numerous other less well known compilations of folk material, alas without success. It is possible that there are other works I am simply unaware of or that I have overlooked evidence, but given its conspicuous absence from almost all the important folklore collections, one can without fear of contradiction state that Brasil Island does not feature prominently in nineteenth-century Irish folklore.

⁴² *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, ed. William Butler Yeats, Gerrards Cross, 1973, 190.

⁴³ See http://www.ucd.ie/library/special_collections/archives/manuscripts/ferriter.html (accessed 18 November 2009).

⁴⁴ *The Ferriter Manuscripts*, described and catalogued by Eibhlín Ní hÓgáin, University College, Dublin, Special Collections 0.G. 1/4a-t, MS 16, 337-39.

⁴⁵ In Irish the definite article *an* frequently appears before the name of a country.

Westropp's attention was not only attracted by Brasil Island, but he had developed a general interest in the legendary or phantom islands of western Ireland, about which he published over half a dozen articles during the first decade of the twentieth century alone. One important aspect of his own fieldwork concerned the folk beliefs and tales surrounding such islands. The outcome of this enquiry is intriguing because it shows that in the minds of people there was a clear connection between phantom islands and sunken land. This tradition conceives of land under the sea which appears above water at certain times. Westropp found this belief to be prevalent in many places, "very common" in fact along the whole western coast,⁴⁶ a finding which has been buttressed by many other studies.⁴⁷

Of the numerous phantom islands in the west, those most frequently associated with traditional stories, moving from south to north, are: Cantillon's Rocks (off Ballyheige), Kilstapheen (near Loop Head), Kilstuithin (in Liscannor Bay), Beag-Ara (off Skerd Rocks in Galway Bay), the actual Inish Bofin, Imaire Buidhe bank (off Achill), Manister Ladra or Letteragh (near Mullet in Co. Mayo), The Sunken Land (between counties Mayo and Donegal), Tir Hudi (to the north of the latter) and Dathuli (or Daculi in North Donegal). Beside these quite well-known phantom islands, some of whose lore found their way into Irish literature, there are others which are only known to people in the immediate vicinity. Off the coast of Erris, for example, Seán Ó hEochaíd noted different names even for submarine lands lying between the two tiny islands of Inisglory and Eagle Island.⁴⁸

In addition to the notion of tracts of land submerged under the sea, there is also the tradition of drowned cities, towns, monasteries or churches that are kept beneath the waters by evil magic. These two traditions are of the same general character, and as it is neither easy nor relevant here to distinguishing carefully between them, they will be treated as one and the same.

⁴⁶ Thomas J. Westropp, "Descriptive Account of the Places Visited on the Summer Excursion of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, 1900", *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, XXX, consecutive series (1900), pt. III, 289.

⁴⁷ A number of these will be referred to below.

⁴⁸ Seán Ó hEochaíd, "Seanchas Iascaireachta agus Farraige", *Béaloideas*, XXXIII (1965), 95.

Folk belief relating to sunken places is surprisingly homogeneous and traditions about these have a curious uniformity about them. Apart from a few aetiological tales concerning the origin of specific islands, phantom island lore rarely amounts to more than accounts of chance encounters. Coastal dwellers or fishermen out at sea suddenly perceive submerged land, either on the verge of the sea or under the water. Sometimes gold-roofed domes and palaces are reported to have been noticed, but as a rule the subaqueous places are modest affairs. In shape and appearance, the underwater dwellers are of human stature. Of human passion and behaviour, they live in ordinary cottages amidst hills, tilled fields and pastures where they keep sheep and cattle. They have a taste for cabbage and potatoes, poteen, tea and tobacco. Engaged in common activities, the men go to fairs, make hay or cut turf, while the women do the cooking and washing and leave the clothes out to dry on hedges: in fact life under water mirrors the everyday world of the ordinary human folk in many respects. Very occasionally fishermen from this world accidentally visit the underwater realm and vice versa, but these are uneasy encounters, often haunted by a sense of threat of misfortune.

With few exceptions, the islands were thought to appear at intervals of seven years, at which time they could be reached by boat and their enchantment could be broken by any person bold enough to row close to them. Among the various modes of disenchantment the use of fire was certainly the most frequently attempted and, as we know from the case of Inisbofin, it is the only cure which appears to have met with any success. None of the other promising methods – like throwing a sod from the Irish *terra firma*, or a fistful of clay, pebbles from under the left foot, a bible or a crozier – has proved in any way efficacious.

When supposedly vanished under the sea, the existence of the submarine places was considered to be proven by the fishing up every now and then of cooking vessels, tools or pieces of masonry from the sea-bed. Sometimes anchors were thought to have got caught under the thresholds of houses. Other unmistakable signs appeared in or on the water. In the Shannon estuary the roughness of the sea in certain parts would indicate where the submerged spires and turrets were

standing, acting as it were as breakers against the tide.⁴⁹ And often the inhabitants of the underwater city would raise a destructive hurricane within its precinct, while the surrounding water remained perfectly calm and smooth.⁵⁰ Fishermen rowing across the sunken islands would hear the muffled chiming of church bells, the bleating of lambs or lowing of cattle coming up from the depths of the sea. They would smell the fragrance of wild flowers, and find floating on the waves leaves of apple-trees and oaks, branches of holly or sprigs of heather. Conventionally, though, these were considered to be ominous signs striking fear into the fishermen's hearts. Just to catch a glimpse of the submerged island was often a sure omen of disaster, and in many cases of death, for the beholder.

Nowhere is the notion of misfortune associated with the sighting of the submerged land as prevalent as in the lore surrounding Kilstapheen and Kilstuithin. Whoever was so unlucky as to see the former – over the waves, or dimly under the waters – was doomed to die within a week, or a month, and woe to the beholders of the latter, for before the island is seen again, they shall have long been dead.⁵¹

Even to hear the bells toll was a warning that death was not far away, the bitter truth of which was evidenced by local fishermen on a boat out of Doonbeg heading towards Galway Bay. No sooner had they heard the faint sound of a bell, very far away, than from the stern of the boat, came the cry: “Kilstaveen! Kilstaveen! Oh God, protect us!” from an older man who was pointing with a trembling finger at

⁴⁹ Mr and Mrs Samuel C. Hall, *Ireland, its Scenery, Character, &c.*, London, 1843, III, 436.

⁵⁰ William S. Mason, *A Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland, Drawn up from the Communications of the Clergy*, Dublin, 1816, II, 401.

⁵¹ Westropp, “Descriptive Account of the Places Visited on the Summer Excursion”, 289; Westropp, “Kilstuiffin”, *Journal of the Limerick Field Club*, III (1905-1908), 199-200; Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 251; William Gregory Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland: A Folklore Sketch; A Handbook of Irish Pre-Christian Traditions, With Numerous Illustrations*, London, New York and Bombay, 1902, I, 212-22; Anon., *The Fairy Mythology of Ireland*, MS from the 1st half of the 19th century, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin: MS. 24 E 22 (Hudson Bequest), 292; Hall, *Ireland*, III, 436; Ó hÓgáin, “The Mystical Island in Irish Folklore”, 251; B. O’Looney, “Letter to William Smith O’Brien, President of the Ossianic Society”, *Transactions of the Ossianic Society for the Year 1856*, IV (1859), 231; L.C.J. Cosgrave, “Spectres of Western Coast”, *Ireland’s Own*, 6 October 1928, 317.

something far below the surface of the sea.⁵² While the younger crewmen stared curiously at the spot, the older men “turned their heads away, fearful of what they might see”. In an instant, the trembling man at the stern was swept overboard by a freak wave, vanished beneath the water and was never seen again, while the rest of the crew returned unharmed. This was not an isolated case. At different times, “several fishermen from the area had thought they had seen something beneath the waves and all of them had died shortly after”. Sometimes whole boat-crews were lost, and because of several such frightening occurrences, “if they think that they hear that bell-note, Clare fishermen will not even put to sea, no matter how calm the weather, for they know that if they do, they may never return home again”.⁵³

All around the mouth of the Shannon, people used to dread the appearance of the submarine lands not only because it spelled death to the beholder, but also because at the time of its emergence some boat or vessel, with its crew, was doomed to be lost.⁵⁴ When the island appeared in 1823, fifteen men out in a sail-boat were later found drowned at the bottom of the river.⁵⁵ According to one account the men actually came from the subaqueous village and went to church to “receive spiritual consolation”.⁵⁶ Another source claims that the people of the area called the submerged city “Little Limerick” and that the stories they told about it are filled with an eerie atmosphere of foreboding.⁵⁷ And this is exactly the kind of fear W.B. Yeats’ fisherman expressed when he talked about the portentous vision of Hy Brasil (see page 67).

⁵² See “The Bells of the Drowned Town”, in Bob Curran, *Banshees, Beasts and Brides from the Sea: Irish Tales of the Supernatural*, Belfast, 1996, 77-79.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Ireland*, III, 436.

⁵⁵ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, 257-58; *The Fairy Mythology of Ireland*, 292; Hall, *Ireland*, III, 436.

⁵⁶ Fletcher S. Bassett, *Phantoms of the Deep, or: Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors*, Chicago, 1903, 480; Tom Pete Cross, “‘The Psalter of the Pig’: An Irish Legend”, *Modern Philology*, XVIII (1920-21), 447.

⁵⁷ Patrick O’Tafffrail, “The Lost City”, *Irish Monthly Magazine of Politics and Literature*, I (May 1832-April 1833), 325-29, 469-77.

Similarly, whenever The Sunken Land began to appear above water, this was taken as a sign of storms, shipwreck and loss of life.⁵⁸ A Ballycastle boatman and native of Co. Sligo, managed to spot it twice at intervals of seven years, without being harmed, and had he lived to see it a third time he would have been able to disenchant it. But alas: "On the eve of the day on which the fated seven years were to expire, the man himself expired."⁵⁹

Several stories tell of fishermen who instead of fish brought up a live child in their nets.⁶⁰ This was considered to be an unlucky catch. Fishermen from Tyrawly caught such a child close to The Sunken Island. It was a little green and fishy-looking, but otherwise quite human in shape. In their fright they threw it back into the water and let it escape. However, the man who hooked it died suddenly within a year.⁶¹

Not all accounts end in death: other less severe outcomes are reported for people who inadvertently caught sight of an enchanted island or an infant from there. Some got away with a minor disability such as a twisted mouth or a speech impediment, others suffered loss of sight.⁶² And there is the story of fishermen on their way to the Kid Island bank who got off very lightly after landing a half-boiled cabbage leaf from a submarine cooking pot. They had just managed to get the catch aboard when they were startled by the sudden appearance of a woman, who stuck her head up alongside their boat and angrily

⁵⁸ Ó hEochaidh, "Seanchas Iascaireachta", 94.

⁵⁹ Caesar Otway, *Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly: With a Map and Other Illustrations*, Dublin, 1845, 247; Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic", 253.

⁶⁰ "The Child from the Sea", in *Folktales of Ireland*, ed. and tr. Sean O'Sullivan, Chicago and London, 1968, 188 (cf. also notes to the tales, 275); Seán Ó Suilleabhaín, *Irish Folk Custom and Belief*, Dublin, 1967, 89.

⁶¹ Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic", 253-54; Otway, *Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly*, 247-48. Other examples of fishermen catching a child in their net which they let go because they were afraid to take it on board or because they were threatened by a woman suddenly appearing alongside their boat are quoted in *Stories of Sea and Shore, Told by John Henry, Kilgalligan, Co. Mayo*, ed. Séamus Ó Catháin, Dublin, 1983, 55-56. From Scotland we hear stories of grown men being fished up in the Western Ocean: see Campbell, "The Green Island", 194-95.

⁶² Ó hÓgáin, "The Mystical Island in Irish Folklore", 253. No harm came to another fisherman from Clare in a similar situation: see N.M. Holmer, *The Dialects of Co. Clare*, Dublin, 1965, II, 35.

accosted them because they had spoiled her pot. Thankfully, they lived to tell their tale.⁶³

The belief in such phantom islands is not peculiar to the west of Ireland: it was widespread among people all along the coast of Ulster,⁶⁴ the West of Scotland,⁶⁵ the Isle of Man,⁶⁶ Wales⁶⁷ as well as

⁶³ *Stories of Sea and Shore*, 52-53. There is even a report about a civil encounter with the underwater dwellers by fishermen from the same area, but it is really a story more about the Good People and their interference in human affairs: see Séamus Ó Catháin and Patrick O'Flanagan, *The Living Landscape, Kilgalligan, Erris, County Mayo*, Dublin, 1975, 156-60.

⁶⁴ The references in this and the following four footnotes represent a random collection and not an exhaustive list of titles on the subject matter: William H. Drummond, *The Giants' Causeway; A Poem*, Belfast, 1811, 170; Anon., "The Fairy Annals of Ulster - no. 2", *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, VII (1859), 137-38; Hall, *Ireland*, III, 149-50; Michael J. Murphy, *Rathlin, Island of Blood and Enchantment: The Folklore of Rathlin*, Dundalk, 1987, 35-37; *Fairy Legends from Donegal*, originally coll. by Seán Ó hEochaíd, tr. into English by M. Mac Neill, Irish texts ed. by Séamus Ó Catháin, Dublin, 1977, 215-19; Anon., "A Shadowy Land; Off Donegal, Waterford and Antrim", *Ireland's Own*, 9 November 1946; David Russell McAnally, Jr., *Irish Wonders: The Ghosts, Giants Pookas, Demons, Leprechawns, Banshees, Fairies, Witches, Widows, Old Maids, and other Marvels of the Emerald Isle; Popular Tales as Told by the People*, London and New York, 1888, 70; Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, 217-18; Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic", 254; Mason, *A Statistical Account*, II, 516.

⁶⁵ Campbell, "The Green Island"; Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, 222; Bob Curran, *Complete Guide to Celtic Mythology*, Belfast, 2000, 140-41; *Popular Tales of the West Highlands Orally Collected with a Translation*, ed. J.F. Campbell, Edinburgh, 1860-62, I, liii, cxviii, II, 293-303, III, 403-22; John Mactaggard, *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia, or, The Original, Antiquated, and Natural Curiosities of the South of Scotland*, London and Glasgow, 1876, 307-308; Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic", 239.

⁶⁶ Margaret Killip, *The Folklore of the Isle of Man*, London and Sydney, 1975, 138-41; Sophia Morrison, *Manx Fairy Tales*, Peel, 1929, 196; *Mona Miscellany: A Selection of Proverbs, Sayings, Ballads, Customs, Superstitions, and Legends, Peculiar to the Isle of Man*, ed. William Harrison, Douglas, Isle of Man, 2nd series, XXI (1873), 250-51; Walter Gill, *A Manx Scrapbook*, London and Bristol, 1929, I, 497-500; Walter Gill, *A Second Manx Scrapbook*, London and Bristol, 1932, 126; Joseph Train, *An Historical and Statistical Account of the Isle of Man, from the Earliest Times to the Present Date; with a View of its Ancient Laws, Peculiar Customs, and Popular Superstitions*, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1845, II, 171; George Waldron, *A Description of the Isle of Man: with Some Useful and Entertaining Reflections on the Laws, Customs, and Manners of the Inhabitants*, ed. William Harrison, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1865, 132; *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, I, xl.

⁶⁷ John Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, Oxford, 1901, II, 401-55; John Rhŷs, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, New York, 1966, 359-62; P.H. Jeffery, *Ghosts*,

Cornwall.⁶⁸ Campbell, surveying the folk literature of the Hebrides, remarked that “there are traditions of an Island away in the West, submerged by enchantments, in which the inhabitants continue to live as formerly, and which will yet become visible and accessible. Traditions regarding its position vary, each locality placing it near itself.”⁶⁹ Margaret Killip summed up her study of folklore in the Isle of Man with the observation that there “is probably no stretch of sea-coast that does not have its traditions of … sunken cities from which the tolling of bells and the sounds of the human world are heard …”.⁷⁰ Gwynn Jones arrived at a similar conclusion about the Welsh tradition: “Stories of the overflowing by the sea of large tracts of land off what is now the coasts of Wales are known from north to south”,⁷¹ and Hunt, citing traditions of submerged lands, cities and churches in western England where people believe that the Scilly Isles were once united with Cornwall, relates equivalent stories about the lands that were overwhelmed by the sea.⁷² This is how a bard expresses his lament for these lost lands:

Between Land’s End and Scilly rocks
 Sunk lies a town that ocean mocks …
 Where breathes the Man that would not weep
 O’er such fine climes beneath the deep?⁷³

In Campbell’s view it is the most natural thing in the world that people “placed on the margin of a boundless sea” should invent such

Legends and Lore of Wales, Foxton, s.d., 43-45; Gwynn T. Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom*, London, 1930, 97-101; Curran, *Complete Guide*, 136-37; Wirt Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folklore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*, Boston, 1881, 8 f.

⁶⁸ William Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, Penzance, 1873, 130; Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England, or The Drolls, Traditions, and Superstitions of Old Cornwall*, London, 1881; Curran, *Complete Guide*, 135. The best known stories from Cornwall are associated with “Lyonesse”, the legendary land extending from Land’s End to the Isles of Scilly that was swallowed by the ocean in a single day.

⁶⁹ Campbell, “The Green Island”, 191.

⁷⁰ Killip, *The Folklore of the Isle of Man*, 139.

⁷¹ Jones, *Welsh Folklore*, 97.

⁷² Hunt, *Popular Romances*, 189-201.

⁷³ Bottrell, *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall*, 34.

tales. In fact he would have considered it downright strange if, in days gone by when the evening entertainments consisted of story-telling, the coastal dwellers had not peopled the cloudy distance with enchanted islands. He conceded, however, that this does not necessarily mean that such stories are not founded on truth or fact, thus allowing for the possibility of some real occurrence in the past to which they owe their origin.⁷⁴

Croker, too, thought it likely that the Irish tales originated in actual events.⁷⁵ Westropp, even more strongly inclined to regard the tradition as based on geological change, historical fact and folk memory, searched for corroborative evidence which either the physical features of the regions provided or which local records and annals preserved. To this end he carried out a geographical survey of the western coast of Ireland, searching for signs that would suggest a lowering of the land or a rise in the sea levels which could have resulted in inundations.

What he discovered was that the site of nearly all the phantom islands coincided with a shoal or bank of no great depth, a reef, insulated rock or barren fragmentary islet. Such geographical particulars, he believed, warrant the conclusion that because of obvious submergences in the past, it is possible that actual islands – with the explicit exclusion of Hy Brasil – “may have existed within traditional memory at all the alleged sites”.⁷⁶ A study of the sea-bed and the inroads of the sea alone would go far to justify such an assumption, he and others have argued. It is pointed out that old riverbeds like those of the Shannon and the Erne are still traceable far out under the sea, and attention is drawn to many traces of remarkable subsidence along the coastal areas in not excessively remote times.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Campbell, “The Green Island”, 191, 199.

⁷⁵ Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, 327.

⁷⁶ Westropp, “Kilstuiffin”, 199; Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 249; Hancock, *Underworld*, 504-34; Edward Hull, *Contributions to the Physical History of the British Isles*, London, 1882, 101-102; Pádraig Augustine Ó Siocháin, *Ireland: A Journey into Lost Time*, Dublin, 1982, 107-108.

⁷⁷ Westropp, “Descriptive Account of the Places Visited on the Summer Excursion”, 289; Thomas J. Westropp, “The Coasts and Islands of the County Mayo”, in *RSAI, Antiquarian Handbook-Series: Illustrated Guide to the Northern, Western and Southern Islands and Coast of Ireland*, Dublin, 1905, 18; Westropp, “Kilstuiffin”, 199; Otway, *A Tour of Connaught*, 385-86.

Partially submerged peat beds also suggest a more extensive coastline in the past, and fully submerged bogs with tree trunks and roots *in situ*, as well as bog timber beneath the sands of beaches in Mayo and Kerry, tell the tale of submerged forests.⁷⁸

One would not expect to find this evidently very gradual encroachment of the sea noted in the annals, but from time to time, sudden inundations caused by violent storms and floods were indeed documented. The case of Inis Fitae (“Mutton Island”) is a frequently cited example.⁷⁹ Several annals record how, between 799 and 804, this island was split during a thunderstorm:

They state that ... a great wind arose, accompanied by thunder and lightning. The sea swelled so high that it burst its boundaries, overflowing a large tract of the country, and drowning over one thousand persons Mutton Island, which had previously formed part of the mainland, was separated from it by the sea From an inspection of the coast, it is plain that at some remote period, the sea has submerged several hundreds, or even thousands, of acres of the land. A constant tradition exists in the neighbourhood, that the sea has encroached upon land along the west coast of Thomond. In ... ancient maps of the county, we observe three islands set down where only two exist at the present time.⁸⁰

A number of people have ascribed this catastrophic event to a tsunami, or what was then referred to as a huge “earthquake-wave” produced by underwater volcanic eruptions which shook the entire coast of Ireland, sending large tracts of land sliding into the sea. In Clare a whole barony is thought to have fallen away from the Cliffs of Moher

⁷⁸ Westropp, “Kilstuiffin”, 199-200; Otway, *Sketches in Erris*, 80; Theresa McDonald, *Achill Island: Archaeology, History, Folklore*, Tullamore, 1997, 32; Frazer, “On Hy Brasil”, 173-76.

⁷⁹ Westropp, “The Coasts and Islands”, 18; Westropp, “Kilstuiffin”, 199; Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 258; *The Antiquities of Co. Clare: Letters Containing Information Relative to the Antiquities of the County of Clare, Collected During the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1839; & Letters and Extracts Relative to Ancient Territories in Thomond, 1841*, eds John O’Donovan and Eugene Curry, Ennis, 1997, 97.

⁸⁰ James Frost, *The History and Topography of the County of Clare: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the 18th Century; With Map and Illustrations*, Dublin, 1893, 145-46.

and the precipices along Malbay, and Mutton Island was considered “but a remnant of the great loss”.⁸¹

Some have argued that such cataclysms are also evidenced by man-made features of prehistoric times. For example, it is pointed out that the great Stone Age structures in west Clare must have served a military purpose and that the many fortified dwellings known as doons, cahers and mohairs⁸² around the Cliffs of Moher clearly would at one time have constituted an ancient defence line along with the immense forts directly opposite on the Aran Islands (Dún Aengus and Dún Cathair), as otherwise the latter would make no sense. This would imply that the Aran Islands once were part of a range of hills which, like Mutton Island, were cut off from the mainland during a massive earth subsidence.⁸³ Further north on the coast of Mayo a “Cyclopean wall” was found to have been torn asunder, and “on an island, now separated from the main land by an enormous chasm, not only the stratifications of the rock correspond, but also the ranges of stones forming the Cyclopean wall”.⁸⁴ Examples like these appear indeed to be manifestations of violent geological changes at some time in the past.

A few voices even claim that the whole island of Ireland is the remnant of a terrible volcanic eruption. These come mainly from people who believe in the actual existence of Atlantis and who see Ireland as having been part of it. They imagine that there were once islands off the west coast of Ireland which are now submerged, but which were originally either connected to Plato’s sunken island or suffered a similar fate. The violent destruction of Atlantis, they argue, left a deep impression on folk-memory, and Brasil Island is thought to be an echo of this, reflecting traditions that lingered on the Irish coasts long after Atlantis had sunk beneath the ocean.⁸⁵ Pádraig Ó Siocháin

⁸¹ Otway, *A Tour of Connaught*, 385-87; Curran, *Banshees, Beasts and Brides from the Sea*, 77.

⁸² *Dún*, “fort”; *cathair*, “fortified settlement” and *mothar*, “ruined fort”.

⁸³ Ó Siocháin, *Ireland: A Journey*, 111-17.

⁸⁴ Otway, *A Tour of Connaught*, 386.

⁸⁵ John T. O’Flaherty, “A Sketch of the History and Antiquities of the Southern Islands of Aran, Lying off the West Coast of Ireland, with Observations on the Religion of the Celtic Nations, Pagan Monuments of the Early Irish, Druidic Rites, &c.”, *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, XIV (1825), “Antiquities”, VI, 139; Guest, *Origines Celticae*, I, 125-26; Otway, *A Tour of Connaught*, 389; Adair S.J.

believed that there once lived an ancient and highly sophisticated people in the “province” of Hy-Brasil, of which all that is left today is the legend of their “ancestral race” and the lost land they inhabited.⁸⁶ Harold Wilkins even went so far as to maintain that the “highly civilized” “Hy-Brazilian master-race” belonged to the royal empire of Atlantis.⁸⁷

It is perhaps a useful exercise to compare such wild conjecture with F.J. North’s thorough investigation into the past geography of certain coastal areas in Wales which, though now under water, are traditionally regarded as the site of sunken cities, lands or palaces.⁸⁸ Not unlike Westropp, but on a more systematic scientific footing, North tested the assumption that such folk beliefs and legends are records of historical facts. The Welsh coast also shows unmistakable signs of subsidence since Megalithic times, and there are definite indications of encroachment by the sea before and during the Bronze Age.⁸⁹ Yet in the legends this submergence is exaggerated and becomes a huge catastrophe. All the tales about sunken cities suggest a sudden encroachment of the sea which, as his study proves, could not have occurred within the limits of human memory. He therefore concluded that in the fertile imagination of the storytellers the effects of gradual inundations tended to be attributed to one big disaster, and with the passage of time, and especially since the beginning of the nineteenth century, simple country folktales became embellished and thoroughly romanticized.⁹⁰

Westropp and other more sober-minded folklorists differentiate between two categories of phantom islands. The first appear to have had an actual existence, but fell victim to submergence. Such islands, they feel, rest on a firm historic basis. Tales about them are connected

Fitzgerald, *Stories of Famous Songs*, London, 1898, 350; Charles Vallancey, “A Vindication of the Ancient History of Ireland”, *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis*, IV/14, Dublin, 1786, *Introduction*, 51-53.

⁸⁶ Pádraig Augustine Ó Siocháin, *Aran: Islands of Legend*, Dublin, 1962, 3, 12, 14, 55.

⁸⁷ Harold T. Wilkins, *Mysteries of Ancient South America*, London, 1947, 24-29, 80-81, 87-97.

⁸⁸ F.J. North, *Sunken Cities: Some Legends of the Coast and Lakes of Wales*, Cardiff, 1957.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 180-81.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 241-42.

with either old families in the areas (like Cantillon's Rocks, O'Shea's Island, O'Dougherty's Isle), or with natural disasters. Their stories have local names and scenery attached to them and they thus represent genuine folklore. The other type, to which Brasil Island belongs, owes more to imagination than to reality. Islands of this category are “purely mythical”, or are, at best, based on mirage and fog-bank and can be assigned to optical illusions.⁹¹ Westropp visually underlined this supposition in a line drawing which shows all the islands “belonging to Irish lore” close to the Irish shore, whereas the location of Brasil Island, according to its various positions on the portolan charts, is farther away, that is, outside the “100 fathom line”.⁹²

In his view, tales based on optical illusions are often derived from one of the commonest of sea phenomena, which is the delusion of sighting land, generally referred to as “mirages” or Fata Morganas. Clouds on the horizon, rising vapours or fog-banks conjure up images that are easily mistaken for ships, castles, towns or shadowy islands, whose disappearance is popularly explained by magic. And it is easy to see why: when standing on the exhilarating western shore of Ireland one can see how its shrouded rocky coastline and the weather-worn rock masses in the sea would lend themselves to such fantasy.

⁹¹ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 257-58. Earlier in his enquiry into legendary islands, Westropp thought *Hy Brasil* might belong in the same tradition as the other enchanted islands off the Irish coast in that it, too, although now submerged, had once been an actual island. He later rejected this idea, but in 1905, he could still write, “For Atlantis and Brasil and St Brendan's Island were, perhaps, no myth; and the earthquake-wave that split Inisfitae in three in 802 was but one of a thousand other cataclysms in the all-powerful Atlantic” (see Westropp, “The Coasts and Islands of the County Mayo”, 24).

⁹² Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, plate XXII. It would appear that the eminent folklorist Seán Ó Súilleabháin harboured similar reservations about an Irish pedigree of Brasil Island. In 1942, he advised folklore collectors to look for stories or beliefs about submerged lands in their districts. In particular he wanted them to enquire about all the “sunken” islands off the west coast which Westropp had named as belonging to “Irish lore”. After having given each of them its geographic location, Ó Súilleabháin then adds, without indicating any specific site, *Hy Brasil* as well as other places which we know from the Irish literary tradition, like *Tír na hÓige*, *Magh Meall*, etc. However, some twenty five years later, when writing about Irish folk belief in enchanted islands, *Hy Brasil* is dropped from the list. See Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, London, 1963, 505-506; and Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folk Custom*, 89-90.

O'Flaherty gave a pretty description of such mirages which he himself had frequently been presented with in Galway Bay:

There is, westward of Aran ... Skerde, a wild island of huge rocks These rocks sometimes appear to be a great city far of, full of houses, castles, towers, and chimneys; sometimes full of blazing flames, smoak, and people running to and fro. Another day you would see nothing but a number of ships, with their sailes and riggings; then so many great stakes of reeks of corn and turf; and this not only on fair sun-shining dayes, whereby it might be thought the reflection of the sun-beamse on the vapours arising about it, had been the cause, but alsoe on dark and cloudy days happening The enchanted island of O'Brasil is not always visible, as these rocks are, nor these rocks have always those apparitions.⁹³

Such atmospheric deceptions are not confined to Galway Bay, they were – and, to a lesser extent, still are – in evidence in all the other coastal areas of Ireland, too. This is what a man from Mayo noticed:

I saw upon a clear day, reaching along from the Saddle of Achill, and covering all you now see before you as the dark boiling sea, a delightful green land, with illigant [*sic*] hills and valleys, woods, rivers, and pretty bays. One day I saw the houses, and some o' the people plainly – one woman especially, I saw come out o' the back door of her house, walk into her garden, and cut cabbage for her dinner I know twenty people from my own village who will swear they saw the same.⁹⁴

The exact same phenomenon was reported several times from the coast of Sligo. One of Wood-Martin's correspondents gave an account of the mirage he witnessed in 1885. As it bears such a strong likeness to the foregoing we need not repeat the description, but, again, it is remarkable how certain the observer was that what he saw was real: "Nothing could have persuaded me but that I was gazing at a veritable city."⁹⁵ Along the northern coast, too, people noticed the same

⁹³ *A Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, 69 ff.

⁹⁴ Otway, *Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly*, 79.

⁹⁵ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, 218.

mirage,⁹⁶ and Caesar Otway himself witnessed it near the Giant's Causeway.⁹⁷ As with the stories attaching to sunken land, the surprising element is the ordinariness of the vision. The Halls, commenting on such a mirage observed close to Rathlin Island, remarked that "many individuals ... have distinctly seen it, adorned with woods and lawns, and crowded with people selling yarn, and engaged in the common occupations of a fair".⁹⁸ An insightful mid-seventeenth-century account came from a French traveller, M. de la Boullaye le Gouz, who was journeying by boat along the east coast of Ireland. Thinking he perceived an island close by where he distinguished trees in great numbers and even cattle, he enquired about the name of it, only to be told by the ship's pilot:

You are not the first who has erred in the supposition of these things; the most expert navigators are often deceived by them. That which to us appears land is only a dense vapour which cannot be raised higher in consequence of the season and the absence of the sun. Those apparent trees and animals are a part of that miasma which collects in some places more than in others.⁹⁹

Mirages of floating islands replete with walled towns, castles and churches or with pastures full of sheep and cattle were also seen passing by the Southern counties of Waterford, Cork and Kerry.¹⁰⁰ And corroboration comes from English sailors, too, who saw with

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 217; Drummond, *The Giants' Causeway*, 38, 148, 170; "The Fairy Annals", 137.

⁹⁷ Otway, *Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly*, 248.

⁹⁸ Hall, *Ireland*, III, 150.

⁹⁹ *The Tour of the French Traveller M. De la Boullaye le Gouz in Ireland; A.D. 1644*, ed. Thomas Crofton Croker, London, 1837, 3-4. The French tourist also learns that further to the North, particularly near the Pole, there are many such islands that are seen from a distance, but are hard to approach "owing to the witches who inhabit them, and destroy by storms the vessels of those who obstinately seek to land upon them". That such stories were widely circulated is also confirmed by similar reports of mirages observed in the Orkneys, Greenland, Alaska and numerous other places: see John F. Michell and Bob Rickard, *Unexplained Phenomena: A Rough Guide Special*, London, 2000, 213-16.

¹⁰⁰ McAnally, *Irish Wonders*, 67-68; *The Percy Anecdotes*, eds Reuben and Sholto Percy, London and New York, 1870, II, 240-41; Michell and Rickard, *Unexplained Phenomena*, 216.

their own eyes floating islands on the coast of the English Channel.¹⁰¹ In fact, wrote McAnally, the appearance of phantom islands used to be such a commonplace that to doubt their existence in the company of coast fishermen “will at once establish for the sceptic a reputation of ignorance”.¹⁰² He and others also pointed out that often the physical resemblance between the enchanted island and the actual land from where it is spotted is so close that the observers are fooled into believing that they are beholding their own land, claiming that “sure two twins couldn’t be liker”.¹⁰³

Denis O’Donoghue was convinced that it was such atmospheric deceptions that led to the belief in the existence of the “fanciful island of Hy-Brazail”.¹⁰⁴ Many have agreed with him, and most notably so Westropp who saw the optical illusion several times himself. Its appearance was so realistic that he even made a coloured sketch of it,¹⁰⁵ so he understood perfectly well how people in the past came to believe firmly in the existence of an island far out to sea. This conviction, he thought, led to its mythical aura and ultimately influenced the early map-makers.

However, even if we disregard the lack of any evidence of an early myth about Brasil Island, Westropp’s hypothesis remains problematic. If the practically-oriented Italian cartographers had been given to understand that they were dealing with either a “purely mythical” island or an optical illusion far out at sea, “rarely within the limits of sight”, and specifically lying “outside human trade”,¹⁰⁶ it is difficult to see why they would have marked this vague entity on their portolan charts. It is especially perplexing, considering that at the same time they ignored all the submerged islands close to the Irish shore, which the Irish unhesitatingly treated as real so that they could “be placed on the maps as definitely as any real islands”,¹⁰⁷ and thus posing, if we accept Westropp’s line of argument, a real threat to the seafarers.

¹⁰¹ Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, I, 376.

¹⁰² McAnally, *Irish Wonders*, 68-69.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 70; see also Anon., “I saw Hy-Brazil!” – Says ‘Rí Arann’”, *Irish Press*, 8 November 1944, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Denis O’Donoghue, *Brendaniana: St Brendan the Voyager in Story and Legend*, Dublin, 1893, 298, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 257.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

Another strong reason against this argument is the fact that people all around the Irish coasts were quite adamant that they, too, had seen phantom islands off their shore, begging the question why these were not also represented on the maps.

In a more recent study based on mid-twentieth-century Gaelic folk records, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin found that the belief in enchanted islands continues to intrigue people along the West coast of Ireland. Surprisingly, however, of all the different names they have for such islands *Hy Brasil* is by far the best known. Reference to it is made, he commented, “in all the western coastal areas” of Ireland.¹⁰⁸ Tellingly though, the total number of references has to be somewhat qualified on account of the fact that, following O’Flaherty, Ó hÓgáin identified Beag-Árainn (“Little Aran”) with Brasil Island, admitting that in the Galway area this island was only sometimes referred to as Uí Bhreasáil, “but more usually was called Beag-Árainn”.¹⁰⁹ Even more noteworthy is the fact that the majority of references to that island come from Kerry where the island is called *an Bhreasáil* which, as has already been pointed out, is the Irish rendering for the South American Republic of Brazil. The uncertainty about the name is quite remarkable. I have only been able to consult six of Ó hÓgáin’s manuscripts, but in these alone I found seven different versions of the name, which are: *Hy Brazil*, *Hi Brazil*, *An Bhreasil*, *An Bhreasail*, *Bhreasaoil*, *An Bhreasaoil* and *An Breasaoil*.¹¹⁰

In this very recent oral tradition, too, the stories are mostly confined to accounts of people who spotted the island which is still said to surface once in every seven years. There are a few accounts by certain named fishermen from Kerry who set foot on the island. These men are said “to have visited Breasaíl and to have walked the beautiful streets there and to have been treated to food and drink”. But Ó hÓgáin also remarked, that “something sinister” is felt to be connected with the island, which is illustrated for example by the use of the handshake motif: a fisherman would not shake hands with a resident of that island, knowing that if he did, it would crush his hand. According to other accounts from Kerry, people are afraid to look at

¹⁰⁸ Ó hÓgáin, “The Mystical Island in Irish Folklore”, 247.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹¹⁰ The first version comes from Donegal (*IFC* 561), the next from Galway (*IFC* 1311) and the rest are from Kerry (*IFC* 446, *IFC* 587, *IFC* 834 and *IFC* 966).

Breasaíl because they fear that seeing it might result in some deformity or illness.¹¹¹ Overall, then, other than in frequency, modern stories about Hy Brasil do not deviate in any significant way from those of the all other phantom islands.

To briefly recapitulate the most important findings of our survey of the oral folklore material: while there is ample evidence of a strong belief in phantom islands everywhere along the Irish coasts, no traces could be found of Brasil Island in any of the early Irish records, and none of the pre-nineteenth century sources unambiguously points to the use of that name in folk narratives. The name slowly begins to surface during the nineteenth century, and by the middle of the following century it has established itself as the most frequently mentioned name in connection with the enchanted islands of Ireland.

In order to find a possible answer as to what could have given rise to this recent predominance, we shall turn to Westropp's other intimation, namely that Brasil Island is "purely mythical".

¹¹¹ Ó hÓgáin, "The Mystical Island in Irish Folklore", 252-53.

PART IV

BRASIL ISLAND IN LITERATURE AND LEGEND: THE OLDER TRADITION

CHAPTER 4

GAELIC OTHERWORLDS

Like others before and after him, Westropp claimed that the ancient Irish placed their heaven far out in the waves of the western Atlantic and that this pagan Elysium went by numerous names, the best known of which is *Tír na nÓg* (“Land of Youth”).¹ If true, the Irish would have no monopoly on such a conception. In ancient eschatological speculation the region of the setting sun was thought of as being the last resting place of the chosen few, and in the literatures of many countries, we find that people have invented for themselves an earthly paradise, “some happier island in the wat’ry waste”,² situated towards the setting sun.

It is almost universally imagined to be a distant, delightful resting place for the souls departed, albeit generally with restricted access. In classic literature the Happy Isles beyond the western waters were reserved for heroes exempt from death, who were assigned to the *Fortunate Islands*, *Elysian Fields*, *Garden of the Hesperides* and other wonderful abodes.³ In medieval fancies sinners had no chance, only Christian saints were granted access. A good example of denied entry is told by the Breton in William Morris’ *The Earthly Paradise*, who described this ever-blossoming garden:

Across the western sea, where none grew old
E’en as the books at Micklegarth had told,
And said moreover that an English knight
Had had the Earthly Paradise in sight,
And heard the songs of those that dwelt therein,
But entered not; being hindered by his sin.⁴

¹ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 225.

² Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle I, line 106.

³ Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, Urbana and Chicago, 2000, *passim*.

⁴ William Morris, “Prologue – The Wanderers”, in *The Earthly Paradise: A Poem*, London, 1868, 8.

What makes the assertion that the Irish, too, believed in such an island realm so relevant for the present enquiry is the claim that “*Hy Brasil*” is one of the names given to this heaven. Patrick Weston Joyce’s contention that “there was a belief in a land of everlasting youth and peace” known to people by several names such as “*Tír-nan-óg* … or *I-Brazil*”,⁵ was widely acknowledged.

It is a truism that we know very little about Celtic religion and mythology and that our scant knowledge is confined to three sources. First, there are the classical authors (Caesar, Lucan, Diodorus Siculus, Valerius Maximus, Pomponius Mela, and others), who commented prejudicially on what they observed about the religious practices of their neighbours in Celtic Europe. Then there is archaeological evidence of images seemingly representing Celtic divinities. This material evidence comes mainly from Gaul, the Rhineland and Britain. The early Celtic tales from Ireland and Wales form the third source.⁶ Although Ireland had a written vernacular literature before the rest of Western Europe, this rich body of texts does not present contemporary literary testimony; it was committed to writing in medieval times, with the earliest extant Irish versions dating back to the twelfth century AD, while the Welsh mythic tradition is contained in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century compilations. This means that the early Celtic tales were not only written down centuries after the countries’ conversion to Christianity, but, moreover, that they have come down to us from Christian hands and under the influence of Christian ideas.

Unsurprisingly, then, early Irish myths and legends contain distinctly Christian allusions, and when reference to the otherworld is made the “character and nomenclature … show an admixture of native and ecclesiastical elements”, remarked Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, reminding us that one of its names, *Tír Tairngiri* is a straight translation of *terra repromissionis* (the “Promised Land” of the Old Testament).⁷ John Carey pointed to the use of allegory and the

⁵ Patrick Weston Joyce, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, London, New York, and Bombay, 1903, I, 293.

⁶ Nora Chadwick, *The Celts*, Harmondsworth, 1977, 141-85; Eleanor Hull, “The Development of the Idea of Hades in Celtic Literature”, *Folk-Lore*, XVII/2 (June 1907), 122-30; Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, London, 1997, 11.

⁷ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, “The Semantics of ‘Síd’”, *Éigse*, XVII (1977-9), 149.

doctrines of Paradise and the Fall as a further clear indication of the extent to which “the nature of the Irish otherworld came to be expressed in Christian terms”.⁸ It is hardly plausible that the conception of the pagan Elysium itself is attributable to the Christian monks, or that the early tales were entirely their brainchild. A more reasonable approach seems to be to accept that both were rooted, at least partially, in an oral tradition going back to the pre-Christian past.

Some scholars, like Myles Dillon, argued that originally the stories would have expressed a primitive pagan belief which was later validated and sustained by confusion with the biblical Promised Land.⁹ Others maintain that the traditional element often amounts to no more than a mere nucleus. For instance, James Carney reasoned that when depicting pre-Christian otherworld abodes, the authors of medieval Irish tales would have naturally turned to the conceptions already expressed in written material with which they were familiar, that is, a certain range of Greek and Latin literature, the scriptures, apocryphal writings, and so on.¹⁰ But neither assumption can be proven because we have no direct knowledge of an oral tradition.¹¹

It follows that we simply do not know to what extent the original indigenous material was modified to suit Christian ideas, what and how much the monastic scribes eliminated from the oral narratives and what and how much they added to it; or to put it more pointedly, it is impossible to determine how much recourse they had to their knowledge of classical literature and the Bible when they composed the tales. Only the source of the legendary invasions of Ireland as described in the *Lebor Gabála* can be traced relatively unambiguously to their monastic origin, because history, as we understand it, was not cultivated in the schools of the Celtic poets and professional storytellers.¹² So when the monastic literati fabricated the pseudo-history of Ireland they shaped it with the help of key features culled

⁸ John Carey, “Time, Space, and the Otherworld”, in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium (May 1 and 2, 1987)*, VII (1987), 12.

⁹ Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 1994, 101.

¹⁰ James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, Dublin, 1979, Chapter VIII, 276-321.

¹¹ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth, 1990, 5.

¹² Eoin MacNeill, *Celtic Ireland*, Dublin, 1981, 26.

from the Bible to which they added native myth and legend and arranged these under an arbitrary chronology.¹³

Important and interesting as the question may be, this is not the place to go deeply into the complex argument in what ways the otherworld depictions in Irish tales are dependent on classical or biblical texts, or to adduce parallels from these. We will also have to pass over the debate on whether the Irish actually did conceive of a realm of the dead; some argue that they did not because of their alleged belief in rebirth.¹⁴ Notwithstanding Mac Cana's persuasively argued contention that nothing "about the Celts is more certain than that they believed in a life after death",¹⁵ we shall start out with the premise that our notion of a Celtic afterlife is informed by medieval literature. The conceptions of an Irish otherworld have reached us as literary themes which, to some extent, are probably drawn from native material and which may thus have a foundation in ancient Irish religious mythology. What we are primarily concerned with here is how the otherworld is delineated and what names and locations are assigned to it.

There is general agreement among scholars that there is no single term to denote the otherworld, and that the Celtic notion of "life after death" appears to differ widely from the Christian dichotomy of "this world" (of the living) and "the other world" (of the dead).¹⁶ Because in Irish literature the otherworld is known by a variety of names and locations, Patrick Sims-Williams suggested that instead of using the

¹³ McCone, *Pagan Past*, 257; Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum 17. Jahrhundert*, Hildesheim, 1921, 72.

¹⁴ Alfred Nutt, "The Celtic Other-World", *Folk-Lore*, XVIII/4 (1907), 447; Alfred Nutt, "The Happy Otherworld in the Mythico-Romantic Literature of the Irish: The Celtic Doctrine of Re-Birth, An Essay in Two Sections", in *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living: An Old Irish Saga now First Edited, with Translation, Notes, and Glossary*, ed. K. Meyer, London, 1895 and 1897, I, 101- 331, II, 1-281; Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Feltham, 1983, 122; Douglas Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Present Day*, London, 1980, 94-104; Chadwick, *The Celts*, 174-76.

¹⁵ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 122; Patrick Sims-Williams, "Some Celtic Otherworld Terms", in *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture*, eds A.T.E Matonis and D.F. Melia, Van Nuys, CA, 1990, 60-61; James MacKillop, *Myths and Legends of the Celts*, London, 2006, 116-24.

¹⁶ For a discussion, see Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 122, and Sims-Williams, "Some Celtic Otherworld Terms", 60-61.

singular it might be more appropriate to use the plural form and refer to the multiple Irish otherworlds.¹⁷

Síd (modern spelling *sí*) or “fairy mound” is used in Irish saga and folklore to designate one of the otherworlds. The supernatural beings who dwell in these mounds are called *side* and are sometimes differentiated as *fir side* (males), *mná side* (females) or collectively referred to as *áes side*. As the *side* otherwise have no specific names the mound they live in often serves as their designation. From an Old Irish hymn we learn that before the coming of Christianity, “on the folk of Ireland there was darkness: the peoples used to worship *side*”.¹⁸ Similarly, in the *Book of Armagh*, a seventh-century biographer of St Patrick makes reference to the *side* who were consigned to the underground (*side aut deorum terrenorum*) after Christianity has triumphed over them.

In the fictitious history of Ireland, the *Lebor Gabála*, and in the later sagas the gods are provided with a name: they are called the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, and their descendants are imagined as residing in fairy mounds, hundreds of which are scattered all over the country.¹⁹ Each *síd* is thought of as an individual unit, separate and local.²⁰ It is occupied by a specific clan, and although generally its members are friendly enough and partial to sumptuous food and drink as well as to sweet-sounding music, we often hear of long-standing feuds between two fairy mounds, marked by violent attacks on each other. The *side* possess magic weapons, are skilled in all the arts and are supreme masters of wizardry.

Though not part of a human settlement, the *side* live close to it, side by side with human beings.²¹ Some of their abodes are actually prehistoric burial mounds, like the famous *Bruig na Bóinne* (now known as Newgrange). O’Rahilly asserted that “every district of importance tended to have its own *síd* ... within which the otherworld

¹⁷ Sims-Williams, “Some Celtic Otherworld Terms”, 69.

¹⁸ *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus: A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses*, eds Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, Cambridge, 1901-1903, II, 317.

¹⁹ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 63; *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Welch, Oxford, 1996, s.v. “Sídh”.

²⁰ MacKillop, *Myths and Legends*, 116-17.

²¹ Heinrich Wagner, “Origins of Pagan Irish Religion”, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, XXXVIII (1981), 3.

was believed to be located”,²² yet he also deemed it possible that there was in Celtic belief but one otherworld. Most other scholars reject such a notion. Sims-Williams brushed it aside as reading more like a “modern abstraction”, maintaining that in Ireland there was “no clear notion of a single chthonic otherworld” expressed in literature and that no trace of such a conception survives in terminology.²³ In actual fact, it is his view that the proliferation of fairy mounds exactly mirrors the political divisions of early medieval Ireland, which was also divided into a plethora of petty kingdoms (*tuatha*). Like its human counterparts, then, he sees each local *síd* as an independent little realm, governed by its own god-king.²⁴

Heinrich Wagner pointed to a further correspondence between the mortal and the supernatural world by claiming that the Celts considered their political and religious centres such as “Temair” or “Emain” as “replicas of the palaces of the gods of the otherworld”.²⁵ Probing deeper into the connection between these two worlds, Ó Cathasaigh argued that both are governed by the ideal of just kingship, the doctrine of *fir flathemon*, according to which the qualities of the righteous king are reflected in the condition of his kingdom.²⁶ Some of the king-tales reveal an even stronger nexus in that they suggest that “legitimate kingship has its source in the otherworld”. These tales intimate, he argued, that the worthy king is sanctioned by the otherworld and that the ideal conditions enjoyed under his rule are seen as a re-creation in this world of the paradisal state of the otherworld.²⁷

Beside the fairy mounds many other locations are assigned to the supernatural world, which include wells and lakes, as well as lake islands and off-shore islands. The otherworld can also manifest itself as a sudden mist descending on a person in an open plain, or it can be a hostel, known as a *bruidhen*, found in darkness or storm in the Irish countryside.

²² Thomas F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Dublin, 1984, 290; Myles Dillon and Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*, London, 1973, 182, 197.

²³ Sims-Williams, “Some Celtic Otherworld Terms”, 63, 67, 76.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 63, 67; O’Looney, “Letter to William Smith O’Brien”, 230.

²⁵ Heinrich Wagner, “The Archaic *Dind Ríg* Poem and Related Problems”, *Ériu*, XXVII (1977), 13.

²⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, “The Semantics of ‘Síd’”, 148-49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-44.

Although the otherworld is distinct from the human world, no strict borderline separates the two and there is frequent contact between them. Supernatural beings interfere in human affairs, but living beings also enter otherworld places – without having to go through some form of death – and re-emerge intact. Sometimes famous human heroes afford assistance to *side* engaged in battle with a neighbouring god-clan. We also hear of sexual relationships between the dwellers of the two worlds. Amorous supernatural women will lure a favoured mortal into their realm, but in exceptional cases, as in “Tochmarc Étaíne”, it is a divine male who entices a mortal woman into his, and as the stories of Fróech macc Ídaith and others demonstrate, such unions are sometimes even blessed with progeny.²⁸

Accounts of human visits to all the diverse otherworld locations are indeed quite plentiful. Contact is easy because the otherworld abodes are nearby and can effortlessly be reached by various means, by boat or on a magic steed, for example, but generally they are accessed by going underground or underwater.²⁹ Entrance is gained by natural land features – like hills, groves, caves and wells – or by way of sacred tumuli, tombs and royal sites.³⁰ In cases where human creatures visit the otherworld place by invitation, the gods’ land is depicted as a place of sheer bliss. However, if unbidden heroes force their way into the otherworld, intent on seizing its treasures – magical cauldrons are coveted objects – they experience an entirely different world in which the benign gods turn into formidable foes with nasty serpents and horrifying monsters at their command. Earthly time has no relevance in the otherworld. Mortal visitors who return after a seemingly brief sojourn in the supernatural kingdom may find that all their contemporaries are dead and that their own names are but a memory. Upon contact with the material world they may suddenly become aged and decrepit, or they may dissolve into a heap of dust. Conversely, what appears to be a long stay in the otherworld in some cases turns out to have been but an instant in this world.

²⁸ Heinrich Zimmer, “Brendan’s Meerfahrt”, *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Literatur*, XXXIII (1889), 277.

²⁹ John Carey, “Ireland and the Antipodes: The Heterodoxy of Virgil of Salzburg”, *Speculum*, LXIV/1 (January 1989), 6.

³⁰ Carey, “Time, Space, and the Otherworld”, 2-7.

Despite the multiplicity of subterranean, subaqueous and other locations co-extensive with this world, the general features of the otherworlds are sufficiently fixed, though not described in great detail. The otherworld is never presented as a place of retribution and punishment. It is rather akin to a paradise: a garden of delight, where men and women live in unending happiness with every want richly satisfied. According to Kuno Meyer, the most frequent designation of it is *Mag Mell* (“Pleasant, or Happy Plain”).³¹ It abounds with song, music and intoxicating liquor, for which reason it is sometimes aptly named as *Inis Subae* (“The Island of Joy”). It is also called *Tír inna mBéo* (“The Land of the Living”), as it is untouched by sickness or decay, and because no one there ever grows old, another name for it is *Tír inna n-Óg* (“The Land of Youth”). It may be entirely peopled by beautiful (sometimes sexually demanding) women in which case it becomes literally *Tír inna mBan* (“The Land of Women”). Nor is it surprising that it is also conceived of as a warrior’s paradise of everlasting battle. This adds a thrill of excitement, and, after all, warfare and battle were not only part of the natural order above ground, but also the agreeable pastime of heroic society, and the inhabitants of the otherworld do not have to forego this pleasure. Miranda Green perceived these Irish otherworlds as an idealized mirror-image of the human world,³² while to Lisa Bitel it smacked more of an extravagant male fantasy.³³

Depending on which of its features are highlighted, we read of many other names for the otherworld, such as “Land of Virtues”, “Land of Truth”, “Land of Lights”, “The Other Land”, “Great Plain”, “Plain of Honey”, “Plain of the two Mists”, “Silver Cloud Plain”, “Plain of Sports”, “Land of Victories”, “Land of Heroes”, “Land under Waves”, and so on, but on no occasion do we come across a land or island called “Brasil” or “Hy Brasil” in early Irish literature.

All evidence so far points to the otherworld being located close-by. Indeed, some have strongly argued that it is “confined to the empirical geographic context”; if it is an island Elysium, it is an actual place either in a named lake or in the ocean facing a specific stretch of the

³¹ *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal*, I, 18, n.1.

³² Miranda Green, *Celtic Myths*, London, 1993, 137.

³³ Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*, Ithaca, NY and London, 1996, 162-66.

Irish coastline, which, incidentally, may be in the west, south, or east of Ireland. Proponents of this view have therefore rejected as alien to the indigenous tradition the idea of an overseas otherworld located on a fabulously remote island. Tales in which otherworld lands are reached by “voyages beyond the local frame of reference” are thus deemed to be imitations of classical and ecclesiastical texts, that is, they are considered to be due to foreign, clerical influence.³⁴ The eminent Celticist James Carney most resolutely gave voice to this opinion, even going so far as to state that he had “no confidence in any view which supposes that the primitive Irish believed in an otherworld beyond the seas”. He specifically dismissed the notion of Hy Brasil: not just the idea of a vague, terrestrial paradise set far out in the western sea, but also the name which he called “curious” and ascribed to modern, non-Gaelic sources.³⁵

Of similar view is John Carey, who pursued Carney’s argument further by trying to establish whether in the material surviving in Old Irish there is any evidence of an unlocalized otherworld island somewhere in the ocean towards the setting sun. Excluded from his investigation were the *immrama* or voyage tales, whose narrative formula he sees as indubitably derived from classical and biblical models. We shall save a discussion of these tales for the following chapter and focus for the moment on Carey’s conclusion which states that outside “the *immrama* ... and the two closely linked tales *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Conlae*, the early sources give us no grounds for postulating belief in an overseas otherworld; nor does there appear to be satisfactory evidence for such a belief in either contemporary Irish folklore or the traditions of Wales”.³⁶

James MacKillop concurred with Carey’s findings which supported his own view that the insular Celts placed their otherworldly realms in specific locations and not in fabulous far-off islands.³⁷ An interesting indirect corroboration of this opinion comes from Douglas Hyde. In his *Literary History of Ireland*, he pointed out

³⁴ Carey, “Time, Space, and the Otherworld”, 1; John Carey, “The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition”, *Éigse*, XIX (1982-83), 40.

³⁵ James Carney, “Review of ‘Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis’”, Edited with Introduction and Notes by Carl Selmer”, in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*, ed. J.M. Wooding, Dublin, 2000, 46-47.

³⁶ Carey, “The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition”, 36-43.

³⁷ MacKillop, *Myths and Legends*, 121.

that in a large collection of almost sixty folk tales taken down in Irish “from the lips of the peasantry” he found allusions to the otherworld located under water in five, and inside hills in four stories. But none of the tales alluded to an overseas otherworld: “The Hy Brasil type – that of finding the dead living again on an ocean island – is, so far as I have yet collected, quite unrepresented amongst them.”³⁸

There is one otherworldly abode which is remarkably different from those discussed so far and therefore puts a somewhat different complexion on the whole debate. Unlike all the others this specimen has a sombre aspect attaching to it: it is associated with death and the dead. This is the island *Tech nDuinn*,³⁹ the “House of Donn”, or the “Palace of the Dark One” which is a rocky islet in Munster. When the monastic scribes put together the *Lebor Gabála* they created an ancestor of the Irish people whom they called Míl and to whom they attributed a son named Donn. Upon landing in Irish waters, they let Donn drown together with his wife and whole crew near Dursey Island off the south-west coast of Munster, where he is said to have been buried on the tiny islet named after him.

Kuno Meyer made quite a striking observation regarding the lord of this otherworld.⁴⁰ He pointed out that Mael Muru of Othan (d. 887), the first scribe who put the *Lebor Gabála* into verse, added the following comment after announcing the death of what Meyer called the “pseudo-Donn”:

There was raised for him a cairn with the stone of his race,
Over the broad sea, an ancient stormy dwelling;
And Tech Duinn, it is called.
This was his great testament to his numerous children,
“To me, to my house, come ye all
After your deaths.”⁴¹

³⁸ Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland*, 96.

³⁹ In English the islet is known as “Bull Rock”.

⁴⁰ Kuno Meyer, “Der Irische Totengott und die Toteninsel”, *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, XXXII (1919), 537-46.

⁴¹ *The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius*, eds James H. Todd and Algernon Herbert, Dublin, 1848, 249.

It seemed to have slipped Máel Muru's mind, the otherwise faithful adapter of the *Lebor Gabála* material, that no descendants were credited to Donn, Meyer argued, voicing his suspicion that Donn was an old pagan deity whose memory the Christian compilers of the *Lebor Gabála* wished to eradicate. They attempted to achieve this by retaining the well-known name of his abode but weaving it in with the fanciful history of the invasions. Máel Muru, however, still remembered the "real" Donn who entreats his numerous "children" (*clann*), that is, all the people of his tribe, to come to his house when they die. This otherworld, then, presided over by Donn, is entered after death only.

Meyer scanned early Irish material in an effort to substantiate his claim that *Tech nDuinn* was indeed regarded as a place of departed spirits. One of the few examples he found in support of his view is the dark and somewhat obscure passage in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* ("The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel"), where it says of the ill-fated warriors of King Conaire that "they will die at low-tide on the strand (on their way) to the House of Donn, early in the following morning".⁴² Mac Cana used the same doom-ridden tale as an example of the hostel or *bruidhen* as otherworld, towards which King Conaire is inexorably drawn to meet his death. On his way to the hostel the king comes across three horsemen, all clad in red and riding red horses, which are the steeds of Donn Déscorach from the otherworld. This reinforces "what is already evident from the context", Mac Cana commented, namely that "Derga is one and the same as Donn, god of the dead, and that those who, like Conaire, enter his abode are either dead or foredoomed".⁴³ Among the few other sources Meyer found is the tenth-century tale of *Airne Fingein*, in which the "House of Donn" is also referred to as an island situated in the extreme south-west of

⁴² Meyer translates § 79, "A[t] mbía basa lecht bas briscem lurgu mais for traig maitne do thig duind matin moch imbárach" as: "Der Tod wird sie schlagen auf dem Strand der Morgenebbe (zur Fahrt) zum Hause des Donns in der Morgenfrühe des morgigen Tages." Whitley Stokes is less certain and renders the same passage as "Clouds of weakness come to you ... to a lord's house early tomorrow morning" (see *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga: The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel*, ed. Whitley Stokes, Paris, 1902, 66-67).

⁴³ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 127.

Munster, but more importantly it is specified as the place where the dead assemble (“co Teach nDuind frisndailit mairb”).⁴⁴

Taking a closer look at the exact location of “Donn’s House”, we find that it lies at the tip of the Béara Peninsula, home to the “most famous old lady in Irish literature”,⁴⁵ the *Caillech Bérrí*, the old hag or nun of Beare, who is presented in an anonymous eighth- or ninth-century poem as an aged female who, having outlived her many friends and lovers, took the *caille* or nun’s veil.⁴⁶ This celebrated lament is loaded with mythological import whose original meaning has long since become obliterated and forgotten. While it has been read in many different ways, most interpreters agree that the opposition or tension between pagan and Christian beliefs is the central idea governing its composition.⁴⁷ Meyer was tempted to see also in this poem an allusion to the dead being carried across the sea to their final resting place. In quatrain 13, after mentioning a special friend whose visit she now no longer expects, the old woman says of all the departed she once knew:

I know what they are doing:
 They row and row across
 The reeds of the Ford of Alma –
 Cold is the dwelling where they sleep.⁴⁸

Her departed pagan friends are carried by boat to their resting place in the sea which is described as cold and is thus unfavourably contrasted with the blessed future realm in heaven to which she can look forward.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, eds Osborn J. Bergin *et al.*, Halle and Dublin, 1907, II, 8.

⁴⁵ Wagner, “Origins of Pagan Irish Religion”, 6.

⁴⁶ “The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare”, in *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*, ed. and tr. Kuno Meyer, London, 1911, 88-91.

⁴⁷ For a discussion, see Gearoid Ó Crualaóich, “Continuity and Adaptation in Legends of Cailleach Bhéarra”, *Béaloideas*, LVI (1988), 153-78; John Carey, “Transmutations of Immortality in ‘The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare’”, *Celtica*, XXIII (1999), 30-37.

⁴⁸ See *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*, 89. The Ford of Alma (Áth Alma) is nowhere else mentioned, but Meyer thinks it may very well refer to the river *Alla* (now called Moyalla) in the Beare Peninsula.

⁴⁹ See Carey, “Transmutations of Immortality”, 37.

The beginning of *The Lament* indicates that the old lady is dying. The very first line reads “Ebb-tide to me as of the sea”, and we will recall that King Conaire’s men, too, are about to die at low-tide. According to H. Wagenvoort, in ancient primitive conceptions there was a close connection between low tide and death, the implication being that the receding water facilitated the soul’s journey across the ocean. Among others, he referred to Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, which lists numerous examples for this idea from all over the world. Indeed Frazer’s material includes lore from the coasts of Wales as well as parts of the coast of Brittany, where the belief was said to prevail that people die when the tide goes out.⁵⁰ Frazer even quoted from Dickens (*David Copperfield*) and Shakespeare (*Henry V*, II, iii), who were obviously familiar with this tradition. However, to his amazement, Wagenvoort could find hardly any evidence of this obviously widely held belief in classic literature.⁵¹

Similarly, it would appear that very little is said about Donn in the early literature, but his importance is likewise substantiated by the rich variety of folklore material.⁵² Hyde pointed out that in his time the tradition was still so vivid in Munster that an eighteenth-century poet treated Donn as still reigning in his abode, and addressed a poem to him as “the tutelary divinity of the place”. The poet pleads with the god to allow him into his house, even as a horse-boy to groom his horses, “unless thou hast grown deaf by the constant voice of the tide, or unless, O bright Donn, thou hast died like everybody else!”⁵³ From James Todd we learn that at the time of his publication of *The Irish Nennius*, in 1848, the name *Teach Duinn* was still given by the peasantry of the neighbourhood to the island.⁵⁴ In their explanatory notes on the “House of Donn”, Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, the translators of *Acallam na Senórach*, commented that, “to go to the house of Donn in Irish tradition means to die”⁵⁵ Further proof of this

⁵⁰ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion; Pt 1. The Magic Art and Religion: The Evolution of Kings*, London, 1920, 167.

⁵¹ H. Wagenvoort, “The Journey of the Souls of the Dead to the Isles of the Blessed”, *Mnemosyne*, 4th series, XXIV/2 (1971), 116.

⁵² Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 37.

⁵³ Hyde, *A Literary History of Ireland*, 49-50.

⁵⁴ *The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum*, 56.

⁵⁵ *Tales of the Elders of Ireland: A New Translation of ‘Acallam na Senórach’*, eds Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, Oxford, 1999, 231.

tradition can be seen in the grim story about Donn, which appeared in an Irish magazine dating back to the 1830s. The story centres on the submerged city of Kilstapheen in the Shannon estuary, which we have already seen strongly associated with doom and death in the oral folklore tradition (see pages 71-73). The dark deity is here referred to as “the mighty Donn of the ocean” and lord of the “City of the Dead”.⁵⁶

Käte Müller-Lisowski, inspired by Meyer’s enquiry into *Tech nDuinn* in early Irish texts, examined instances of this tradition in modern oral folklore, and was astonished by the sheer volume of material attaching to Donn. One of the folklore collectors expressed his own surprise at what he called the strong hold “this stark paganism” still had over the people while another collector interpreted the survival of the Donn tradition as due to the fact that “he was still a reality to the people”.⁵⁷ In any case, Müller-Lisowski’s survey of modern folklore proves the tenacity of the belief in the physical existence of this coastal otherworld island until at least well into the first half of the twentieth century. It follows naturally, then, that in his encyclopaedia of Myth, Legend and Romance, Dáithí Ó hÓgáin refers to Donn as the “shadowy personification of death” and the “God of the dead”.⁵⁸

Let us return to Meyer one last time. Based on his analysis of early Irish texts he drew a clear distinction between *Tech nDuinn*, as the place to which the spirits of all the departed are taken, and the happy otherworld island, which is reserved for the chosen few who travel there during their lifetime and who return to Ireland – though sometimes at their peril. *Tech nDuinn*, the general realm of the dead, lying close to the Irish coast, he likened to the domain of Hades; whereas the happy otherworld island, situated far out in the western ocean, he argued, corresponds to Homer’s Elysium and Hesiod’s Islands of the Blessed.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ O’Taffrail, “The Lost City”, 477.

⁵⁷ Käte Müller-Lisowski, “Contributions to a Study in Irish Folklore: Traditions about Donn”, *Béaloideas*, XVIII (1948), 143.

⁵⁸ Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *The Lore of Ireland: An Encyclopaedia of Myth, Legend and Romance*, Wilton, 2006, s.v. “Donn” and “Donn Cuailinge”.

⁵⁹ Meyer, “Der irische Totengott”, 545.

Apart from the plentiful Irish folklore material, we also have some classical accounts of islands believed to lie west of the British Isles to which the dead were supposed to be ferried; notably from Plutarch (*Face of the Moon*, 941-42), Procopius of Caesarea (*History of the Wars*, 8.20.42) and Pliny (*Historia Naturalis*, iv, 27). These seem to testify to a Celtic tradition of locating the spirits of the departed on islands, and while we have to be mindful of the fact that all the accounts are based on second- or third-hand sources, we do know that this is a very ancient conception, shared by many European countries. The Germanic peoples for example imagined that the spirits of the dead were shipped across the North Sea to the Isle of Brittia (Britain). In German popular tradition England means “Engelland”, that is the “realm of the souls”.⁶⁰ M. D’Arbois de Jubainville drew on Plutarch’s and Procopius’ works to show that the Gauls, in any event, believed in the existence of such a western isle, and John Rhŷs, besides quoting from the same sources also discussed many examples from Welsh folklore which confirm the belief in an Isle of the Dead.⁶¹ This finding is further strengthened by Peter Anson’s study of modern fisher folklore in parts of Britain and Normandy, according to which frequent reference is made to the belief that the spirits of the dead are shipped to a land in the west, where the sun goes down.⁶²

Rhŷs made the point that the dead were feared because they posed a threat to the living. They might return and avenge themselves on those who had taken over their place or possessions: “The Celtic notion of locating the spirits of the departed on islands is inseparable from the widespread superstition that water formed an effective barrier against their movements; to be conveyed to such islands they must be ferried across, and once they had gone, one felt no apprehension of their ever returning to disturb the living.”⁶³ Carrying out research in connection with a different subject matter, I came across remarkably similar notions in Irish folklore. For our pre-Christian forebears, there seems to have been no real boundary between this life and the next.

⁶⁰ *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, Berlin and New York, 2000, VII, 1569.

⁶¹ Rhŷs, *Celtic Folklore*, 400-55.

⁶² Peter F. Anson, *Fisher Folk-Lore: Old Customs, Taboos and Superstitions among Fisher Folk; Especially in Brittany and Normandy, and on the East Coast of Scotland*, London, 1965, 155.

⁶³ Rhŷs, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, 358.

When people died everything was done to placate them and assure them of their popularity, particularly while their body was still around. Hence the wake with which the living were trying to ingratiate themselves with the dead in the hope of being spared any trouble from them.⁶⁴

O'Rahilly, however, claimed that the notion of a dark otherworld abode was incompatible with the eschatology of the Celts. The belief of the Celts was that after death they entered the house of their ancestor, which was a place of perpetual joy and feasting.⁶⁵ Eleanor Hull and Alfred Nutt agreed with O'Rahilly and were adamant that what may be true of Celtic traditions elsewhere is absolutely inapplicable to Ireland. They utterly disagreed with the notion of an Irish Hades, insisting that the Irish Gael, and probably also his Welsh and Gallic cousins, did not believe in a world of departed spirits at all. The mournful land of ghosts is incompatible with the joyous Irish *Mag Mell*, Hull insisted, claiming that “there is no similarity whatever between the two ideas”⁶⁶

Maybe the two seemingly contradictory ideas are not mutually exclusive at all. Early Irish narratives represent aristocratic literature which was designed to be read by or to members of the leisured classes. Naturally it is on their concerns, ideas and activities that the literature focuses, to the extent of almost totally ignoring the fortunes of the common people.⁶⁷ We may therefore assume that the projected images of the otherworld are imaginative conceptions of the bards, intended to entertain and please their aristocratic listeners. Instead of the unattractive prospect of having to share the same realm as the *hoi polloi* after death, they would be tickled to hear of an exclusive happy otherworld realm to which the people at large had no access. After all, neither the Greek Elysium, nor the Norse Valhöll nor the biblical Promised Land was open to the souls of everybody; they too, were restricted to the chosen few.

⁶⁴ Barbara Freitag, *Sheela-na-gigs: Unravelling an Enigma*, London and New York, 2004, 92-97.

⁶⁵ O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History*, 482-83.

⁶⁶ Hull, “The Development of the Idea of Hades”, 128-34; Nutt, “The Celtic Otherworld”, 446-47.

⁶⁷ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 131.

Another, though less likely, possibility is that the privileged classes and the common people did indeed have quite different beliefs concerning the next world. But given the small number of people who constituted a *tuath* it is difficult to imagine that within these tiny units multiple conceptions prevailed in such an important matter as the Hereafter. A further suggestion was made by Zimmer, who reasoned that, analogous to the Christian idea of heaven and hell, there may have been the conception that different otherworlds awaited the good and the bad in the Irish tradition.⁶⁸

One might even conceive of the two different otherworld abodes as interconnected. People may have viewed the two worlds as two distinct stages in the journey of the dead. *Tech nDuinn* may have been thought of as a temporary abode where the souls of the departed assembled before embarking on the journey to their future homes, either situated in an island out in the ocean or in some other location, or, as the case may be, before setting off to an unspecified place where reincarnation awaited them. None of the early texts contradicts this reading; in fact the wording in *Airne Fingein*, where the dead are said to “assemble”, seems to strengthen this notion. Islands as assembly places for the departed as they prepare to undertake the journey to their future homes are known to have existed in many traditions.⁶⁹

To conclude, whatever the traditional or even eschatological background to these early Irish tales may have been, it is not preserved by any other record. Therefore, we have no direct or unbiased information on pagan conceptions of life after death. All we are presented with in the early literature are a few glimpses of different ideas of the world of the unseen. Great care has to be taken, then, in using these literary sources as evidence for Gaelic conceptions of an otherworld. In particular, the notion of a happy overseas abode for all the departed souls seems very questionable and should be treated with extreme caution. For a belief in Hy Brasil, however, we are given no justification whatsoever. As it is nowhere mentioned, it must be taken out of the equation altogether.

⁶⁸ Zimmer, “Brendan’s Meerfahrt”, 285-86.

⁶⁹ Wagenvoort, “The Journey of the Souls”, 116,121,148.

CHAPTER 5

CLERICAL SEA VOYAGES AND ST BRENDAN'S VISIT TO BRASIL ISLAND

According to a treatise in the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* that specifies the requirements for the *filed*, this learned class of poets had to be able to recite seven times fifty tales before the nobility.¹ Of these 350 tales five times fifty were regarded as main tales. While comparatively few of the tales have survived, at least most of their titles are preserved in two manuscripts. Between what is generally referred to as List “A”, which follows the above statement in *The Book of Leinster*, and List “B” (in *Anecdota from Irish MSS*) the manuscripts retain altogether 250 titles of the main tales. For these two lists Thurneysen postulated a lost common ancestor, dating from the tenth century, suggesting that the titles represent the repertory of tenth-century poets, with some eleventh- and twelfth-century additions.² In these lists, the tales are grouped according to themes, like *tána bó* (“cattle raids”), *togla* (“destructions”), *tochmarca* (“wooings”), *tochomlada* (“immigrations”), and so on.

Two of the themes are of particular interest to the present enquiry, namely the *echtrai* (sg. *echtrae*) and the *immrama* (sg. *immram*), both involving a human expedition into otherworldly territory. There is general agreement that in the *echtrae* (a derivative of *echtar* = Lat. *extra*), literally an “outing”, emphasis is put on the heroes’ entry into the supernatural world,³ which may be situated in any of its assumed locations: in a *síd*, in a well, under a lake, on an island, and so on. All the pleasures of the happy otherworld – perpetual good health and weather, abundance of food and drink, joyous battles, women and

¹ *The Book of Leinster*, eds R.I. Best and M.A. Bergin, Dublin, 1965, IV, 835-37.

² Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, 21-24; Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Literature*, London, 1966, 103-104.

³ Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, I, 1, n.1-2; David N. Dumville, “Echtrae and Immram: Some Problems of Definition”, *Ériu*, XXVII (1976), 73-74.

music, etc. – are featured in the *echtrai*; their “essential milieu” is thus a pagan one.⁴

In the *immram*, literally a “rowing about”, the voyage itself is central; it takes place across the sea, usually describes a circle and is set in the Christian era. A frame story introduces the motives for the circumnavigation and provides a conclusion at the end, thus binding the various episodes together in which the heroes are depicted wandering about from island to island. As each of these islands is peculiar and evokes a different response from its visitors, ranging from exultation to horror, the narrator is afforded the opportunity of introducing a great diversity of situations and topics. The salient point to be noted about this type of tale is its Christian bent. Numerous titles in both medieval tale lists denote *echtrai*, indicating that they were a well-established genre at that time. The *immrama*, however, are in the minority. They are completely absent from List “B”, while List “A” contains just three titles with this theme, that is, “Imrom Maele Duin”, “Imrom Hua Corra”, “Imrom Luinge Murchertaig meic Erca”⁵.

Given the small number of texts, then, the *immrama* appear not to belong to the mainstream of medieval Irish literature.⁶ Nor did the number of vernacular *immrama* increase significantly over time. There are only three extant tales, namely, (the prose) *Immram Curaig Mæle Duin* (and a subsequent verse redaction), (the verse) *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla* (and later prose versions), and (the prose) *Immram Curaig Ua Corra*. To this list some would add one further tale, namely the *Immram Brain* (“The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living”). It was given its heading by Kuno Meyer, who first edited and translated this tale in 1895. But his unfortunate choice of title, for which there is no substantiated manuscript-authority, has been regretted by Myles Dillon, Dumville and others, who maintain that, on various grounds, but most of all structurally, the story belongs with the *echtrai*.⁷

Carney argued that *immrama* are of their very nature of monastic origin and “are related one to the other on the level of Christian

⁴ Dumville, “Echtræ and Immram”, 73.

⁵ *The Book of Leinster*, IV, 835 (189c).

⁶ Dumville, “Echtræ and Immram”, 94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 83-88.

literature rather than on the level of pre-literary oral tradition".⁸ It will be recalled that Carey excluded *immrama* from his investigation into pre-Christian otherworld abodes precisely because he considered them to be derived from classical and biblical models. And Dumville, highlighting their distinct apocalyptic flavour, the use of psalm-verses, religious terms, the employment of hagiographical as well as apocryphal Christian motifs, came to the conclusion that "the evidence for an ecclesiastical origin for the *immrama* is overwhelming".⁹

Elva Johnston, who subscribes to this position in principle, too, probed the background for this connection. She arrived at the opinion that the development of the voyage-literature is bound up with the journeys of early medieval Irish clerics,¹⁰ who, from the sixth century on, voluntarily left their homeland in a desire to go on a *peregrinatio pro Christo*. Some of these pilgrims of Christ simply went a-wandering in their curraughs (small hide-covered, wicker-frame boats), putting themselves totally in God's hands. Others, in keeping with the anchorite enthusiasm of the time, sought solitude in a *terra deserta* out in the ocean, where they hoped to renounce their worldly goods to commune with God in peace. A missionary motive prompted other holy men to set sail not only for Britain and Europe, but also for remote, often semi-barbarous, regions throughout the North Atlantic in order to spread or renew the Gospel. By the seventh century they had reached the Orkneys, the Shetlands and the Faroes, and in the year 770 they set foot in Iceland.

Then there were those *peregrini* who sailed off in search of the Land of Promise. Well into late medieval times, it was commonly believed that the Garden of Eden really did exist in some remote part of the earth. Not only was it thought to be the wonderful Paradise in which Adam and Eve lived for a short time, but for many Christians and Jews it was also the *terra reprimissionis sanctorum*, where God's saints and prophets awaited the resurrection and final judgment. The location of this terrestrial Paradise was long a subject of serious inquiry and occupied the earnest attention of some of the most learned

⁸ Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature*, 294.

⁹ Dumville, "Echtræ and Immram", 77.

¹⁰ Elva Johnston, "A Sailor on the Seas of Faith: The Individual and the Church in *The Voyage of Mael Duin*", in *European Encounters: Essays in Memory of Albert Lovett*, eds J. Devlin and H.B. Clarke, Dublin, 2003, 239-52.

theologians. Despite the advice of more acute thinkers who preferred to interpret the biblical text allegorically and who urged that the Garden of Eden be taken figuratively, many voyagers undertook the arduous task of finding this Land of Promise¹¹ without knowing where exactly to look for it, although universally it was placed in the East, because this is where God put it according to Genesis (Gen 2:8). A medieval Irish geography book used in County Cork describes it as follows:

Asia's beginning seems to be in the East
 The land wherein is the Paradise of Adam;
 The land where one need not prepare a feast
 The land around which is a wall of fire.¹²

Two men, Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1-18), were thought to have been already transported thither. Both had been removed from the land of the living without passing through death and were now living in a state of terrestrial bliss until the Second Coming of the Saviour.¹³

Ecclesiastical literature has preserved various maritime exploits of Irish clerics, and Johnston reasoned that these form the basis of the voyage tales. As far back as 1889, this idea had been mooted by Zimmer, who suggested that the *immrama* grew out of the actual experiences of fishermen and hermits.¹⁴ But Johnston developed the notion further. She argued that the monastic scribes revamped accounts of clerical sea pilgrimages and turned them into adventure tales with a specific purpose in mind. In combining the adventurous element with the edifying, the legends aim to set an example for model behaviour, obedience and religious piety. Influenced to some extent by Christian apocrypha, but also inspired by classical models as well as the indigenous *echtrae*, she argued, the scribes transmuted the empirical voyages of the early clerics into imaginary narratives saturated with monastic ideals.¹⁵

¹¹ Delumeau, *History of Paradise*, 15-21.

¹² Quoted in T. Olden, "The Voyage of St Brendan", *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 5th series, 1/8 (1891), 677.

¹³ Delumeau, *History of Paradise*, Chapters 2 and 3.

¹⁴ Zimmer, "Brendan's Meerfahrt", 176-82.

¹⁵ Johnston, "A Sailor on the Seas of Faith", 239-40.

Written in Irish or Latin, *immram*-type tales form part of many saints' *Lives* and also some *Visions*. In fact examples of clerical voyages are legion in the hagiographic literature of Ireland.¹⁶ Already in the late-seventh-century *Vita Sancti Columbae Tripartita*, Adomnán of Iona recorded the voyages of Cormac, who made at least three efforts to seek a *herimum in ociano*. But beside the more elaborate account of his travels, other sea pilgrimages are also referred to by Adomnán.¹⁷ Some two hundred years later, in the "Litany of Irish Pilgrim Saints", reference is made to sea-voyages and the search for the Land of Promise in connection with Saints Brendan, Ailbe, Íbar, Munnu mac Tulcháin, Patrick and others.¹⁸

St Brendan's legendary journey to the Land of Promise, as related in the Latin *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, is certainly the best-known and most acclaimed exemplar of all such texts. Although there is no agreement on the authorship, or on the date and place of its composition, it seems very likely that it was written in Ireland around the year 800.¹⁹ The tale became so popular that it is invariably referred to as a medieval bestseller. Over 120 Latin manuscripts and innumerable translations and adaptations in many European vernaculars survive. What makes this legend so relevant for our investigation is the oft-repeated claim, made from mid-nineteenth century onwards that St Brendan went in search of Hy Brasil.

There is very little secure information concerning Brendan's life. It seems certain that he was born near Tralee in County Kerry, southwest Ireland, in the last decades of the fifth century (c. 484) and that he died at Clonfert (c. 577). By all accounts he was a very active man whose conduct was quite exemplary. Of the many monasteries he established, the most important ones are Ardfert (Co. Kerry), Annaghdown (Co. Galway) and Clonfert (Co. Galway). According to the *Lives* of later saints, Brendan undertook voyages to Britain, the Hebrides Islands, the Orkney Islands, Brittany and even the Faroes,

¹⁶ Dumville, "Echtrae and Immram", 78.

¹⁷ William Flint Thrall, "Clerical Sea Pilgrimages and the *Imrama*", in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*, ed. J.M. Wooding, Dublin, 2000, 19-20.

¹⁸ Dumville, "Echtrae and Immram", 78-79.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of its provenance, see Clara Strijbosch, *The Seafaring Saint: Sources and Analogues of the Twelfth-Century Voyage of Saint Brendan*, Dublin, 2000, 126-27; also Johnston, "A Sailor on the Seas of Faith", 240, 250, n.12.

earning him the appellation “Brendan the Navigator”.²⁰ But perhaps tellingly, Dicuil, the eighth-century Irish monk and geographer who had visited some of these islands himself, does not mention Brendan’s nautical endeavours.²¹

Beside the Latin *Nauigatio* and the references to him in other saint’s *Lives*, there is a further source which provides some biographical details about Brendan, as well as his travels. This is the *Life of Brendan*, which survives in seven versions, five in Latin (*Vita Brendani*) and two in Irish (*Betha Brénainn*). Its origin and early history is also uncertain, but it is generally assumed that the original *Vita* was composed towards the end of the eighth century, well over two centuries after the saint’s death.²² With one exception, all *Vitae* are of Irish provenance and are preserved only in late manuscripts or early printed editions.²³ Of the two Irish-language versions the first is contained in the fifteenth-century Book of Lismore (two other copies exist, one in the Royal Library of Brussels, the other in the Stowe Collection), while the shorter second version has survived in a late manuscript and is partly derived from the former.²⁴

It is of no significance here whether the *Nauigatio* or the *Life* was composed first – there is a line of reasoning for both sides of the argument. The two versions somehow became interrelated, and therefore it seems impossible to unravel the influences that underlie each composition, but I think we are on safe ground to agree with Strijbosch’s assumption that it is more likely that the author of the *Nauigatio* borrowed from the *Vita Brendani* than the other way round.²⁵ Whereas the latter focuses more on the life of the saint, the former tells us more about his sea-voyage, but the main incidents related in the two texts are quite similar. Overall there are fewer and

²⁰ Apart from historical evidence of Brendan in Ireland traces of his presence are found at Tiree, in the Hebrides, where he founded a church; another in the Island of Seil, in the Firth of Lorn. In *The Seafaring Saint*, Strijbosch lists some studies which contain further details about St Brendan’s life and voyages: see 1, n.3.

²¹ *Diculii Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*, ed. J.J. Tierney, with contributions by L. Bieler, Dublin, 1967.

²² Strijbosch, *The Seafaring Saint*, 131.

²³ *Ibid.*, Appendix 5.1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 279.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

less well developed island episodes in the *Life* compared to the *Nauigatio*, which is the more accomplished tale of the two.

In both texts Brendan and his monks set out from the west of Ireland in search of the Promised Land, visit a number of islands where they experience some testing adventures and finally return back home. However, instead of the one voyage in the *Nauigatio*, Brendan undertakes two in the *Life*, the first of which turns out to be unsuccessful, hence necessitating a second attempt. The failure of the first, Brendan learns afterwards, was due to the type of boat he used: the “dead stained skins” of the curragh were incompatible with the “holy consecrated land” in which no blood has ever been spilt. So the second time around he builds a wooden vessel and, sure enough, with this he achieves his aim of finding the Promised Land.²⁶

In the *Life* (details and references are based on Whitley Stokes’ translation of the “*Betha Brénainn*” from the *Book of Lismore*) Brendan’s burning desire to become a pilgrim of Christ is kindled upon hearing at his ordination that according to the gospel “every one that hath forsaken father or mother or sister or lands (for my name’s sake) shall ... possess everlasting life”. Brendan, eager to leave parents and fatherland, earnestly beseeches God to give him “a land secret, hidden, secure, delightful, separated from men”. Already the following day his prayers are answered. A messenger from heaven tells him that “God hath given thee what thou soughtest, even the Land of Promise”.²⁷ He is given a glimpse of the beautiful island he has prayed for and after that he wastes no time preparing for his journey to reach it.

He sets off with three curraghs, each carrying thirty men, though we are not told in what direction they sail. For the space of seven years they travel across the ocean, encountering a multitude of monsters, the Devil and many enchanting islands. One of these is a whale which turns up regularly at Easter to allow the men to celebrate mass on its back. During all that time they survive without injury or loss of men, despite the fact that Brendan has not allowed the men to take any provisions on board, being certain that God would look after them, “even as He fed five thousand with the five loaves and the two

²⁶ “Life of Brenainn, Son of Finnslugh”, in *Anecdota Oxoniensia: Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*, ed. and tr. Whitley Stokes, Oxford, 1890, 256-57.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

fishes".²⁸ Eventually the men behold a beautiful island and within it a delightful church, but all efforts to land upon the island fail. A waxed tablet, cast down to them from above, orders them to go home. This was not the island they were seeking, though one day they would find it, they are assured, and upon consulting the scriptures they would realize that besides this island the Lord has many other places. The men obey and return to their native country. Apart from a glimpse of the horrors of Hell, the first journey is a gentle affair with the emphasis very much on the men's reliance on Brendan's leadership and the saint's ability to perform miracles and marvels. He heals the sick, calms a violent storm and brings two people back to life. None of the islands Brendan and his men visit is named and descriptions are kept so vague that it is entirely impossible to locate or identify any of them.

The direction of the second journey is "westward from Aran".²⁹ This time sixty men go on the journey, but theirs is a little tougher; they are threatened by enormously big mice, their smith dies during the voyage, one of the men is devoured by sea-cats, and an attack on the boat by another monstrous sea-cat can only be averted through the intervention of God. Although the journey also takes seven years, we only hear of three islands, one of which is full of black people, "in the shape of dwarfs and pygmies, with their faces as black as coal".³⁰ But then they achieve their aim, they reach the Land of Promise, where they are welcomed by an old man, who is overjoyed to welcome his "dear brothers in Christ". This almost angelic creature is without any human raiment, but his whole body is covered with bright white feathers like a dove. Although interspersed with Christian terms, the description of the island in many ways resembles that of the happy otherworld of the *echtrai*. Naturally, no battles here or amorous women, and the emphasis is very much on purity and holiness, but otherwise the delights awaiting its visitors are quite similar, which the following few phrases will demonstrate: "plains of Paradise; delightful fields; a land radiant, lofty, beautiful, odorous, many-melodied, flower-smooth, musical, shouting for joy, unmournful; a place where there is health without sickness, delight without quarreling, freedom

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 255-58.

³⁰ "Life of Brenainn", 258.

without labour, avoidance of pain, feasting without extinction.”³¹ Having been allowed to see this wonderful island, Brendan and his men return home, and, deeply impressed with the Lord’s miracles, they thank God “with their minds fixed on Him”.

A conversation with a fellow-monk named Barinthus provides the impetus for Brendan’s voyage in the *Nauigatio*. Barinthus has just returned from a wonderful peregrination of which the highlight is a visit to the Land of Promise. Filled with the burning desire to seek this island himself, Brendan selects fourteen monks who he invites to take part in the voyage with the words: “Dearly beloved fellow-soldiers of mine, I request your advice and assistance, for my heart and mind are firmly set upon one desire; if it be only God’s holy will, I have in my heart resolved to go forth in quest of the Land of Promise of the Saints, about which Father Barinthus discoursed to us.”³²

All fourteen reply, as with one voice, that they are ready to go with Brendan, reminding him that they have already committed their lives into his hands when they forsook house and home. A further three monks are allowed to join them a little later, but these are lost during the journey. When the vessel, a curragh, is all set and ready, Brendan orders the monks to embark, encouraging and exhorting them to be fearless, for God will be their guide. This journey also lasts seven years, and again none of the islands is named, nor are we given any definite idea where they might be located. It would appear, however, that the men are not searching for the Land of Promise anywhere in the East. At the start of their journey, a northerly direction is mentioned a number of times; towards the end they sail southwards, while east and west are only referred to once or twice. And yet, despite the fact that they are borne about in various directions by the wind, causing them to lose their bearings entirely, at the exact same time every year, they miraculously return to the same islands to celebrate the important feast days of the Christian calendar. But this is precisely the point: Brendan has no need for any directions. With his prayer that God may do to him and his little vessel “as He willeth” he consigns the voyage entirely to God’s care. And at the end of their

³¹ *Ibid.*, 259-60.

³² Details and references are based on: *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, tr. Denis O’Donoghue (1893), The Celtic Christianity e-Library, II, 4: <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/celtic/Nsb.htm> (accessed 22 April 2005).

journey it becomes clear that it was indeed preordained by God, who wanted to show Brendan his many secrets in the ocean.

Among the many wondrous sights Brendan is shown are immense pillars of crystal, the colour of silver, floating in the sea. A fiery mountain is seen erupting. Of the various islands some are uninhabited, others are full of animals. One of these is covered with sheep larger than oxen, another is teeming with snow-white birds which chant psalms and sing the praises of God. And again we have the periodically returning whale which lends the monks its back so that they can celebrate Easter on dry "land". If there are communities living on the islands, they are either evil – consisting of nasty demons or savage brutes associated with Hell – or they are good saintly monks, who are already halfway to Paradise. The monks who live on Island of St Ailbe have no heat or cold, bodily infirmities or old age to contend with, and a miraculous supply of bread and water as well as fuel for the lamps relieves them of any unnecessary labour. On the Island of the Three Choirs, where three different age groups of male singers chant psalms unceasingly, sustenance is provided in the shape of enormously large grapes. There is no mention of women on any of the islands.

Then there are islands with a solitary occupant. One is the wretched Judas, who, temporarily released from Hell, is pinned to a rock and buffeted by the waves. When he has described the horrific torments he has to endure in his "heritage of pain", Brendan takes pity on him, and intervening on his behalf persuades God to grant Judas respite for one night. But the next morning the demons carry Judas back to Hell. A completely different affair is the island of the other single occupant, who is the holy hermit Paul the Spiritual, aged one hundred and forty. Like the angelic old man in the Land of Promise he, too, is ungarmented and is covered only with his own hair. He has dwelt on that island for ninety years, during the first thirty of which he was provided with food in a fabulous manner, but for the last sixty years he has drunk only water. Paul is past requiring corporal comfort and nourishment; he is patiently awaiting the day of his judgment.

Brendan's unwavering trust in God is fully vindicated. Divine Providence sustains him and his crew for the duration of the voyage. God also protects them from every exposure to loss, injury or death; for example, he sends a great monster to their rescue when an

enormous fish threatens to devour them and a huge bird when a gryphon almost destroys them. When they are stuck in coagulated water, he releases a favourable wind that pushes the boat out of the thick curdled sea. He shelters them from the burning lumps of slag hurled after them by one of the savages of the Island of Smiths. And at the very end he leads them to the Land of Promise, the land Brendan has so long been seeking. The reason for keeping it last is that God first wanted to show him “His divers mysteries in this immense ocean”.³³

Darkness surrounds the Land of Promise, but the island itself lies bathed in wonderful light which unfailingly shines on it at all times. It is thickly set with trees permanently laden with ripe fruits, and it is strewn with all kinds of precious stones. Brendan and his followers traverse the island until they reach a large river that flows through the midst of it and cannot be crossed. There they are met by a messenger from God, who tells them that the part beyond the river is just as splendid as that which they have already seen. It is reserved for the saints against that time when all the nations of the universe are brought to the true faith. Then, having gathered fruits of the land as well as some of the precious stones, Brendan and his men embark once more and sail back through the darkness, facing homeward again.

Much of the portrayal of the Land of Promise seems to be drawn from biblical sources. The light of the island, the large river, the beautiful trees that produce good fruits, the gold and precious stones are all found in the New Jerusalem and in the Garden of Eden. Without wishing to labour the point any further, it is quite obvious that the scriptural references and the clear Christian message that underlie the whole tenor of the story suggest a symbolic reading. Johnston's argument that accounts of clerical voyages were transformed into adventure tales with a didactic undercurrent is fully borne out in both Brendan's *Life* and the *Nauigatio*. Brendan, the saintly abbot and penitent ascetic, is portrayed as the perfect shepherd who fearlessly guides his crew through all the perils at sea. Those monks who unhesitatingly accept his leadership are rewarded, but those who do not follow his instructions are punished. In the *Life* more emphasis is placed on Brendan's own humility and deference. Here he

³³ *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, 33-34, XXVIII.

comes across as an altruist, to whom his flock's wellbeing is paramount; so much so that when threatened with shipwreck, he even pleads that he be drowned alone, but that his men be spared. In the *Nauigatio* more stress is laid on the conflict between the forces of good and evil: the monastic versus the demonic communities, Paul the Spiritual versus Judas Iscariot, obedience versus disobedience, and so on. But ultimately the success of Brendan's quest was surely intended to stimulate the desire of believers in Christ to reside in the delightful Land of Promise after death and to steer clear of Hell at all costs.

To recapitulate, very little is known about the historical Brendan and his seafaring activities, but the famous legend of his travels portrays him as a mentally and morally strong character. The literary influences bearing on the composition of the legend have been the subject of many studies and are well-established at this stage. As regards specific details and descriptions of incidents in and around the islands, it is above all Strijbosch's painstaking work which has demonstrated beyond all doubt that these are not only based to a large extent on a common stock of motifs, but that they also benefited greatly from various literary traditions. Strijbosch unravelled many of the complicated clusters of motifs and examined the origin for these. The outcome of her analysis corroborates Johnston's argument that the literary embellishments, symbolism and structure of Brendan's sea-voyage can be traced to classical, biblical as well as indigenous texts.³⁴

The physical aspect of Brendan's expeditions has also stimulated plenty of research, leading to remarkable speculations about the saint's travels. The starting point of these investigations is not unlike Johnston's position in that there is the presumption that a germ of truth exists in the legend and that the geographic notions of the text are accepted. As the legend is taken to have originated in actual accounts of the saint's early sea-journeys, it is assumed that there is a factual nucleus to it. Thus, it is argued, that an authentic thread runs through the tale, and however fanciful many of the episodes may seem, the incidents related therein are seldom wholly without basis.³⁵ The one thing these commentators regret is that the journey's specific

³⁴ Strijbosch, *The Seafaring Saint*, *passim*.

³⁵ Ashe, *Land to the West*, 290-91.

geography was almost entirely dissipated at the hands of the clerical authors.

There are three different views of where Brendan's voyages took him. One is the widespread presumption that the Land of Promise was actually America, suggesting that Brendan sailed westward and finally reached America long before Columbus discovered it. This notion seemed to be authenticated when, in 1976, Tim Severin, a British navigation scholar, successfully demonstrated it would have been possible for Brendan and his crew to reach America in a curragh. However, the fact that he could have does not prove that he did. Others are convinced that Brendan took a northerly route and sailed to Iceland, perhaps even Greenland. According to this popular view, Brendan's pillars of crystal are a description of an iceberg; the Island of Sheep and the Island of Birds are identified with two of the Faeroe Islands, and the fiery mountain with the volcano Mount Hecla in Iceland. The monstrous sea-cat that gave the men such a terrible fright would seem to be none other than a walrus. It fits the description perfectly with its size that of a young ox, "overgrown by feeding on the fish of the sea", with a boar's tusks, furzy hair and the maw of a leopard.³⁶ The walrus lives in Arctic seas and none has ever been sighted anywhere near the Canary or Madeira Islands, where Brendan allegedly went according to the opposite camp which claims that he went south.³⁷ From his vivid description of the saint's determination, it appears that Matthew Arnold subscribed to the idea of a northern route:

Saint Brandan sails the northern main;
The brotherhoods of saints are glad.
He greets them once, he sails again;
So late! – such storms! – The Saint is mad!
He heard, across the howling seas,
Chime convent-bells on wintry nights;
He saw, on spray-swept Hebrides
Twinkle the monastery-lights.

But north, still north, Saint Brandan steer'd –

³⁶ "Life of Brenainn", 258.

³⁷ Donald S. Johnson, *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic: The Legends of Seven Lands that Never Were*, London, 1997, 164-65.

And now no bells, no convents more!
 The hurtling Polar lights are near'd,
 The sea without a human shore.³⁸

However, proponents of a southerly passage point out that in the legend there is no mention of the cold. Quite the opposite in fact: islands abounding in grapes, flowers and fruit, men needing no clothes, and so on, all point to a benign climate. The black pygmies provide a further clue because they evidently refer to the black inhabitants of Africa. Of all the African isles the Canary Islands seem to be the most obvious. The Pico de Teide on the island of Tenerife may very well be the fiery mountain which Brendan notices. But more importantly, it would only be natural to associate the Land of Promise with the Fortunate Isles of Antiquity, this blissful paradise which was thought to lie in the western ocean and is traditionally identified with the Canary Islands. The Greeks called the Canaries “The Islands of the Blessed”, or the “Fortunate Isles” and the Arabs “The Eternal Isles”. Among this group of special islands one stands out, which, according to Ptolemy’s *Geografia* (Book IV, 6-34), was called “Aprositus Nesos”. As it was in the habit of appearing and disappearing, it remained inaccessible and was surrounded by an aura of mystique.

There was already much speculation about this island in connection with St Brendan in medieval times. Was this the Land of Promise he found? That he did find some island was certainly believed, for the name of the saint appears on many maps. An early allusion to this can be found in the popular geographic encyclopedia of the period, *De Imagine Mundi*, about 1125, where it says:

There lies also in the Ocean an island which is called Lost (“Perdita”); in charm and all kinds of fertility it far surpasses every other land, but it is unknown to men. Now and again it may be found by chance; but if one seeks for it, it cannot be found, and therefore it is called “the Lost”. Men say that it was this island that Brandanus came to.³⁹

The earliest map on which an island bearing the name of St Brendan appears is the Ebstorf map of c. 1235 which was used as an altarpiece

³⁸ Matthew Arnold, “Saint Brandan”, in *Arnold: Poetical Works*, eds C.B. Tinker and H.F. Lowry, London, 1969, 156.

³⁹ Translation provided by Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, I, 375-76.

in a Benedictine monastery in Germany. The island is clearly marked on the site of the Canary group and it bears the caption

Insula p[er]dita hanc invenit S[an]ctu[s] Brandanus a qua cum navigasset a nullo hominum a postea a inventa (The Lost Island [Perdita]; this is the island found by Saint Brendan, and after he sailed away it was never again seen by any man).⁴⁰

We find six islands in the same location on the Hereford map by Richard de Haldingham of c. 1280, the inscription reading *Fortunatae Insulae sex sunt Insulae Sct Brandani*. On the Angelino Dulcert map of 1339 St Brendan's Islands have drifted slightly northwards, corresponding to those now known as the Madeiras, which are collectively labelled *Insulae Sct Brandani siue puerarum*. The Pizzigani map of 1367 affirms this new location and, to reinforce the identification, it shows the drawing of a kneeling monk bending over the islands in an attitude of benediction.⁴¹ Numerous, though not all, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century maps show St Brendan's Islands, but those that do tend to apply the designation *The Fortunate Islands of St Brandan* (or *Brendan*) and locate these in the Madeiras or, a little further north, in the Azores.⁴² However, once these islands became settled and better known, they could no longer be the site of the Land of Promise and consequently St Brendan's Isles were shifted elsewhere. From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, instead of the multiple islands, we only find a single island for St Brendan, but this continues to recede into the unexplored North Atlantic until it finally settles off the coast of Newfoundland. A 1544 map, attributed to Sebastian Cabot, marks it near Cape Breton and notes that the island was discovered in 1494.⁴³

Along with the early cartographic evidence, other records also place St Brendan's Isle to the south rather than the north. Again, most popularly it is set among the Canaries, from where there are many reports of people claiming to have seen it. Columbus verifies this. The Canaries were ports of call on his voyages to the Caribbean and

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic*, 173.

⁴¹ William H. Babcock, "St Brendan's Explorations and Islands", *Geographical Review*, VIII/1 (July 1919), 42.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁴³ Westropp, "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the Atlantic", 244.

therefore he knew the islands well. He heard many credible people there assert that at certain intervals they see an unknown mountainous island, lying to the west.⁴⁴ Another witness is an Englishman named Thomas Ricols, who stayed in the Canaries in 1526, and who heard the Portuguese population there allege that St Brendan's Isle was located between Palma and Madeira.⁴⁵

From the latter half of the sixteenth century we have a more detailed report on the island by the Dutchman John Huyghen van Linschoten who called it by the name "San Borondon", and placed it some one hundred miles west of the Canaries.⁴⁶ Some lucky seafarers who apparently chanced upon it described it as a very pleasant, fair country full of trees. Although it was not known what language the inhabitants speak nor "what nation they are", they were definitely understood to be Christians. Linschoten mentioned Spaniards living in the Canaries, who unsuccessfully attempted to find the island many a time. Opinion on the island was divided: some thought it was enchanted and could only be seen on certain days; others believed that, like island of Perdita, San Borondon, could only be found by people not specifically looking for it. Then there were those who reckoned it was so elusive because it was quite small and perpetually covered with clouds, and a further hindrance to the island's discovery was, they argued, the strong winds and currents that drove approaching ships away.

The name of St Brandan, San Borondon or San Brandaõ was from time immemorial given to this phantom island, we learn from Washington Irving's book on Columbus, for which he gathered plenty of material on St Brendan's Isle.⁴⁷ Columbus himself obviously associated the island with the Land of Promise because when he noted in his diary in 1492 that he had heard eight years previously of Portuguese expeditions in search of the "land Brendan found", he added his own conviction that "therein lay the Earthly Paradise".⁴⁸ Irving noted that the archives of the cathedral of Grand Canaria

⁴⁴ Von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchungen*, I, 408.

⁴⁵ Peschel, *Geschichte des Zeitalters der Entdeckungen*, 39, n.1.

⁴⁶ *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies*, I, 265-66.

⁴⁷ *The Works of Washington Irving*, New York, 1897, VII: "The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus"; Appendix, XXV; "The Imaginary Island of St Brandan", 317.

⁴⁸ Ashe, *Land to the West*, 297.

contained an ancient Latin manuscript, now lost, in which the adventures of St Brendan and his men were recorded.⁴⁹ From another source we learn that the friar Alonso de Espinosa of the Order of Preachers, who long dwelt in Tenerife and wrote his book there in the 1580s, was adamant that St Brendan spent several years in that archipelago, substantiating his claim by quoting from an earlier, though undated, calendar as proof of the “mighty works” accomplished there by the saint.⁵⁰

The existence of St Brendan’s Isle was tenaciously believed for two reasons. Not only did many persons of credibility from various islands attest to their having seen it repeatedly, but they also overwhelmingly and firmly agreed as to its form and position. Naturally, the inhabitants of the Canaries were determined to find and explore the island. When Columbus visited Portugal in 1484, he met with a man from Madeira who actually asked King John II for a vessel to go in search of it.⁵¹ Even legal documentation recognized the island. From Schröder we learn that the Portuguese writer Luis Perdigon claimed that the king of Portugal transferred possession and control of St Brendan’s Isle to his father in the event of it being discovered.⁵² Von Humboldt told the story differently. According to him, it was the Portuguese government who ceded St Brendan’s Isle to Luis Perdigon, just as he was about to conquer the island.⁵³ Another indication of the seriousness with which the island was taken is the Treaty of Evora, concluded in 1519, where the Portuguese Crown surrendered to the Crown of Castille the right of conquering the Canary Islands; Brendan’s Isle, if it should ever be found, is also listed as part of the deal.⁵⁴ If Lawrence Hills’ information is correct, then the noble Spanish family of Herrera to this day and age still holds the title of “Lords of the Conquest of the Unknown Island”.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ *The Works of Washington Irving*, VII, 316.

⁵⁰ Babcock, “St Brendan’s Explorations”, 40-41; Babcock, *Legendary Islands*, 39.

⁵¹ Von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchungen*, I, 408; *The Works of Washington Irving*, VII, 315.

⁵² *Sanct Brandan: Ein Lateinischer und Drei Deutsche Texte*, ed. Carl Schröder, Erlangen, 1871, v.

⁵³ Von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchungen*, I, 407.

⁵⁴ *Sanct Brandan*, v.

⁵⁵ Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 55.

The historian José de Viera kept records of various expeditions which were sent forth from the Canaries in quest of St Brendan's Isle between 1487 and 1759.⁵⁶ Irving related four of these, starting with an attempt in 1526 which ended in failure. But because of many repeated sightings in the same place another expedition was planned for 1570. This time the governor of the island of Ferro commissioned a report in order to put the whole undertaking on a sound footing. According to that report more than one hundred witnesses, "several of them persons of the highest respectability", testified that they had seen the island with their own eyes and had contemplated it in a sober frame of mind. Even more emphatic testimony came from the neighbouring islands of Palma and Tenerife where worthy men swore that they had landed on St Brendan's Isle, but as an invariable consequence of a storm had to abandon its exploration.⁵⁷ One Pedro Vello, the pilot of a vessel that was driven about by a tempest, confirmed that he and his crew unexpectedly landed on the island. Besides woods, a brook and plenty of cattle and sheep, they also saw traces of human presence: footprints (double the size of an ordinary man), signs of fire having been made and a cross nailed to a tree. Unfortunately a storm set in, causing the ship to drag anchor. The men hastened back to their vessel, and in an instant they were swept away, losing sight of the island, and when all was calm again they searched in vain for it; not a trace of it could be found.⁵⁸ Another visitor to that island was Marcos Verde, a man well known in Tenerife, who stated that upon returning to the Canaries, he beheld land, which according to his maps and calculations could not be any of the known Canary Islands. It had to be the mysterious Isle of St Brendan, he concluded, overjoyed at having discovered it. He and several of his crew wandered about the island in different directions, but failing daylight soon drove them back to the ship. They would resume their investigations the following day. However, scarcely back on board, a furious whirlwind pulled the vessel out to sea, and they never managed to see the island again.⁵⁹

Further testimony of a visit to the island remains on record in manuscript. It came from the French adventurer Abreu Galindo who

⁵⁶ Von Humboldt, *Kritische Untersuchungen*, I, 406.

⁵⁷ Richard Francis Burton, *Wanderings in West Africa*, New York, 1991, 74-75.

⁵⁸ *The Works of Washington Irving*, VII, 318.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, 318-19.

was sailing among the Canaries. Irving was unable to ascertain whether this account originally formed part of the governor of Ferro's report or whether it predates it. Anyhow, this gentleman and his crew also encountered violent storms that eventually drove them to an unknown island covered with stately trees. As the mast of their ship was broken, they cut down a tree for its repair. But night was approaching fast and heavens assumed such a threatening aspect that the mariners quickly returned on board. As in the other cases, the ship was borne away from the coast and it arrived at the island of Palma the following day. All the testimony gathered in 1570 led to a further expedition fitted out in Palma that year. It was commanded by one Fernando de Villabolos, but turned out to be just as fruitless as the previous attempts.⁶⁰ Still the people of the Canaries held on to their firm belief in the island, and in 1605 they sent yet another ship in search of it. This time it was commanded by the accomplished pilot Gaspar Perez de Acosta,⁶¹ who sailed from Palma and who brought with him a holy Franciscan friar, skilled in natural science. Alas, to no avail: the elusive island refused to reveal itself.

Fresh reports of sightings continued to be circulated over the following decades, and at length, in 1721, public excitement again rose to such a height that another expedition was launched, this time from Santa Cruz de Teneriffe under the command of Don Gaspar Dominguez.⁶² By bringing two holy friars with him, he had the edge on the commander of the previous exploration, though nothing came of this expedition, either. While there is no mention of any further expeditions, the island continued to keep a strong hold on the faith of the inhabitants of the Canaries, and St Brendan's Isle was spotted by favoured individuals for a long time to come. In one instance, a Franciscan monk espied it early one morning in 1759, whereupon he summoned a curate and upward of forty other persons, all of whom beheld it clearly. And a Spanish map from 1730 which even shows a drawing of the island gives its exact measurements as 112 miles long

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁶¹ Harrisse states that this voyage of discovery took place in 1604: see Henry Harrisse, *The Discovery of North America: A Critical, Documentary and Historic Investigation*, Amsterdam, 1961, 652, n.3.

⁶² Peschel, *Geschichte des Zeitalters der Entdeckungen*, 39, n.1; Harrisse, *The Discovery of North America*, 652, n.3.

and 35 miles wide, making it larger than any of the other Canary Islands.⁶³ In an effort to explain the geographical illusion, Irving cited the “learned father Feyjoo” who attributed all these appearances to atmospherical deceptions, like that of the Fata Morgana, observed in the straits of Messina and elsewhere. Reports of visits to the island, however, are rejected as mere fabrications.⁶⁴

Denis Florence M’Carthy (1817-1882), the Dublin writer of patriotic verse, regarded the legend of St Brendan’s voyage as one of the “most authentic narratives to be met with in the sacred legendary lore of Ireland”. That is to say, there was little doubt in his mind that St Brendan actually undertook an Atlantic sea-voyage, and he was equally certain that the saint eventually reached America. Because the tale was told in such a highly imaginative manner, he was inclined to consider it perhaps the first historical romance ever written.⁶⁵ Out of great admiration and affection for the saint, but also as a protest against the neglect of ancient Irish lore, M’Carthy made the legend of St Brendan’s travels the basis of his long narrative poem, “The Voyage of Saint Brendan”, which first appeared in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1848.

He divided the poem into six parts, entitling these (1) “The Vocation”, (2) “Ara of the Saints”, (3) “The Voyage”, (4) “The Buried City”, (5) “The Paradise of Birds” and (6) “The Promised Land”, and for each of these M’Carthy carried out a good deal of research. Copious footnotes reveal that he consulted, among others, Colgan’s *Acta Sanctorum*, Capgrave’s *Life of St Brendan*, Hardiman’s *Irish Minstrelsy*, O’Flaherty’s *Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, Otway’s *Sketches in Erris and Tyrawley* and Hall’s *Ireland*, and, tellingly, for the description of the birds in part five he acknowledges the works of the American ornithologists A. Wilson and C.L. Bonaparte. A lot of biographical and historical detail as well as folklore material that he culled from these publications were carefully woven into his poem.

The narrator in the poem is St Brendan himself who, having safely returned from his seven-year voyage, is entertaining St Ita with an

⁶³ Hills, *Lands of the Morning*, 55-56.

⁶⁴ *The Works of Washington Irving*, VII, 320-22.

⁶⁵ Denis Florence M’Carthy, “The Voyage of Saint Brendan”, *Dublin University Magazine*, XXXI (January 1848), 89.

account of his adventures in the ocean. In the first part he describes how his desire grew to see the *terra reprimissionis sanctorum*, the happy isle, “made for the habitation of His saints”:

And then I longed with impotent desire,
Even for the bow whereby the Python bled,
That I might send one dart of living fire
Into that land, before the vision fled,
And thus at length fix thy enchanted shore,
Hy-Brasail – Eden of the western wave!
That thou again wouldst fade away no more,
Buried and lost within thy azure grave.

But angels came and whispered as I dreamt,
“This is no phantom of a frenzied brain –
God shows this land from time to time to tempt
Some daring mariner across the main:
By thee shall myriad souls to Christ be won!
Arise, depart, and trust to God for aid!”
I woke, and kneeling, cried, “His will be done!”⁶⁶

The Promised Land and Hy-Brasail have thus become interchangeable, and the angels’ message is clear: God wants St Brendan to search for it. Although surfacing again in part four, at the very end of the poem, where Brendan reaches his Eden, Hy-Brasail is no longer mentioned; M’Carthy reverted here to the Promised Land only.

Overall the voyage is a tad dull. No fiendish beasts or grotesque monsters lie in wait, nor do the travellers encounter eccentric persons or eerie islands. These “pilgrims of the sea” patiently strive against inclement weather, darkness and the cold, whiling away the time with hymns, prayers and, at times, with telling stories of life’s misery or bliss. Part four is taken up by one brother’s piteous tale of earthly passion, in which a young man falls in love with a beautiful damsel who, unaware of his undying devotion, decides to become a nun. She has just arrived at the convent, ready to take the vestal vow, when the young man bursts in, snatches her and carries her away in his boat. Neither of them is ever seen again. Nor is there a definite answer to

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

the question raised about the two young people's ultimate fate: did they sink within the walls of the lost city buried in the Shannon estuary or did they enter "green Hy-Brasail's fairy halls"? Whatever their destined end was, upon hearing the tale the voyagers are moved to tears and pray for the dead lovers.

For over six centuries St Brendan's Isle had traditionally been given a location in the Canaries, the Azores or Madeira. M'Carthy, however, wished to associate his hero with an indigenous place. He had come to the conclusion that Hy Brasail belonged to ancient Irish lore, so, naturally, this island seemed ideally suited as the saint's destination. It borders on magic how quickly M'Carthy's poetic vision was taken for granted and how routinely from then on St Brendan was connected with Hy Bras(a)il. We shall return to this extraordinary development in Part V where the focus is on the Gaelicization of the island. So, for the moment, just a few examples will have to suffice. In 1866, referring to the building of Ardfert Cathedral, Patrick Kennedy asserted that its founder St Brendan "went to search for the sunk isle of Hy-Breasil". Clearly also wishing to bolster ancient Irish lore and traditions, he expressed the view that vernacular versions of the *Nauigatio* were in fact translations of an old Celtic original. In his discussion of the legend itself he mentioned M'Carthy's "charming metrical version" and repeated that Brendan's celebrated course was undertaken for the discovery of the "Blessed Isle of Breasil".⁶⁷

As it seemed to be such a long-standing tradition, some people were obviously under the impression that James Ussher had already dispatched the saint to Hy Brasil, which is borne out in a letter to the editor of the *The Gentleman's Magazine* where it is claimed that the "learned James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, would have us believe that Hy Brasail, like St Brendan's Island, was one of the *miranda loca* seen in the ocean by St Brendan about the middle of the sixth century".⁶⁸ It should be stressed that Ussher said no such thing. In 1639, he wrote that St Brendan had seen enchanted isles, without naming these and only commenting: "... ultra quam ad occasum nulla invenitur habitabilis terra, nisi miranda loca quae videntur S. Brendanus in

⁶⁷ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, 284, 337.

⁶⁸ W.H.G.F., "Hy Brasail, 'The Isle of the Blest'", *Gentleman's Magazine*, new series, CCCII (January-June 1907), 300.

oceano.”⁶⁹ However, by the end of the nineteenth century the association between St Brendan and Hy Brasil had become so commonplace that the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* could confidently state that St Brendan, “according to tradition, made a voyage in his curragh across the Western Ocean, in the sixth century, in search of the shadowy land of Hy-Brasil”.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D., Lord Archbishop of Armagh, and Primate of All Ireland; With A Life of the Author and An Account of His Writings*, ed. C.R. Elrington, Dublin, 1847, VI, 369.

⁷⁰ Anon., “Folk Lore”, *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, III (1894), 66 (emphasis added).

CHAPTER 6

SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH TRAVELLERS' TALES

In England, Brasil Island not only attracted seafarers and merchants – writers, too, fell for its lure. In the early stages, the ambiguity in regard to its location, claims of its discovery and the subsequent miraculous disappearance of the island are all reflected in its literary representation.

As may be expected, particularly the Bristol expeditions to Brasil Island fired the imagination of the English. During the seventeenth century we find fleeting reference to the island in diverse subject areas, thus attesting to a widespread awareness of it in learned circles in England. Overall one can detect a slightly sneering undertone whenever Brasil Island is referred to. It is associated with notions of trickery, delusion and evasion, and its deceptive nature serves to comment on other shifty matters – be they in a political, religious, or social context – generally through use of sarcasm, ranging from mild mockery to elaborate hoaxes.

The *Calendar of the State Papers Relating to Ireland* (1663), for example, contains an exchange of letters between Secretary Bennet (later Lord Arlington) and Winston Churchill (1620-1688). The latter, referred to by the editor of the State Papers as a corrupt schemer and one of Bennet's "secret agents in Ireland",¹ is seen here to commiserate with Bennet over his lack of success with a particular bill: "I am sorry your bill is so difficult to pass. It has been

¹ *Calendar of the State Papers Relating to Ireland; Preserved in the Public Record Office; Vol. II, 1663-1665*, ed. Robert P. Mahaffy, London, 1907, xx. Winston Churchill, a fervent Royalist from Dorset, appears to have obtained his post as a Commissioner of the Irish Court of Claims and Explanations in Dublin (between 1662 and 1668) through the influence of Sir Henry Bennet. Churchill's services were rewarded with a knighthood in 1664. He was the father of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, and an ancestor of the British Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill.

disappointed often when we thought all was going well and appears like ‘the enchanted isle of O’Brasil, nearest when furthest off’.”²

The other supposed secret agent, Colonel Vernon, followed up on a specific case involving Brasil Island. The incident at the centre of this political intrigue suggests that some people in the highest echelons of society were still persuaded of the reality of the imaginary island. In March 1663, Secretary Bennet was informed by Lord Kingston that Edmond Ludlow, the celebrated republican, had chartered a vessel at Limerick to sail in search of Brasil Island. Pretending to go on a voyage of discovery, Ludlow had, under this cover, fitted a ship with arms, ammunitions and provisions and was allowed to depart unquestioned.³ Doubts about the integrity of Ludlow’s mission, however, must soon have dawned on the authorities, because less than two months later, Vernon reports that the vessel has been apprehended, but that Ludlow has escaped: “The ship for the discovery of old Basill [Brazil] is seized in the Isles of Arran, and in it Col. Pritty, but no Ludlow.”⁴

According to his diary, Robert Hooke (1635-1703) discussed Brasil Island with Francis Lodowick who was also a fellow of the Royal Society, but thanks to Hooke’s staccato records, we have no idea what these two scientists made of the island. All we hear in the laconic entry on 12 April 1675 is:

Walkd with Grew. At Brooms about Gomeldon. At Garaways with Mr. Hill. Spoke with Lodowick: O.Brazill. I spoke to Lodowick about Longitude.⁵

The clergy seem to have taken great pleasure in resorting to the island in religious discourse, as the following three comments illustrate. In an attempt to demonstrate the firm basis for his own Christian faith, Jeremy Taylor ridiculed the swampy ground on which the principles of one of his Catholic opponents are established, who had “so clearly demonstrated his religion by grounds firm as the land

² *Ibid.*, 40.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵ *The Diary of Robert Hooke 1672-1680*, eds Henry W. Robinson and Walter Adams, London, 1935, 158.

of Delos or O Brasile".⁶ Similarly, Vincent Alsop, after having deplored the lack of steadfastness in the Jewish tradition, commented further: "Strange it is, that Religion of all things in the World should be unfix'd, and like ... O'Brazile, float up and down in various and uncertain Conjectures."⁷ And conversely, we find Robert South berating "idle Pretenders" who with "absurd confidence" purport to fully understand "the most *Mysterious Points* of the *Christian Faith*". To him such an assertion was preposterous, an invention "much like the discovery of some *New-found-land*, some O Brazile in Divinity".⁸

A droll example stems from *A History of the Isle of Man*, written between 1648 and 1656. Musing on the curious absence of any mention of the Isle of Man in the works of numerous famous historiographers, its author, William Blundell, came to the conclusion that by their silence they seem to verify the crafty Manxmen's tradition that the island was not discovered until late and that in previous ages, especially during the reign of the old necromancer Manannán MacLir, it had been invisible and inaccessible. Blundell informed the reader that similar lore existed in Ireland, where it was alleged that, hidden between two rocks close to the north-western coast, there was a yet unknown island which they [in Ireland] call O'Brazille. Despite the fact that it could plainly be seen, the island could not yet be discovered by any approach.⁹ When and how this might be done is not revealed.

In a book entitled *Poor Robin's Vision*, which was published anonymously in 1677, but is generally attributed to William Winstanley, Brasil Island is likened to a fool's paradise. The author solemnly warned that, "many are brought into a Fools Paradice [sic],

⁶ *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Jeremy Taylor, Lord Bishop of Down, Connor, and Dromore*, rev. and corr. Charles P. Eden, London, 1849, VI: "Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament: Dissuasive from Popery, &c.", 318.

⁷ Vincent Alsop, *Melius Melius Inquirendum, or, A Sober Inquirie, into the Reasonings of the Serious Inquirie: wherein the Inquirers Cavils Against the Principles, his Calumnies Against the Preachings and Practices of the Non-Conformists Are Examined, and Refuted, and St Augustine, the Synod of Dort, and the Articles of the Church of England in the Quinquarticular Points, Vindicated*, London, 1678, 53.

⁸ Robert South, *Twelve Sermons upon Several Subjects and Occasions*, London, 1698, 308.

⁹ William Blundell, *A History of the Isle of Man, 1648-1656*, Douglas, Isle of Man, Manx Society, MS 00049c and MS 00050c, I, 7-8.

by gladly believing there is no such place at all; or that it stands upon Fairy-ground, or is that Inchanted Island, the imaginary O Brazeel".¹⁰

We find an even earlier literary reference in one of the works of London playwright James Shirley, who had moved to Dublin in 1636. Shirley declared two years later that he still had not found the city, nor its inhabitants that is, those witty theatre-going Lords and Ladies he had heard tell about in London. Was Dublin a figment of the imagination, whereas Brasil Island was real? This is the question Shirley sarcastically poses in the prologue which he wrote for Thomas Middleton's play *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*.

Ile tell you what a Poet sayes, two yeare
 He has liv'd in *Dublin*, yet he knows not where
 To finde the city: he observ'd each gate,
 It could not run through them, they are too strait:
 When he did live in England, he heard say,
 That here were men lov'd wit, and a good Play;
 That here were Gentlemen, and Lords; a few
 Were bold to say, there were some Ladies too:
 This he beleev'd, and though they are not found
 Above, who knows what may be under ground:
 But they doe not appeare, and missing these,
 He sayes he'll not believe your Chronicles
 Hereafter, nor the Maps, since all this while,
Dublin's invisible, and not *Brasile*.¹¹

But the first writer to elevate Brasil Island to a full-blown literary topic was Richard Head (c. 1637-1686?). All considered, it is not entirely surprising that Head, author of *The English Rogue* and various other prose narratives in the picaresque tradition, and by all accounts a bit of a rogue himself, found disappearing islands attractive. An inveterate gambler, with a passion for a libertine lifestyle, he frequently faced bankruptcy, which obliged him temporarily to duck out of sight, and also to produce books quickly by borrowing from

¹⁰ Anon. [attributed to William Winstanley], *Poor Robin's Vision: Wherein Is Described, the Present Humours of the Times; the Vices and Fashionable Fopperies Thereof; and After what Manner Men Are Punished for them Hereafter; Discovered in a Dream*, London, 1677, 31.

¹¹ *Verse in English from Tudor and Stuart Ireland*, ed. Andrew Carpenter, Cork, 2003, 214.

other works, thereby resulting in his notorious reputation for plagiarism.

The advantages of a disappearing island already feature in *The Floating Island* (1673), where a group of bankrupt tradesmen found the appositely named “Owe-Much Society”, whose aim it is to provide a hideaway from their cruel creditors. This the members attempt by embarking on a journey through London for which they fit out three ships – *The-Least-in-Sight*, *The Excuse* and *The Pay-Naught*. The journey along the river Thames, narrated in the manner of a voyage of discovery, takes them to, among other places, the eponymous floating island, called the *Summer Island*, so called:

... because it is never seen ... in the winter; ... this island always takes its choice of the Summer Season for its appearance. And as some fishes retire into the Concaves of rocks, upon the approach of cold weather, so this [island] absconds or hides itself within some narrow gut of the Inland-Country, and crawls out again in fair and warm weather.¹²

Head published three works in which Brasil Island figures explicitly. In his play *Hic et Ubique* (1663) we come across another jolly bunch of blackguards from London, who sail all the way to Ireland to escape their creditors. At first, all goes well in Dublin, but then their true identity is in danger of being discovered. They all wish they were elsewhere, even “in St Georges Channel in a great storm”, rather than in Dublin and one of them expresses the desire: “Wou’d I were employ’d by the King for the finding out *Obrazeele* to rid me of my present fears.”¹³ The clear link between the cartographic appearance of Brasil Island and the English expeditions in search of it is reinforced later on in the play when two of the characters are hatching

¹² Richard Head, *The Floating Island, or, A New Discovery Relating the Strange Adventure on a Late Voyage from Lambethana to Villa Franca, alias Ramallia, to the Eastward of Terra del Templo, by Three Ships, viz. the Pay-Naught, the Excuse, the Least-in-Sight, under the Conduct of Captain Robert Owe-Much, Describing the Nature of the Inhabitants, their Religion, Laws and Customs, Published by Franck Careless, One of the Discoverers*, London, 1673, 17.

¹³ Richard Head, *Hic et Ubique; or, the Humours of Dublin: A Comedy; Acted Privately, with General Applause*, London, 1663, 8.

schemes to make money, and one of them tries to persuade the other to try to find the island:

This very day did I find in an old Map, O Braseel with its height; that there is such a place, is without doubt, and as report goes, very rich, and inhabited by very ignorant people; this I'd have thee do: let me have thy moneys to carry on the design, and ne'r fear, but this working pate will soon make a discovery.¹⁴

While the plan falls on deaf ears here, a similar suggestion is met with success in Head's narrative called *The Western Wonder: or, O Brazeel, an Enchanted Island Discovered*.¹⁵ The hero of this tale, also in a state of financial ruin and in need of a hiding place, has a ship-owning friend whom he inveigles into a joint expedition in search of the island.

The narrator gives four reasons for his belief in its existence. Firstly, it is clearly marked on ancient maps. Secondly, of late there have been a number of sworn affidavits by seamen who actually espied it. Thirdly, the narrator has personally received accounts from fishermen who spotted the island but who, no matter how hard they tried, were unable to set foot in it due to sudden lightening storms or thick mist. He abstains from relating all of the fishermen's stories, because he is afraid that they might be taken as fantasy, as chimeras similar to Don Quixote's fantasies, or as unreliable as Mandeville. One of these accounts, however, he cannot let pass. This is the record of one of the fishermen who managed to get close enough to Brasil Island to make out rocks, trees, ugly-looking beasts, and even shaggy-haired men of enormous stature resembling walking oak trees. The ultimate proof of the island's existence is a dream the narrator had. He dreamt that an eagle swooped down, grabbed him in his talons and carried him off to the island of O Brazeel. Unlike the fisherman's account, the narrator's dreamed-of island has all the hallmarks of a paradise: a benign climate, verdant fields and pleasant groves, but in

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 24.

¹⁵ Richard Head, *The Western Wonder: or, O Brazeel, an Enchanted Island Discovered; with a Relation of Two Ship-Wrecks in a Dreadful Sea-Storm in that Discovery, To which Is Added, a Description of a Place, Called, Montecapernia, Relating the Nature of the People, their Qualities, Humours, Fashions, Religion, etc.*, London, 1674.

contrast to this pleasant vista, he notices that the people on the island who walk about stark naked are held under the sway of a dark power. Sudden thunder, lightning and hellish noises interrupt the spectacle, and thankfully the eagle reappears to pick him up and deliver him home safely, at which point the narrator awakes. The combined evidence could only signify one thing: the narrator is destined to be the happy discoverer of Brasil Island. So compelling is his conviction that his friend requires no further proof or persuasion thereof: "No man could be fitter for this purpose than he and I: for we were both so indebted to the place wherein we were, that we only wanted a wind to sell the Countrey."¹⁶

A ship is made ready with suitable seamen aboard, and they set sail in October of 1672. Seven days later the friends are overjoyed to notice a blue cloud which they interpret as a sure indication that they have reached their desired destination. But then tempestuous weather conditions, lightning, and turbulent seas toss the ship about for several days and nights, so that it springs a leak and begins to sink, leaving our friends no option but to abandon it. Eventually their small life-boat is spotted, and the men are picked up by a trading vessel, which is in turn wrecked on a rock, but close enough to the shore of an island for them to reach it on foot at low tide. Then, as is its wont, Brasil Island eludes its would-be discoverers and vanishes from sight. The remainder and much the larger part of the book focuses on the island of *Montecapernia*, on which the men find themselves stranded, and no further mention is made of Brasil Island. The tenor of the narration changes once they are on *Montecapernia*. Instead of the usual episodes of depredation, debauchery or disasters which regularly require Head's heroes to flee from place to place, he presents the reader with an almost sober, albeit pejorative description of the fictitious island of *Montecapernia*, replete with pseudo-anthropological observations of its inhabitants.

Sometimes scholars needed detective skills to trace the origins of the materials which Head used, in other cases his plagiarizing was rather obvious,¹⁷ but occasionally Head himself provided certain

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ See Margaret C. Katanka, "Goodman's 'Holland's Leaguer' (1632) – Further Examples of the Plagiarism of Richard Head", *Notes and Queries*, 219 (November 1974), 415-17; Allen H. Lanner, "Richard Head's Theophrastan Characters", *Notes*

pointers by divulging names of authors or titles.¹⁸ In the case of *The Western Wonder*, Head dropped a number of clues about the works responsible for the conception of his pamphlet; one of these is Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines*.

The Isle of Pines was first published anonymously in London in 1668, and consisted of only nine pages.¹⁹ Supposedly the life-history of one George Pine who had left England during the early years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, it is an account of Pine and four women – one of whom is a Negro slave and the other three are young white Englishwomen – who are shipwrecked on an uninhabited island east of Africa while on their way to the East Indies. Fortunately for the survivors, the island turns out to be a paradise of plenty. It produces an abundance of food and the benign weather renders clothing unnecessary. With nothing else to do, Pine and his four women soon engage in open sexual activity. When shortly before his death, Pine summons all his children, grand-children, and great-grand-children to come to him so that he might number them, he finds that he has produced offspring totalling 1,789 descendants.

About a month after its first appearance, Neville published a second, longer version of *The Isle of Pines* which was expanded to include the re-discovery of the island by Dutch explorers some one hundred years later and now lists the captain of the Dutch ship, Henry Cornelius van Sloetten, as the author of the book. Van Sloetten claims that by the time his ship reached the island, the population has grown to between ten or twelve thousand, ruled over by George Pine's grandson William, who imparts the whole story of his forebears to the foreign visitors. Living conditions are pretty primitive, showing no

and *Queries*, 215 (July 1970), 259; Matthew Steggle, "Richard Head's 'The Floating Island' (1673) Plagiarizes Thomas Powell", *Notes and Queries*, LII/ 3 (2005), 325-27.

¹⁸ Percy Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Lexington, KY, 1983, 118; Jerry C. Beasley, "Translation and Cultural *Translatio*", in *The Picaresque: A Symposium on the Rogue Tale*, eds Carmen Benito-Vessels and Michael Zappala, Newark, DE, 1994, 94-106; C.W.R.D. Moseley, "Richard Head's 'The English Rogue': A Modern Mandeville?", in *Yearbook of English Studies*, 1971, 102-107; Calhoun Winton, "Richard Head and Origins of the Picaresque in England", in *The Picaresque*, 79-93.

¹⁹ Henry Neville, *The Isle of Pines* (1668): e-Text at Project Gutenberg. On the complex publishing history of this work, see P.G. Stillman, "A Note on the Texts. (The Isle of Pines: Introduction)", *Utopian Studies*, 1/1/2006: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/printable.aspx?id=1G1:151394322> (accessed 5 April 2008).

signs of any technological, scientific or artistic advance. Not needing to cultivate the land, the people idle away their days in slothful ignorance and occasionally engage in dangerous and disorderly faction fights instigated by the descendants of the black woman. William Pine's authority is in fact so weak that just when the Dutch are about to leave, he needs to call upon them to rescue the island from utter chaos.

Van Sloetten acknowledges that some people might find it hard to credit that the Isle of Pines should have remained undiscovered for so long, but then, “Nullifidians … will believe nothing but what they see”.²⁰ Happily, however, he is in possession of independent corroborative evidence which comes in the contents of two letters also included in the book. The sender of the two fictitious letters is an Amsterdam merchant by the name of Abraham Keek, who informs his “friend and Brother” in London that he has just received intelligence of a French vessel which has reported the discovery of the Isle of Pines with its proper location, and confirming that the island is inhabited by thousands of English people, wearing no clothes but “only some small coverings about their middle”, who have related to the French sailors that they are all descended from one man and four women who were shipwrecked in Queen Elizabeth’s time and have remained there ever since, without any contact with other people.

Keek admits that he would have regarded the French report as fabulous had he not personally known the writer and the “credible” recipient of it, stressing that, “the Letter is come to a known Merchant, and from a good hand in France”.²¹ As far as Keek is concerned the French visit to the island took place, and to lend even further weight to the credibility of this sensational news, Keek finishes his letter by asserting that: “Some English here suppose it may be the Island of Brasile which have [sic] been so oft sought for, Southwest from Ireland.” This is indeed an interesting comment, both because it is further proof that the wider reading public must have been familiar with Brasil Island, and because it again connects it with the Bristol expeditions.

²⁰ Worthington Chauncey Ford, *The Isle of Pines (1668) and, An Essay in Bibliography*, 39: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21410/21410-8.txt> (accessed 2 April 2008).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

The initially idyllic island on which Neville's protagonists landed finds its counterpart in the Brasil Island Head's narrator dreams about, although in the latter it is only vaguely adumbrated and contains no descriptions of any sexual activities. On both islands, thanks to a wonderfully warm climate, fruit and corn reproduce without requiring any human labour, which not only furnishes the islanders with everything they need to live on, but also makes clothing and housing unnecessary. The narrators of both stories use the word "paradise" to describe their island. But a paradise of perpetual happiness and perfection becomes a little insipid as it offers very little scope for any development, literary or otherwise. To hold the readers' interest, it either has to remain an unattainable dream or some drama has to unfold that puts its existence in jeopardy. Neville opted for the latter by allowing George Pine's harmonious patriarchal rule to degenerate a generation later into a primitive, dangerous state. Head's narrator only dreams of Brasil Island. No sooner has he set eyes on it than it vanishes and remains a cherished aspiration. He lands instead on the island of *Montecapernia*, where conditions are reminiscent of those of the later phase of the Isle of Pines. In each case the island is represented as a somewhat dystopian place, portrayed from the point of view of someone who is smug in the knowledge of coming from a culturally superior background. The islanders are described as barbarous, slothful, devoid of art, culture and industry, and yet climate, soil and natural resources would quite obviously lend themselves to refinement and advance. Amazingly, Head's portrayal of the fictitious island of *Montecapernia* was understood by some to be a true account of an actual journey around Ireland. In 1904, James Buckley reprinted it as "an exceedingly interesting description of the social life and manners, and religious usages of the Irish peasantry in the seventeenth century".²²

The Isle of Pines is referred to in the very first sentence of Head's book, *The Western Wonder*. It is rejected with mock abhorrence as a monstrous, preposterously erroneous, lying report. Given Head's penchant for travel narratives involving shipwrecks, disappearing islands and manly exploits of an erotic nature, it is hardly surprising that, apart from its commercial success, *The Isle of Pines* strongly

²² James Buckley, "A Tour in Ireland in 1672-4", *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, X (1904), 85.

appealed to him. But the importance of Neville's story does not lie so much in its subject matter (after all, Head himself had made frequent use of island settings) as in its form – a seemingly authentic report of the discovery of an island, backed up by the assurance of a personal letter from a close acquaintance providing reliable, independent evidence.

Within a year of *The Western Wonder*, Head published his third literary quest for the phantom island under the title *O-Brazile, or, The Enchanted Island: Being a Perfect Relation of the Late Discovery and Wonderful Dis-Inchantment of an Island on the North of Ireland: with an Account of the Riches and Commodities thereof: Communicated by a Letter from London-Derry to a Friend in London*. As already implied in the title, Head adopted Neville's idea of a letter based on the reliable eyewitness account of a seafarer, mimicking the entire apparatus of a report of the discovery of an island, including exact sailing dates, ports, destinations, freight, and so on.

He called the writer of his letter William Hamilton, a man from Derry who addresses his cousin in London. Like Neville's letter-writer Keek, who did not actually visit the Isle of Pines himself and who would have greeted the report with scepticism had it not “come ... from a good hand in France”,²³ that is, directly from the French vessel whose crew had allegedly been on the island, Hamilton asserts that he would not have given credence to the report had he not had it straight from Captain John Nisbet himself whose ship had landed on the island.²⁴ Previously, he assures his cousin, he ridiculed and dismissed reports about Brasil Island as romantic nonsense; now however, he is certain of its existence because he has it “from very good hands”.²⁵ The report is true, Hamilton insists, pointing out that “several gentlemen have sent an express, with the true relation of it, under their own hands and seals, to some eminent [sic] persons in Dublin.”²⁶

Apart from Captain Nisbet's good name and unquestionable integrity, Hamilton provides further purported evidence to underpin

²³ Ford, *The Isle of Pines*, 26.

²⁴ The Hamilton letter is reprinted in full in George G. Carey, “Enchanted-Island Traditions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”, *American Neptune: A Quarterly Journal of Maritime History and Arts*, XXIX/2 (1969), 275-81, and also in Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy*, I, 369-76.

²⁵ Carey, “Enchanted-Island Traditions”, 278.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

the trustworthiness of the report. The points he makes partly resemble the arguments of Head's narrator in *The Western Wonder*: he talks of reported sightings of Brasil Island, particularly during the summer,²⁷ and he draws attention to the fact that the island appears on maps. He furthermore states that during its last sitting in 1663, a Member of Parliament informed the House of Commons that the enchantment of Brasil Island was broken and the island gained. Hamilton also informs his cousin that a mutual acquaintance, described as "a wise man, and a great Scholar" has taken out a patent for Brasil Island whenever it should be located. Finally, Hamilton alleges that a certain Quaker, claiming he had a revelation from heaven that he is ordained to take possession of it, has set off to the island but has not been seen since.²⁸

The circumstances of Captain Nisbet's journey are related in a factual manner. We learn that he sets off from his native Killybegs in County Donegal, in the company of eight crew members, three of whom are mentioned by name. The vessel, laden with butter, tallow and hides, was destined for France whence it was supposed to bring back French wines. On 2 March 1674, due to a sudden thick fog lasting three hours, they lose their bearings, only to find themselves in the shallow waters of an unknown island close by. The initial exploration of the island yields nothing exciting and makes almost trivial reading: pleasant green woods and valleys full of cattle, horses, sheep, deer and rabbits, but not a single person to be seen, and no houses except for an abandoned, half-demolished castle. They knock in vain on its gate and conclude that it must be deserted. Then suddenly, after the men have lit a fire, a most frightening, hideous noise erupts, sending them scuttling back to their ship in panic.

A kindly "very ancient grave gentleman", followed by ten bareheaded men of servile demeanour, approaches the seafarers the following morning and informs them in what is termed "the old Scotch language"²⁹ that they are in O-Brazile. He tells them about the spell under which the island has lain for hundreds of years which has not only made it invisible to other mortals, but also life for the islanders intolerable. Inflicted on them through the diabolical art of a

²⁷ This is reminiscent of *The Floating Island*, where the island also makes its appearance during the summer time.

²⁸ Carey, "Enchanted-Island Traditions", 278.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

great necromancer, the spell turned the whole island into a receptacle of furies. However, the curse expired the previous month so that the island has become visible again. But the islanders were unable to help themselves: they had to remain passive until a fire was kindled upon the island by some good Christians in order to free them. In doing just that, Captain Nisbet and his crew have managed to finally drive the powers of darkness from the island once and for all. At the dilapidated castle, the ship's crew are thanked and welcomed by a few more islanders, and having been richly rewarded, they are directed home to their own coast. Back at Killybega the following day, their story is at first not readily credited, but this changes when the crew produce their many gifts of pure gold and silver. Only three days later, another vessel leaves Killybega for Brasil Island, whence it safely returns also laden with gifts. Since then, "several Godly Ministers" have set off to visit and "discourse them", though nothing is as yet known of their return.

At first sight, Head's portrayal of the island and its location is puzzling. While it is obvious that the idea of a letter-based report of the discovery of a seemingly real island was inspired by Neville, the question remains if he had any models to draw on in regard to the depiction of the island. As far as we know, Head was the first writer to use Brasil Island as a literary setting. When comparing the references he makes to the island in his three publications it would appear that he did not have any clear or preconceived idea of what it should look like. Tellingly, the only fixed element is the island's fabled wealth, while all other references, including the spelling of its name,³⁰ its physical appearance and that of its inhabitants, undergo several changes.

Even its location is only gradually pinned down. In his earlier tracts, Head did not identify any location for Brasil Island. In *The Western Wonder* we may deduce a western location from the title, but west of where? The port the island-seekers set off from is not disclosed, and their direction is equally vague: "We set Sail, bearing our course due West, sometimes West and by South, and sometimes West-North-West, each traverse not exceeding Fifteen Leagues in

³⁰ In *Hic et Ubique* it is called "Obrazeele" on page 8, but "O Braseel" on page 24; in *The Western Wonder* he refers to it as "O Brazeel" while in *O-Brazile* he sticks with this version in the title.

Longitude.”³¹ The island which the Bristol merchants had sought some two hundred years earlier was supposedly located off the western coast of Ireland, generally west of Galway, and on the ancient maps which Head also refers to, the island is usually, though not exclusively, marked west or southwest of the Irish coast. But in *O-Brazile*, Head places it north. He has Hamilton write to his cousin that the enchanted island was north of Ireland, and that multitudinous reports confirm that it was seen off the coast of Ulster.³² Hamilton does not specify whether his Captain Nisbet, on setting off from the northern county of Donegal, chooses to sail along the west or the east coast of Ireland to reach France. When on its return journey the ship gets into trouble, the captain assumes he is “near the coasts of Ireland”,³³ but when the fog has lifted, although familiar with most shores of Ireland and Scotland, he does not recognize his whereabouts. To obscure matters even further, the old gentleman on the island speaks neither Irish nor English, but uses “the old Scottish tongue”.

As regards the inhabitants of Brasil Island they are not up to very much in any of Head’s portrayals. In *Hic et Ubique* we only learn that they are “very ignorant people”. In *The Western Wonder*, the one fisherman who gets close enough to catch a glimpse of the islanders espies rough barbarians whom he describes to the narrator in the following terms: “Men of prodigious stature, who as they mov’d, look’d like walking Oaks, whose shaggy bushy hair outv’y’d the spreading of their leav’d branchy tops; and the waving of their hands, resembled much the turning of our wind-mills sails.”³⁴ Even the beasts on the island are not pleasant to behold, and although the fisherman fails to give us at least some idea of what kind of creatures they might be, we learn that they are simply too horrid to warrant a description; in fact he finds the sight of them so unbearable that he has to turn his eyes away.

In contrast to this portrayal, the islanders in the narrator’s dream are described as very white and handsome, but they have neither clothes nor houses and appear to be living in the bowels of the earth.³⁵

³¹ Head, *The Western Wonder*, 8.

³² Carey, “Enchanted-Island Traditions”, 277.

³³ *Ibid.*, 278.

³⁴ Head, *The Western Wonder*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

Worse still, they live in fear because they are under the power of a dark force, and the whole island is teeming with ugly devils, horrid spectrums and frightful apparitions which torment the inhabitants constantly. Houses are also absent from Captain Nisbet's Brasil Island, and here, too, myriad devils, furies and the power of a great necromancer hold sway over the islanders. Although abounding with fowl, cattle and wild beasts and being rich in mines of silver and gold, food and people are in scarce supply. The few men and women are grave-looking, and there is no mention of a single child. This was not always the case, for we hear of once-great towns and cities; now lying in tatters. The old gentleman who welcomes the visitors is descended from a line of princes whose now dilapidated castle still gives a hint of its once "very strong-like" appearance. The underlying implication is that we are witnessing the end of an ancient and incompetent rule, a notion further reinforced by the large pieces of pure gold and silver Nisbet brings back, which are a little rusty and of a most ancient stamp.

The rationale of this curious representation of Brasil Island now becomes clear – the *ancien régime* of this island has failed miserably. With its rich natural resources untapped, its towns and cities derelict and with its population reduced to a few people, the island is no longer clearly owned by anyone, and is thus up for the taking. What is more, the last few inhabitants are the helpless pawns of dark powers, and their deliverance is possible only through rescue by good Christian outsiders. What could be more obvious than that Brasil Island was in need of rescue by a strong colonial power. The view that a culturally superior nation could by rights take over another considered inferior, was of course quite commonly expressed in the context of colonial expansion, and it was a view not confined to monarchs and their political advisors, but one that was shared by clergymen, merchants and even by poets.

Edmund Spenser (?1552-1599) is a good example of the latter, and his *View of the Present State of Ireland*³⁶ must indeed count as one of the main sources of Head's portrayal of both *Montecapernia* and Brasil Island. In this pamphlet Spenser argued, broadly, that thanks to their sloth, superstition and mismanagement, the Irish have squandered their natural resources with the result that a huge

³⁶ Although written in the 1590s, the pamphlet was only published in 1633.

discrepancy has arisen between the country's agricultural potential and its disordered, miserable state. Spenser's recommendation: destroy all traces of the old social order, if necessary by violence, and install English law, order and husbandry.

In his spurious enquiry into the history of human settlements in Ireland, Spenser distinguished three identifiable groups of settlers whose origins, he maintained, could still be traced in, among other things, their evil customs. Of these immigrant groups, the Scythians were not only the first, but branded by him as the most barbarous.³⁷ They had arrived by sea in the North of Ireland to inhabit what is now called Ulster, and as their numbers increased, they also moved into the neighbouring territory which they named after themselves, "Scuttenland – which more briefly is called Scutland or Scotland". Therefore "Scotland and Ireland", he repeatedly asserted, "are all one and the same".³⁸ The Scythians remained isolated in the North where they continued to practise their ancient customs, unlike the later waves of immigrants from Gaul and Spain who settled in the West and South, and the Britons who inhabited the East, who through contact and trade with other seafaring nations were culturally diluted and had embraced a modicum of civil manners and good fashions.

From the English point of view, Ulster constituted the dark, unexplored and recalcitrant Ireland in any case,³⁹ but what exactly were the evil customs Spenser had in mind? Well, the wearing of mantles⁴⁰ and the dreadful hair style, for example, alarmed him

³⁷ Many other historians of the time argued for a Scythian ancestry of the Irish, but without the attendant intricacies of Spenser's arguments. The Scythians were, however, generally thought to have come into Ireland from Spain, inhabiting the south-western part of the country. See, for example, Fynes Moryson, "Description of Ireland", in *Ireland under Elizabeth and James the First*, ed. Henry Morely, London, 1890, 413; also Andrew Hadfield, "Briton and Scythian: Tudor Representations of Irish Origin", *Irish Historical Studies*, XXVIII/ 112 (1993), 390-408. The Scythians, a nomadic Indo-European tribe, flourished from, roughly, the ninth century BC until the nineteenth century, and according to Johnson, at some stage they were considered to be the parent of virtually every nation in western Europe: see James William Johnson, "The Scythian: His Rise and Fall", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XX/2 (April 1959), 256.

³⁸ *A View of the Present State of Ireland* by Edmund Spenser, ed. W.L. Renwick, Oxford, 1970, 38.

³⁹ *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, ed. S. J. Connolly, Oxford, 1998, 182 ff.

⁴⁰ Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 50.

greatly. The latter he described with loathing: “long glibs, which is a thick curled bush of hair hanging down over their eyes, and monstrously disguising them, which are both very bad and hurtful.”⁴¹ This hair style matches that described by Head’s sailor in *The Western Wonder*. The insistence on cattle herding rather than tillage, was presented as another basic defect in the Irish character – a clear sign of laziness, which plainly also stemmed from the Scyths.⁴² Their inherent crudeness aside, Spenser highlighted these customs because of their subversive potential for the Irish rebels: hair and mantle capable of disguising them, and the boolies (cattle drovers’ shelters) ideal for providing them with food and shelter. Having enumerated other barbarous and superstitious traditions imputed to the Scyths and still practised in Ulster, Spenser arrived at the unsurprising conclusion: that of the ten-thousand foot soldiers he deemed necessary to bring Ireland completely under English control, eight-thousand should be employed in Ulster alone, and the rest should be divided between the remaining provinces of Ireland.⁴³ Head took Spenser’s lead when he chose Ulster as the location of Brasil Island, and it now makes sense that the ancient clan leader of the island does not use modern English or Irish, but speaks old Scottish, that is, the Scyth language.⁴⁴ Portraying the island as outmoded and in a state of deterioration, Head appears to have signalled to the English king and/or enterprising merchants that the time had come to take possession of the island.

Could this mean Head had a political agenda? Hardly, considering that apart from the accusation of plagiarism, the other constant criticism levelled against him is his crude opportunism. He stands accused of failing to observe and portray manners and customs, of lacking social criticism, satirical or moral purpose, or as Chandler put

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁴⁴ The same sharp North-South division is also evident in *The Western Wonder* where the very first sentence about Montecapernia reads: “Montecapernia is divided into two great parts, South and North; and it may well admit of this division, since there is so great a division in the manners and language of both places; the South understanding the North ... as little as the English do the Cornish.”

it, of setting pen to paper for hire alone.⁴⁵ Head needed to make a living out of publishing books which catered for and satisfied a popular taste. As we have already seen in Chapter 2, at that time, in the interest of political power and commerce, the maritime nations of Europe were competing to find and claim unknown lands, and whenever there were reports of islands being discovered, this caused quite a sensation not only in political and commercial quarters, but also among the reading public. Neville's *Isle of Pines*, which was an instant success throughout Europe, is one such example. Within six months of its publication in London, where it had an extraordinary run, various European editions of *The Isle of Pines* appeared in translation – in Dutch, French, Italian and German.⁴⁶ Head would obviously have wanted to emulate Neville's success. And in his case, too, there are indications of *O'Brazile* having been translated into other languages⁴⁷ and according to one source the book “obtained a good circulation in London in 1675”.⁴⁸

Head may also have had a personal reason for portraying both Montecapernia and Brasil Island as wastelands, wishing as it were to settle a private score. Both he and Spenser had spent part of their lives in Ireland. In fact they shared similar, doubtless personally traumatic experiences while living in that country, at the hands of Irish rebels in each case. Spenser, who had served with the English forces during the Second Desmond Rebellion, was awarded a magnificent estate in County Cork after the defeat of the rebels, but he was later driven from his home and his castle burnt down during Hugh O'Neill's, the Ulster lord's rebellion in 1598. One of his infant children – and, according to local legend, his wife, too – died in the flames.⁴⁹ Born in Carrickfergus, Head was the son of a Church of England clergyman who was murdered in the Irish rising of 1641, which had commenced

⁴⁵ Frank Wadleigh Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, Boston and New York, 1907, I, 69, 115, 211-14; see also Beasley, “Translation and Cultural *Translatio*”, 96; Winton, “Richard Head”, 87; Adams, *Travel Literature*, 118; Moseley, “Richard Head's 'The English Rogue'”, 107.

⁴⁶ Ford, *Isle of Pines*, 7-11.

⁴⁷ For example, a Swedish translation was published as early as 1675: <http://movv.org/2006/12/19/a-ilha-mitica-obrazile-e-a-serie-lost-perdidos/> (accessed 18 November 2007).

⁴⁸ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths*, I, 214.

⁴⁹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Spenser (accessed 22 May 2008).

in Ulster. Head was then about four years of age. His family fled to England where he grew up and spent the rest of his life, except for a short interlude in Dublin, in the early 1660s.⁵⁰

Apart from Spenser's work and his own first-hand experience in Ireland, Head could also have drawn on a substantial number of publications which revived and expanded on the negative stereotyping⁵¹ which had begun with the *Topography of Ireland* (1188) by Gerald of Wales; who was then still the most widely read authority on Irish customs and history.⁵² As already noted, Gerald of Wales had already drawn attention to an imaginary island somewhere off the northern coast of Ireland, but Head may have also heard similar tales himself. Whatever the case may be, he associated the island represented on maps with existing folklore and combined the two elements to write a voyage tale. Gerald of Wales fails to enlighten us on the nature of the mystical forces from which the island was wrestled, whereas Head has nasty creatures of all shapes and forms keep his enchanted island under their sway. With his emphasis on evil magicians which the islanders live in fear of Head may have intended to ridicule the excessively superstitious nature which he and Spenser attributed to the Irish. Spenser argued that the "Papists" were so utterly ignorant that "you would rather think them atheists or infidels".⁵³ Thus, holy rituals like baptism, marriages and burials which Head's narrator observes in *Montecapernia* are all obscured with crude, even ludicrous elements.

Head may even have shared the view of his hero in *The English Rogue* that many Irishmen themselves were devils. This point is neatly brought out in his bogus etymology of "Dublin":

... many of its Inhabitants call this city *divlin*, *quasi Divels Inn*, and very properly it is by them so term'd; for there is hardly a city in the World that entertains such a variety of Devils Imps as that doth. If any knavishly break, murder, rob, or are desirous of Polygamy, they

⁵⁰See <http://www.oxforddnb.com.remote.library.dcu.ie/articles/12/12810-article.html?back> (accessed 24 March 2008).

⁵¹ See David Hayton, "From Barbarian to Burlesque: English Images of the Irish c. 1660-1750", *Irish Economic and Social History*, XV (1988), 5-31.

⁵² Hadfield, "Briton and Scythian", 393.

⁵³ Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, 84.

straightway repair thither, making that place, or the Kingdom in general their Azylum or Sanctuary.⁵⁴

What is certain, however, is that Head was clearly influenced by the evil forces at work in *The Tempest*, to which he specifically referred. Albeit for different reasons, like Head's, Shakespeare's own interest in using an enchanted island-setting was not restricted to its literary possibilities. Shakespeare had been keenly following the determined efforts to expand English influence across the seas, according to Joseph Quincy Adams, who amply proved this point, and who also reminded us of the general enthusiasm for overseas adventures which existed in the seventeenth century. When a new campaign was launched to raise funds and enlist volunteers for an English settlement in Virginia, the response of the public was instant and exuberant:

Inspired writers issued pamphlets describing in glowing terms the riches of Virginia and the advantages that would accrue to England from a political conquest of North America; ministers of the gospel, from pulpit and press, earnestly urged the Christian duty of carrying salvation to the benighted heathen and the desirability of extending the domain of Protestantism to the New World.⁵⁵

Accordingly, in June 1609, a total of nine ships carrying upwards of 600 colonists, set sail for "Virginia, earth's only paradise".⁵⁶ As the fleet neared the coast of the New World it suddenly got caught up in a most dreadful tempest, and the ships were buffeted about in a boisterous ocean amidst claps of thunder of an almost supernatural kind. When two days later the storm subsided, the ships were scattered; some had sprung leaks, all were seriously damaged, while one failed to reappear altogether and was eventually given up as lost at sea. Unbeknown to the rest of the world, these voyagers were alive and well. Their ship had been driven upon the Island of Bermudas, an island then dreaded as an enchanted place, wholly given over to devils

⁵⁴ Richard Head, *The English Rogue Described, in the Life of Meriton Latroon, a Witty Extravagant, Being a Compleat History of the Most Eminent Cheats of Both Sexes*, London, 1665, 184.

⁵⁵ Joseph Quincey Adams in his introduction to Silvester Jourdain, *A Discovery of the Barmudas* (1610), New York, 1940, iii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, iv.

and wicked spirits.⁵⁷ Much to their surprise and joy, however, the adventurers had chanced upon a little paradise – temperate climate, abundantly fruitful: “in truth, the richest, healthfullest, and pleasing land”⁵⁸ – where they spent the following nine months. Among them was Silvester Jourdain, who later published the story of the extraordinary events of their voyage and stay on the island, details of which Shakespeare would later work into his aptly named play *The Tempest*.

Head in turn alluded to *The Tempest* in *The Western Wonder* in that he referred to Trinculo by name and to Caliban, Prospero, and Ariel by inference. Characteristically, Head was drawn to Shakespeare’s pair of boozers, the jester Trinculo and his drunken friend, the butler Stephano, whose farcical behaviour provides some robust fun in the play. Inebriated and under the illusion that he will soon be king of the island, Stephano offers Caliban and Trinculo the position of viceroy (Act III, Scene 2). Head made direct reference to this scene in the report of the fisherman who catches a good glimpse of Brasil Island before it vanishes and who, when getting very close to it, expresses the hope, “to be greater than … that great Usurper Trinkelo [*sic*], or at least be Vice-Roy of this Inchanted Island”.⁵⁹

Besides indicating that the islanders are extremely primitive, the description of the monstrous men who look like walking oaks with leaved branchy tops may already have been modelled on the monster Caliban, “not honour’d with a human shape” who enters Act II, Scene 2, with a burden of wood. But there are clearer echoes of Caliban in the narrator’s dream. Although no other details or descriptions are given, we learn that the dark power the inhabitants of Brasil Island worship is a “deformed ill-shapen thing”, calling to mind Caliban, “this thing of darkness”, this “mis-shapen knave” (Act V, Scene 1).

Furthermore, in that dream sequence, Head’s frightened narrator would certainly not have taken a step forward had it not been for the sudden appearance of a good guide who, because he is skilled in magic, effortlessly manages to dissipate all the devilish creatures around them. This figure is strongly suggestive of Prospero, who by his knowledge of magic is equally capable of keeping the diverse

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* vi.

⁵⁸ Jourdain, *A Discovery of the Barmudas*, 10.

⁵⁹ Head, *The Western Wonder*, 3.

spirits of his enchanted island under control. One of these is Ariel, the invisible Spirit of the Air, who flaps his way through the play and who performs tricks at the command of Prospero. In Act III he appears like a harpy, clapping his wings on the table, and Prospero affectionately calls him “my bird” (Act IV, Scene 1). Head simply refers to a “Prince of the Air” without any further elaboration, but the narrator’s magical mode of transport – by way of an eagle’s talons – is also reminiscent of Ariel’s tricks.

After the dream episode, when Head’s narrator and his friends eventually set off by boat in search of Brasil Island, the question of control over the island is raised again. Spotting an island close by, with what they think are ships riding at anchor, the two adventurers are convinced that they have finally found their destination. But while they are busily embroiled in an argument as to who should be the viceroy, or who should have the most power and authority,⁶⁰ a violent storm begins to arise which eventually leads to the destruction of their vessel. As a reminder of the demonic forces at work, the shipwrecks close to the enchanted isles, both in *The Western Wonder* and in *The Tempest*, occur in wild seas amid tremendously loud noise of thunder and lightning, instilling the mariners with such fear that they, believing all is lost and their last hour has come, turn to God and say their prayers.

To conclude, Head’s fictitious discovery and description of Brasil Island is a composite portrayal which cannot be traced back to one single source. He blended actual material like authentic explorations and maps with imaginative elements, combining Irish folklore with aspects of travel fiction, topical stock themes and racial stereotypes. Head’s literary quest for Brasil Island was clearly intended to excite the English reading class, with whom travel books, in particular those which fuelled their sense of superiority, were prodigiously popular.

There is a palpable undercurrent of colonial aspiration in all three of Head’s books dealing with Brasil Island – whether it is its exploration in the King’s name in *Hic et Ubique*, the playful banter over the isle’s viceroyship in *The Western Wonder*, or the suggestion of a political/military takeover, legal acquisition of the island by means of a patent and its Christianization in *O-Brazile*. The Irish phantom island Gerald of Wales heard about was a mythical place. It

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

rose from the sea in calm conditions, and once fixed, it constituted virgin territory, a new island. Head's Brasil Island on the other hand is old, having been inhabited for hundreds of years. With its natural wealth mismanaged and its people under the control of evil forces, its demise is inevitable and heralded by thunder and lightning. It is presented as an island ready for an English takeover. During the seventeenth century, it will be recalled, the hope of finding the island had not yet been completely abandoned. So by staking a claim for the English crown, perhaps Head was pandering to the Establishment, vaguely hoping to ingratiate himself, courting patronage or Royal favours. After all he had dedicated his play *Hic et Ubique* to the Duke of Monmouth, though with poor results, as the Duke's recompense was below expectations, forcing him to keep up his job as writer and bookseller.⁶¹

In 1724, under the title of *The History of the Enchanted-Island of O'Brazile*, there appeared yet another pamphlet claiming to give an account of a visit to O'Brazile, including a description of the island, its history, people, and customs. The influence of both Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines* and Richard Head's *O-Brazile* is unmistakable.⁶² Interestingly, this is the first Brasil Island publication to come out of Dublin, not London. The story purports to be an eyewitness account by a sailor called William Hogg, on board a ship that sailed from Londonderry, on the north coast of Ireland to Boston, New England. In 1717, on their return journey to Ireland, about 20 leagues off Galway, the seamen suddenly espy land they have never seen before. Their exploration reveals that they have landed on O'Brazile, where they will stay for the next seven years, after which the island will become visible again.

Common to Neville's, Head's and Hogg's stories is the portrayal of a pleasant, plentiful island which is inhabited by incompetent and subdued people who, compared to the more advanced background of the visitors, live in rather basic communities. Hogg's tale is a curious

⁶¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Head (accessed 21 March 2008).

⁶² William Hogg, *The History of the Enchanted-Island of O'Brazile; Giving an Account of the Country, Religion, Government, Marriages, Funerals, their Customs, also of the Strange Birds and Beasts that Are there, and of his Own Landing in Galloway*, Dublin, 1724.

hotchpotch of incongruous parts, thrown together for no obvious purpose, other than, perhaps, to amuse a not too demanding readership. Taking the fauna as an example, we find alongside domestic animals like cows, horses and sheep some strange creatures such as tree-hopping, bird-eating marmots. There are also four-legged birds which can run fast but are unable to fly, and while the latter types bear traces of Neville's creatures, Hogg further populates the island with unicorns aplenty whose horns are used by the natives to deck out the leafy roofs of their cage-like houses.

Of the islanders only the men are described, with a slight touch of racism which again is reminiscent of Neville, in whose book the main perpetrators are black. Hogg's male protagonists are coloured or “tanny” as he calls them, with large whiskers. They wear breeches like Highlanders and caps like the “blacks” in Ireland,⁶³ and also have no firearms but use bows and arrows like the Indians. Like the Indians, too, they worship the Sun, Moon and Stars, and their language is hard to understand. The penalties for misbehaviour in O'Brazile are as severe as on the Isle of Pines: two thumbs and two big toes are cut off for theft, the private parts for adultery, and murder is punished by hanging the offender by the heels.⁶⁴

As far as the disenchantment of the island is concerned, the putative sailor-cum-author follows the method Gerald of Wales and Head had suggested, namely the use of fire. But the responsibility for the enchantment itself lies neither with evil magicians, vile curses nor with necromancers; it is cryptically connected with “the Eyes of Travellers”, whatever that may mean. The author ends his little story somewhat surprisingly by expressing the hope that one day he will return to O'Brazile, break the enchantment, and thus become “a second Columbus”.⁶⁵

There do not seem to be any other publications in which Brasil Island features prominently, but there are the following two interesting cases where the island perfectly serves the satirical sense of humour of their authors.

⁶³ Hogg, *The History of the Enchanted-Island of O'Brazile*, 5. I have been unable to find out to what the innuendo about the “blacks” in Ireland may be referring.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the publication of Jonathan Swift's satire *A Tale of a Tub*, published anonymously in 1704. Like Head, Swift was born in Ireland of an English family which had traditional ties with the Anglican Church. He himself took orders and, after an extended period of time in England, he returned to Ireland to take up the position of vicar of Kilroot, County Antrim, where he began his *Tale*.⁶⁶ The narrative, which mocks the gross corruptions in religion and learning, is interspersed with interrelated digressions satirizing "modern" follies, such as the inanity of the self-indulgent mind, religious fanaticism, pedantic scholarship, and alchemy. The contemporary English critic is set against the "Antients", that is, the classic writers and philosophers. Feigning enthusiastic admiration for the former, the mock author's only regret is that so far no "Modern" has yet "attempted an universal System in a small portable Volume, of all Things that are to be Known, or Believed, or Imagined, or Practised in Life". However, an apparently useful method by which this might be achieved has indeed been proposed by a "great Philosopher of O.Brazile". The method in question is a ludicrous alchemical recipe, reading:

You take fair correct Copies, well bound in Calfs Skin, and Lettered at the Back, of all Modern Bodies of Arts and Sciences whatsoever, and in what Language you please. These you distil in *balneo Mariae*, infusing Quintessence of Poppy Q.S. together with three Pints of Lethe, to be had from the Apothecaries.⁶⁷

The credibility of this "philosopher" – already severely undermined by being modern and by his recourse to alchemy – is meant to be given a further blow by his place of origin. In a footnote Swift gives an explanation as to what and where O.Brazile is: "This is an imaginary Island, of Kin to that which is called the *Painters Wives Island*, placed in some unknown part of the Ocean, merely at the Fancy of the Map-maker." This comment proves that Swift knew that

⁶⁶ Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Satires*, ed. Kathleen Williams, London and New York, 1975.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

Brasil Island occurred on sea charts, and that he dismissed the notion of its actual existence as fanciful.⁶⁸

In 1712 there appeared another satire, very much in the same vein as Swift's, whose sentiments and digressions are alluded to. The first person-narrator of this tale, entitled *A Long Ramble, or Several Years Travels, in the Much Talk'd of, But Never Before Discover'd, Wandering Island of O-Brazil*, alleges that he has returned from a long stay on Brasil Island. Now back in England, the narrator promises to give a full description of that "whimsical country". The author shares many of Swift's views on religion and literature, and he ridicules with good-humoured sarcasm English republicans, freethinkers and advocates of libertine ideas, and, with the express exception of John Dryden and Samuel Butler, he also parodies the dreadful works of the poets of his time, as well as scientists, orators, historians, and philosophers whose concerns he considers base and disproportionate. The pamphlet, then, is a satire on England, exposing the dullness and folly of English society, and so the question remains as to why the author targeted it indirectly by calling it O-Brazil. Apart from making the attack less dangerous and more palatable, this ploy adds to its satiric force, as we shall see.

The text starts with the observation that "O-Brazil is a most famous island, as well known as any Part of *Terra Incognita* ... and as easy to be found, as Sir *Thomas Moor's Eutopia*, or Sir *Francis Bacon's Atalantis* ...". The irony here is that by linking O-Brazil with *Utopia* and *The New Atlantis* readers would expect to hear about another imaginary island boasting an idealized state of humankind, but instead they are presented with a dismal account of the then state of affairs in England, an irony which is heightened further by the repeated references to it as "this noble island". The notions of deception and evasion which in English literature are generally associated with Brasil Island, throughout this text serve as a criticism of English society. Here the shifting location of the island itself which "lies in some uncertain Sea ..., having no Anchors or Cables to hold it", as a result of which, it "is continually floating about, and consequently

⁶⁸ His reference to "Painters Wives Island", I take to be a reference to William Painter (?1540-1594), the English author whose collection of tales entitled *Palace of Pleasure* became the storehouse of Elizabethan "old wives' tales".

never Steady”⁶⁹ is reflected in the unreliability and villainy of its inhabitants who are portrayed as most ignorant people whose lives are governed by stupidity, vanity, fraud and extortion. In the readers’ mind O-Brazil would automatically be connected with Ireland, then regularly referred to in condescending terms. So undoubtedly it must have come as a shock to realize that the unflattering portrayal of the island was in fact holding up a mirror to their own nation.

⁶⁹ Anon., *A Long Ramble, or Several Years Travels, in the Much Talk'd of, But Never Before Discover'd, Wandering Island of O-Brazil; Containing a Full Description of that Whimsical Country*, London, 1712, 3.

CHAPTER 7

AN ABORTED IRISH ATTEMPT TO WRITE ABOUT THE ISLAND

Turning to Ireland for early traces of Brasil Island, we find that as a literary motif it occurs much later than in England, but then it develops into a richer, more varied theme, embracing all literary genres. As we shall see later, it proved immensely attractive to Irish writers and artists and in particular to cultural nationalists and literary revivalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the preceding centuries, however, no literary works about or including Brasil Island have surfaced, either in Gaelic or English, in what is now known as the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland, however, is a different matter and will be dealt with separately later.

While it is true to say that there do not appear to be any Irish books set on Brasil Island, there is the highly intriguing case of an aborted attempt to write about the island involving deception, treason, and piracy at the highest levels of Irish society. The four main players in this drama: the Reverend Thomas Contarine, clergyman of the established church and uncle of Oliver Goldsmith; Charles O'Conor of Belanagare, a leading figure in the Catholic Committee (established in 1756) and pre-eminent antiquarian; Richard Digby of Roscommon, a historiographer and relative of Henry Brooke; and Henry Brooke himself, the Anglo-Irish poet, novelist, dramatist, and better known as the father of Charlotte Brooke. The date: 1743. On 21 June of that year a prospectus was published which proposed for printing by subscription a book in four volumes entitled *Ogygian Tales; Or, A Curious Collection of Irish Fables, Allegories and Histories; From the Relations of Fintane the Aged, for the Entertainment of Cahal Crove Darg, During that Prince's Abode in the Island of O'Brazil*¹

¹ Anon., *Ogygian Tales; Or, A Curious Collection of Irish Fables, Allegories and Histories; From the Relations of Fintane the Aged, for the Entertainment of Cahal Crove Darg, during that Prince's Abode in the Island of O'Brazil*, in which Are Occasionally Set Forth, the Manners, Customs, Arts and Religion of the Ancient

According to the prospectus the manuscript was ready for the press, and although it does not reveal the author(s), it includes a letter to “The Author of the Ogygian Tales”, in which lavish praise is bestowed on him for content, style and instructive intent. It also sheds some light on the nature of the tales, their didactic purpose as well as on the putative narrator Fintane:

You could not act more judiciously than by putting these Accounts into the Mouth of the famous *Fintane*, the Son of *Bochra*, who in the mythological History of Ireland is said to be an antediluvian, to revive soon after the Deluge, and to live from Age to Age, for the Instruction of Mankind in general, and of his native Country in particular; a sage Philosopher and Statesman, and withal represented as a Seer, or one endued with a Foresight of Futurity *Fintane* ... may entertain his Prince not only with the Knowledge of the Past, but even future Ages, and by his ending with a Description of the present, a fair Opportunity is given you ... [to] shew your Detestation of every kind of Corruption, and give some Punishment to its Patrons and Abetors.²

The shortest version of the dramatic action behind the scenes was given by Catherine and Robert Ward, who claimed that O’Conor had written the manuscript and intended to hand over the proceeds of the book to his needy friend Richard Digby. Digby’s cousin, Henry Brooke, borrowed the material and, sensing its marketability, kept the manuscript and tried to pass it off as his own.³ He did this in 1745 when, unbeknown to the others, he advertised under his own name a

Inhabitants of Ireland, with the Characters of the Most Illustrious Persons in Science and Government, Dublin, 1743. Kevin O’Donovan mentions that he found references to this prospectus in a number of catalogues, but being unable to trace it anywhere, he assumes it is now lost: see “The Giant-Queller and the Poor Old Woman: Henry Brooke and the Two Cultures of Eighteenth-Century Ireland”, *New Hibernia Review*, VII/2 (2003), 116. Happily, this is not the case, for a copy of it is preserved as part of the *Stowe MS* in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin (see n.2). I am afraid that in the light of the story surrounding the prospectus, Donovan’s praise for Brooke’s ground-breaking “enthusiasm for Irish antiquities” has to be somewhat modified.

² *Stowe MS*, Bi1 (MS 27), Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

³ *The Letters of Charles O’Conor of Belangare; I, 1731-1771*, eds Catherine Coogan Ward and Robert E. Ward, published for the Irish American Cultural Institute by University Microfilms International, 1980, XVI; see also *Letters of Charles O’Conor of Belangare: A Catholic Voice in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, eds Robert E. Ward, John F. Wrynn, S.J. and Catherine Coogan Ward, Washington, DC, 1988, 103, n.

proposal for *A History of Ireland from the Earliest Times* in the *Dublin Journal*,⁴ a history which was based entirely on O'Conor's work. Regrettably, in the end, neither the *Ogygian Tales* nor the *History* appeared. The exact details and sequence of the saga need not concern us here, suffice it to observe that O'Conor's correspondence bears out the gist of the Wards' reading of the situation.⁵ The Reverend Contarine was so incensed over Brooke's "monstrous" behaviour and "treachery" that he advised Digby to file a bill against him and expose him as much as possible, as he "deserves to be branded with public infamy",⁶ and Charles O'Conor, who had taken legal advice in the matter, was also encouraged to bring Mr Brooke's "treachery and inhumanity" out into the open by putting in print his "dirty" tricks which ought to be "discountenanced by the whole world".⁷

Tellingly, Brooke had changed the title of his forthcoming book from that of the prospectus published in 1743. More significantly, he eliminated the names of *Fintane*, *Cahal Crove Darg* and *O'Brazil* because they would have given away the fraudulent attempt. Thanks to a rather deprecatory remark, we know that the initial idea of calling the book *Ogygian Tales* had been Digby's and that Digby had actually begun writing the tales:

⁴ The Wards only mention one edition of the *Dublin Journal* where the advertisement appeared, that is, no. 1868 (26-29 January 1744/5), but the same advertisement appeared also in subsequent issues of that year, namely, in nos. 1869 (29 January-2 February); 1871 (5-9 February); 1874 (16-19 February); 1884 (23-26 March), and 1888 (6-9 April). The full title of Brooke's proposal reads: *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Times; wherein are Set Forth the Ancient and Extraordinary Customs, Manners, Religion, Politics, Conquests and Revolutions of that Once Hospitable, Polite and Martial Nation; Interspersed and Illustrated with Extraordinary Digressions, and the Private and Affecting Histories of the Most Celebrated of the Natives*, in 4 vols., by Henry Brooke.

⁵ Stowe MS Bi1 (MSS 27, 30, 31, 36). See also O'Conor's grandson, The Rev. Charles O'Conor, who published further evidence in *The Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late Charles O'Conor of Belanagare*, Dublin, 1796, 186-94, but who makes Digby the villain of the piece. Yet more details come to light in a PhD thesis by Charles O'Conor, entitled *The Early Life of Charles O'Conor* (1930), a transcript of which is preserved in the National Library of Ireland (Call number Ir 92 o 162), cf. 15-19.

⁶ *The Memoirs*, 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

The rapid sale of several works published with the title of tales, as the Arabian, Persian, and Peruvian, induced Digby to give his intended work ... that airy name: and the narratives of this kingdom ... went so much on Milesianism, that nothing could be devised happier for a frontispiece than the sound of Ogygian Tales.⁸

However, using *Fintane* as the narrator, was Contarine's brainchild: "The employing of Fintane to be the relater of his tales was what I recommended to him", he wrote to Charles O'Conor, and from the same letter we learn that Contarine, realizing that Digby had probably overestimated his own abilities and needed help to execute the task, advised Digby to enlist O'Conor's assistance.⁹ O'Conor readily consented to be partner in Digby's undertaking, with the result that Digby's plan was completely recast and a new manuscript produced.¹⁰

The inclusion in the title of *Cahal Crove Darg*, that is, Cathal Crobhderg, or "Charles the Red-Handed", king of Connacht and the illegitimate son of Turlough-More O'Conor, who died in 1224,¹¹ directly connected Charles O'Conor with the book as he was a lineal descendant of this historical king. "About this prince", wrote William Wilde in 1852, "there are many romantic tales and superstitious legends, still lingering with the people in the vicinity [of 'Ballintober Castle'], which, were they woven into a novel, would far surpass most modern works of fiction".¹² Unfortunately, Wilde restricted himself to telling the familiar story of Cahal's birth and subsequent flight to a distant province. Oliver Goldsmith, who would have come across these stories when he stayed with his uncle Contarine in Connacht, put *Cahal Crove Darg* on a par with Robin Hood,¹³ and this also seems to be the impression *The Annals of Connacht* wish to give of him where he is portrayed as a righteous, prudent and just king who was "the fiercest and harshest towards his enemies", and at the same time one

⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁹ O'Conor, *The Early Life of Charles O'Conor*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹¹ *Annála Connacht: The Annals of Connacht (AD 1224-1544)*, ed. A. Martin Freeman, Dublin, 1944, 3.

¹² Sir William Robert Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, Dublin, 1979, 99.

¹³ *The Bee, or Literary Intelligencer*, 27 October 1759. Goldsmith was generally referring to folklore traditions transmitted through the people and as examples he cited, among others, the tradition of Robin Hood amongst the English, Kaul Dereg (Cahal Crove Darg) amongst the Irish and Crichton amongst the Scots.

“who most comforted clerks and poor men with food and fire on the floor of his own habitation”.¹⁴ David Fitzgerald called him “a kind of Hercules figure” in the Irish folk tradition, but he, too, omitted any mention of feats or deeds attributed to him.¹⁵

In answer to the question as to why *O'Brazil* was chosen as the prince's abode, two aspects spring to mind. The first concerns his legendary birth tale, which briefly goes as follows: Cahal's father who was married to the daughter of O'Neill, Prince of Ulster, had an affair with a beautiful maid-servant, named Gearrog Ny-Moran. When the childless queen found out that Gearrog was pregnant, she immediately sent for a Scotch witch to see if she could stop the birth. The queen was assured that if nine hazel rods were knotted and fastened to the gable end of the castle, Gearrog could not be delivered of her burden. The witch's advice was taken and the unfortunate Gearrog suffered incessant pains for nine days, during which period the child's bloody hand was suspended from the womb, hence his name. Overcome with pity, her crafty midwife approached the queen, pretending to be soliciting aid for a peasant who had just given birth to a boy. The queen enquired the name of that woman and upon hearing that it was Gearrog, she was so enraged that in a frantic fit she took a hatchet, ran to the gable-end of the palace and hacked the nine hazel rods into bits, upon which poor Gearrog was immediately relieved from her pains, and brought forth the celebrated Charles the Red-Handed.¹⁶ For several years after, Gearrog and her son had to remain in hiding. Protected from the wrath of the queen by ordinary folk, and camouflaged in the garb of a peasant, Cahal supported himself by manual labour. At length the king of Connacht died, and Cahal, who was reaping oats when the news arrived of his father's death, at once

¹⁴ *Annála Connacht*, 3.

¹⁵ David Fitzgerald, “Notes sur quelques Origines de la Tradition Celtique; Sources Historiques: (b) – Cathal Crobhderg”, *Revue des Traditions Populaires*, V/10 (1890), 613.

¹⁶ For further details of this story, see Ottway, *A Tour of Connaught*, 430-32; H.C.C., *Notes and Queries*, 2nd series, VI/139 (28 August 1858), 177; *The Recollections of Skeffington Gibbon, from 1796 to the Present Year, 1829; Being an Epitome of the Lives and Characters of the Nobility and Gentry of Roscommon; the Genealogy of those Who Are Descended from the Kings of Connaught; and a Memoir of the Late Madame O'Conor Don*, Dublin, 1829, 38-40; Wilde, *Irish Popular Superstitions*, 99-101.

went to his palace and successfully claimed the vacant throne. Regrettably, there is no indication of whether the romantic and superstitious tales which William Wilde alluded to had already placed the fugitive prince in Brasil Island, or whether the choice of that location was Charles O'Conor's idea. Whatever the case may be, no better measure could be imagined than to counter the queen's use of magic with the flight to an enchanted island.

The second consideration for selecting O-Brazil as Cahal's hiding place has a more serious background. We have to remember that the manuscript was written during the time of the Penal Laws (1691-1778), the anti-Catholic legislation enacted after the Williamite War. A week before the *Ogygian Tales* were advertised, Contarine admonished O'Conor to be more careful with his choice of words and to treat political and religious issues with more moderation and impartiality so that no party could take offence. Contarine cautioned him about naming names that would immediately "draw the spectator's eyes entirely upon it and raise a prejudice" against the author. Furthermore, in the manuscript he detected too many parallels "with the case of a certain gentleman abroad" that he felt it necessary to strike out the words "exile" and "abdication" in order to discourage readers from concluding that this was the work of some Jacobite.¹⁷ Doubtless, O'Connor heeded the advice, and instead of making straightforward or explicit historical references in the title he opted for more oblique names and locations, and consequently conjured up the image of his legendary ancestor and the illusive Brasil Island.

The Penal Laws notwithstanding, an ever-growing involvement in Gaelic history and literature can be observed among the Old English, the descendants of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman conquerors. Having gradually merged with the native Gaelic stock, they remained Catholic at the Reformation, in contradistinction to the recent Elizabethan and Jacobean settlers, the New English. Tarred with an Irish brush, they stood accused of degeneracy, disloyalty and barbarity by numerous writers and historians,¹⁸ most notably John Davies (c.

¹⁷ O'Conor, *The Early Life of Charles O'Conor* 17-18.

¹⁸ Clare O'Halloran, "Irish Re-Creations of the Gaelic Past: The Challenge of Macpherson's *Ossian*", *Past and Present*, CXXIV (August 1989), 69-95; Colin Kidd, "Gaelic Antiquity and National Identity in Enlightenment Ireland and Scotland", *English Historical Review*, CIX/434 (1994), 1197-1214.

1570-1626) and Edmund Spenser, whose harsh criticism of Irish life has already been commented on. But in fact common religion and mutual threat accelerated an alliance between the Old English and the Gaelic Irish.¹⁹ As part of their defence against the charges of inferiority and divergence from English cultural standards, Irish antiquarians and writers from both these ethnic backgrounds fabricated a glorious pre-colonial past which not only contrasted with their present perceived situation as lowly colonial subjects, thus undermining the colonial stereotype, but also created an appealing image of Ireland as an ancient, highly civilized and sophisticated nation.²⁰ It was the emphasis on the latter which proved very attractive for many Protestant Anglo-Irish antiquarians and writers who came to identify with Gaelic culture.²¹ Leerssen, whose ground-breaking book *Mere Irish and Fíor Gháel* provided the base for all the research done in this area, persuasively argues that ancient Gaelic antiquity so much engaged the interest of the Protestant ascendancy in the course of the eighteenth century that ultimately one can talk of a cultural osmosis of Gaelic culture into the Anglo-Irish classes. This in effect meant that towards the end of that century, many of the Irish Protestant élite had not only come to see Ireland as their native country, but also regarded ancient Gaelic history as their own.²² “By the late eighteenth century”, Leerssen concludes, “Anglo-Irish Patriots see themselves as successors to the ancient Gaels ...”.²³

O’Conor’s correspondence most certainly testifies to this quite extraordinary growth of interest in ancient Gaelic history, a pitfall which Digby obviously had not fully recognized when he first advertised his *Ogygian Tales*. When subscriptions came flooded in and he despairingly realized that he could not deliver, he turned for help to Contarine, who, as already mentioned, then enlisted O’Conor’s assistance. In his bid to inveigle O’Conor into partnership Contarine

¹⁹ *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, 408.

²⁰ O’Halloran, “Irish Re-Creations of the Gaelic Past”, 72-73, 77.

²¹ Kidd, “Gaelic Antiquity”, 1201.

²² Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Gháel: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century*, Cork, 1996, *passim*, and in particular pages 315-25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 382.

pointed out, “I believe no advertisement ever met with so great success”.²⁴

It was precisely this tremendous interest in the Irish past that Brooke wished to cash in on with his *History of Ireland from the Earliest Times*, and the editor’s announcement of Brooke’s book in the *Dublin Journal* is indeed predicated on a cultural heritage shared by Protestants and native Catholics: “As most Nations are fond of giving Accounts of the Antient State of their Countries, we think, that the following Preface to a new History of Ireland, by Henry Brooke ... will be acceptable to all our Readers.” In the preface, Brooke declared that he would make everybody in the country feel proud of its history, promising his readers that he would show them that their glorious ancestors were not only “deep in learning”, pious, and just, but also the most generous and valiant people that lived upon the face of the earth.²⁵

²⁴ O’Conor, *The Early Life of Charles O’Conor*, 17.

²⁵ *Dublin Journal*, 1869 (29 January-2 February).



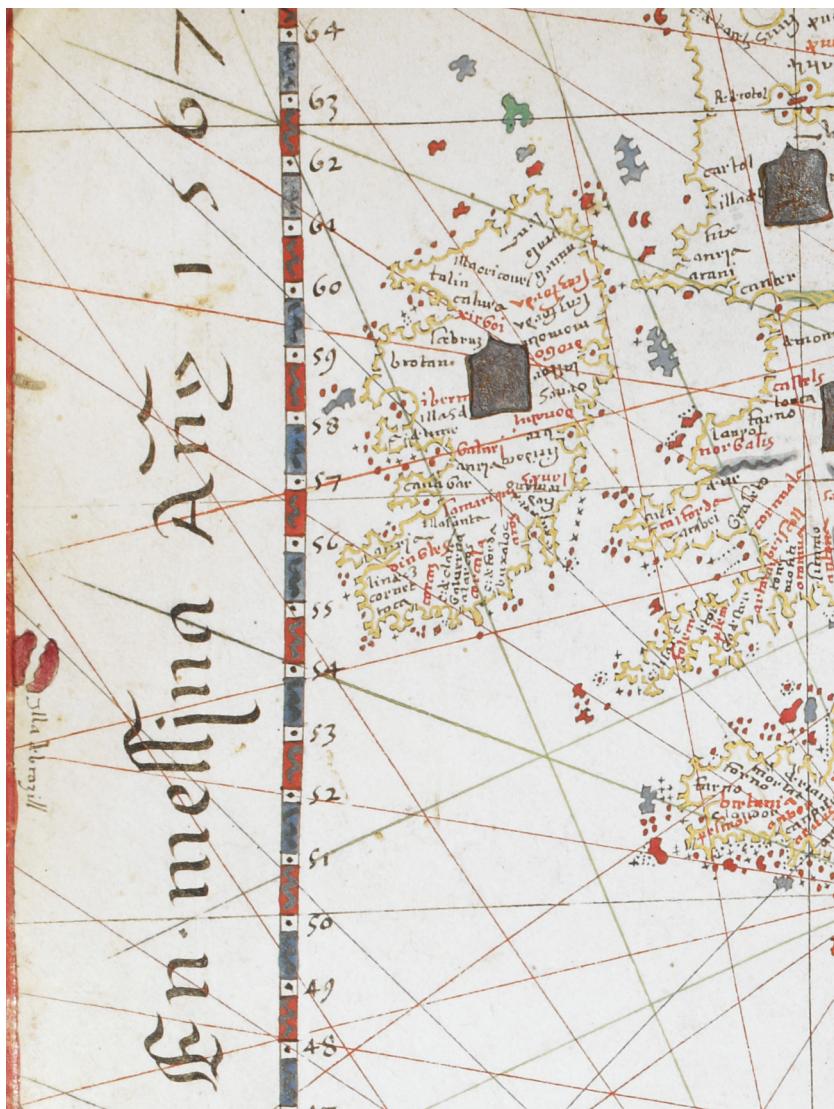
Portolan Chart of Western Europe by Battista Agnese (1536).

By permission of the British Library; Shelfmark: Add. MS. 19927 (f. 7);



Portolan Chart of Western Europe by Giorgio Sideri (1562).

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Portolan Chart of Europe by Joan Martines (1567).

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Portolan Chart of Northern Europe by Fernão Vaz Dourado (1575).
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Ui Breasail (The Isle of the Blest).

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CHAPTER 8

THE VISION OF ULSTER: BRASIL ISLAND AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

In no other part of Ireland is Brasil Island more cryptically bound up with questions of national and religious identity than in the northern province of Ulster. The two most elaborate and enigmatic stories concerning the island stem from here. Although published anonymously in Ireland and in North America, both were in all probability written by Northern Irish clergymen and, by peculiar coincidence, they both date from the same year, 1752. No doubt their intricate political and religious innuendos would have had special relevance to the readership at the time, but it is doubtful whether a full appreciation of their particular significance can be reached today. Little wonder, then, that, with the exception of a more recent study by Michael Griffin and Breandán Mac Suibhne,¹ there do not appear to be any discussions of these two texts, entitled “A Voyage to O’Brazeel, a Sub-Marine Island, Lying West off the Coast of Ireland”,² and *Old Ireland’s Misery at an End; Or, The English Empire in the Brazil’s Restored*.³ The meagre commentary regarding

¹ Michael Griffin and Breandán Mac Suibhne, “Da’s Boat; or, Can the Submarine Speak? *A Voyage to O’Brazeel* (1752) and Other Glimpses of the Irish Atlantis”, *Field Day Review*, II (2006), 111-27; Michael Griffin, “Offshore Irelands; or, Hy-Brazil Hybridized: Utopian Colonies and Anti-Colonial Utopias, 1641-1760”, in *Enemies of Empire*, eds E. Flannery and A. Mitchell, Dublin, 2007, 130-41.

² Anon., “A Voyage to O’Brazeel, a Sub-Marine Island, Lying West off the Coast of Ireland”, bears the date 1752, and is contained in *The Ulster Miscellany* (pages 9-64), which according to the Linen Hall Library (Shelfmark BPB 1753.2) was printed in Belfast by James Blow in 1753. In the past it was difficult to find a copy of the text, but now the complete issue of the *Ulster Miscellany* is available online: see <http://books.google.ie> (accessed 10 August 2011).

³ Anon., *Old Ireland’s Misery at an End; Or, The English Empire in the Brazils Restored: Being the Second Appearance of the Inchanted Lady, who Appeared the 5th Day of June, 1752, in the Form of a Mermaid, on a Sand Bank, in the Harbour of Lougres, and the Parish of Endeskeale, North-West of the County of Donegall, in Ireland, as Was Seen and Heard by Thomas White, John Brown, and William*

the first title amounts to no more than saying that it is “a curious satire”,⁴ “a political tract”,⁵ “a curious tale”,⁶ or “an ingenious political satire ... modelled on the design of Dean Swift’s voyages to Lilliput and Brobdignang”,⁷ while the second title is referred to as a remarkable “early American version of a familiar Irish imaginative genre”.⁸ Because these two titles represent the earliest Irish literary productions dealing with Brasil Island, and because both have so far received only scant attention, they will be dealt with in some detail.

“A Voyage to O’Brazeel, a Sub-Marine Island, Lying West off the Coast of Ireland”

The story is about a visit to the island which, somewhat contrary to the usual sequence of events, was once a supposedly real island situated close to the coast of Donegal whose inhabitants had opted to become invisible, and who now, having lived under water for generations, dread the possibility of their discovery and subsequent disenchantment. So the story focuses on the islanders rather than on the enterprising conqueror or would-be colonizer. Furthermore, unlike other Brasil Islands, this one stays under water and it surfaces neither completely nor periodically, thus rendering it proof against the usual means of disenchantment by casting fire, sods of earth or other objects onto its shores.

“A Voyage to O’Brazeel” forms part of, and is in fact the longest single piece in, *The Ulster Miscellany*, a mixed bag of poetry, prose, plays, letters, songs and riddles, targeted at a young, enlightened, elite male readership. The topics range from religion, philosophy and literature to history and current socio-political affairs, but there are also contributions covering such macho concerns as

Cunningham, *Who Were Coming up the Channel in a Small Fishing Boat*, Boston, 1752. The same text was also published in Newport, Rhode Island in the same year, but with one slight difference in the title: instead of *in the Brazils*, it reads *in the Brazil's*.⁹

⁴ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, I, 217.

⁵ Westropp, “Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic”, 236, n.3.

⁶ Russell K. Alspach, “Some Sources of Yeats’ *The Wanderings of Oisin*”, *PMLA*, LVIII/3 (1943), 856.

⁷ Lageniensis [i.e. Canon J. O’Hanlon], *Irish Folklore: Traditions and Superstitions of the Country; with Humorous Tales*, Glasgow, n.d. [1870?], 124.

⁸ Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: Irish-American Fiction from the 1760s to the 1980s*, Lexington, KY, 1990, 9.

hunting, drinking and courtship. The tenor varies accordingly, from predominantly didactic or kindly paternal to jocular and occasionally even bawdy.⁹

Although the contributors remain anonymous and, if at all, are identified by initials only, there are enough clues to indicate that *The Ulster Miscellany* was the production of a coterie with a centre of gravity in the north-west of Donegal. Of its members only one person, and one of its key figures at that, Matthew Draffen (c. 1703-85), rector of the parish of Gartan, has been identified relatively securely, and one other contributor, William Wray (c. 1708-87), has been tracked down with some degree of certainty. Ominously, both can be tenuously connected to Henry Brooke and his cousin Richard Digby.¹⁰

In his introductory remarks, addressed “To the Very Worthy The Gentlemen of the North of Ireland”, the publisher of *The Ulster Miscellany*, who also remains anonymous, briefly sets forth the two main aims of the book. Apart from generally wishing to promote religion and virtue, the first express aim is to stimulate and strengthen patriotic feelings: “this Book is the Product of your own Soil: A generous minded Man has a natural Propensity to savour every Thing that is peculiar to his native Country; being, in some Sort, of a Piece with himself; and therefore, justly prides himself in its Perfections, and endeavours to palliate its Failings.” However, as love of country and the desire to fulfil one’s social obligations are contingent on the inherent worthiness of society, the second aim of the book is to encourage and fortify the two “glorious privileges” of liberty and property.¹¹ We shall investigate how these objectives are reflected in “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”. Before we do this one other point has to be made.

In the preface to this story it is claimed that the text is a literal translation of an old Irish manuscript, and that the original narrator,

⁹ For a fuller discussion of its contents, see Griffin and Mac Suibhne, “Da’s Boat”, which offers valuable insights into the background of *The Ulster Miscellany* and its contributors.

¹⁰ Griffin and Mac Suibhne support their arguments for such a connection with the observation that Wray was genealogically connected to both Brooke and Digby. Draffen attended Trinity College, Dublin, at the same time as Brooke, whom he would have known anyway because, geographically speaking, he was his neighbour: see “Da’s Boat”, 115-18.

¹¹ *The Ulster Miscellany*, 8-9.

Manus O'Donnel,¹² had put it down in writing during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.¹³ This is an interesting choice of putative scribe. The O'Donnells were indeed a powerful clan in Irish history with septs in different parts of Ireland, but their Donegal branch was regarded as the largest and most prominent dynasty in the history of that county. “A Voyage to O'Brazeel”, then, is set in the O'Donnell heartland. What is more, Manus O'Donnel, chief of the clan until 1555, whose death is recorded in 1563, had indeed produced a Gaelic manuscript entitled *Betha Colaim Chille* (“The Life of St Columcille”), composed in honour of the famous saint and kinsman by descent.¹⁴ Tradition also preserves several satiric *ranns* (verses or rhymes) of this wealthy, witty “scholar-prince” who by some is considered to be one of the most considerable figures of his age.¹⁵

In “A Voyage to O'Brazeel” the O'Donnells' station in life is reduced to that of comfortable farmers by choice. Both by right of family and fortune, they could have belonged to the gentry, but according to our first-person narrator, Manus O'Donnel, his father, Brien, slighted genteel living preferring the life of a yeoman.¹⁶ From the way he is portrayed by his son, the reader understands that he is a saintly man, honest, just and charitable. One day this man does not return home, and after days of fruitless searching for him, the family conclude that he must have accidentally fallen into the sea and drowned.

About a month later, however, when Manus is taking a stroll by the seaside close to their home in Clogheneely, on the west coast of Donegal, he sees his father coming towards him. Cheerful and excited, Brien explains that he wants to show his son something out on the sea, urging him to fetch some fire as they will need it in the boat, and off they row. Suddenly the father bores a hole in the bottom of the boat and, naturally, the boat begins to sink. But thanks to an oak stick which Brien holds in his hand no harm comes to them. Once afloat, it

¹² The surname is here spelled with one *l* whereas the historical figure tends to be spelled with two *lls*.

¹³ *The Ulster Miscellany*, iii.

¹⁴ The MS is preserved in the Bodleian Library. For further details, see Aodh de Blácam, *Gaelic Literature Surveyed: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, Dublin, 1973, 201-208.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶ “A Voyage to O'Brazeel”, 14.

burns like a candle and drives the water away. Thus, no water comes in over the sides of the boat; instead it forms an arch over the men's head, and as they go deeper under the water they move within a tunnel until at length they reach O'Brazeel, where Brien has spent the whole previous month.¹⁷

O'Brazeel is described in terms of Edenic overabundance – a “delicious” island with cattle in fair pastures, splendid fountains, flourishing trees, and fruit and grain in full perfection, where the people are virtuous, happy and hospitable. Accordingly, when entering a farmhouse the O'Donnels are heartily welcomed and warmly entertained before continuing on to the governor's house where their anticipated arrival is greeted with courtesy. The remainder of the visit, that is the bulk of the story, is almost completely taken up by the governor's accounts of the historical origins of the island, its government and institutions and also of the harmonious social conditions prevailing there. Before the O'Donnels take their leave, the governor tells them that it was on account of Brien's high morals that he and his son have been permitted to acquaint themselves with this sinless Christian heaven. Yet Brien's request to be allowed to remain there is emphatically turned down. He must go back to where he is needed most, and where he must endeavour to reform his fellow countrymen, because surely, “a good man ought not to go where he will *get* most good, but where he can *do* most”.¹⁸

The O'Donnels' visit, which forms the framework of the story, allowed the author to contrast what he obviously considered to be the unfavourable social conditions of Ulster with an ideally organized society based on the principles of true Christianity. Clearly then, O'Brazeel is a Christian utopia which represents the other side of Ulster society, as will become obvious when we compare the two systems in greater detail.

The story is presented in an inverted chronological setting. The supposed translation of 1752 is based on an assumed Irish original written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603). The governor's account takes the reader back through the centuries to the

¹⁷ “A Voyage to O'Brazeel”, 15-16. Crofton Croker discusses similar descents of mortals into aqueous abodes in classical literature: see *Fairy Legends*, 345-49.

¹⁸ “A Voyage to O'Brazeel”, 84 (my emphasis).

very early days of the Christianization of Ireland,¹⁹ at which stage O'Brazeel was just an ordinary, barren island, poor and unfruitful, separated from the western coast of Donegal by some seven or eight leagues. The story is best unravelled and analysed in reverse order.

According to the governor, Christianity was brought to O'Brazeel by the Apostle Matthew and his companion Joseph Justus. With their mission accomplished, Matthew left but Joseph stayed behind as Brasil Island's appointed pastor. So good was he at teaching and practice that he won over the entire population of the island, and once they were firmly grounded in the love of God and virtue, the inhabitants were most desirous of a happy afterlife, caring little for their lives or property.²⁰ Nevertheless they still had to earn a living and as their own island did not afford them the necessities of life, they were obliged to travel to the Irish mainland where they laboured hard for their livelihood. In time, this regular intercourse proved to be costly because the moral degradation of the mainland gradually contaminated the pure and unsullied minds of the O'Brazeelians. Unable to put a stop to this growing evil, the heads of the families decided that they were better off at the bottom of the sea "rather than suffer their virtue to be defaced with the corruption of the Irish vices".²¹ So they publicly prayed to God three times a week, begging him to sink them and their island into the ocean.

Just what kind of an unchristian place was Ulster that it could possibly warrant such an extraordinary death-wish, and what period in history is referred to? A time frame is established easily enough: the heart of the story is set in medieval times. We learn from the governor that O'Brazeel was still floating when the Vikings arrived in Ireland,²² because the island was just as badly affected by the Scandinavian marauders as the mainland: "Both parties were severely punished by the barbarous devastations and indecent cruelties committed among them by the Danes, Norwegians, and other neighbouring nations, who came among them for plunder."²³ And when the O'Donnells' visit the

¹⁹ How Christianity expanded in Ireland remains rather obscure, in fact very little is known about the earliest Christians anywhere in Western Europe: see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Harmondsworth, 1986, 276.

²⁰ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 20.

²¹ *Ibid.* 22.

²² Conventionally dated to around 800 AD.

²³ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 22.

island during Queen Elizabeth's reign, it has already been in its submarine position for some generations.

We are told that O'Brazeel was originally owned by a petty prince who governed the whole north-west of Ireland, and who made a present of the island to the chief pastor residing in that part of the country, and that by virtue of this grant the island, technically speaking, still belongs to the bishop of Raphoe: "the present bishops of Raphoe have this island inserted in their patents, and will be good fish for them when they can catch it." We also learn that since their early conversion to Christianity, the Irish clergy had become quite remiss in their duty. They savoured the delights of the prince's court where they were royally entertained, but worse still, they were granted "large allowances out of the lands and labours of the people, which they exacted with rigour".²⁴ While some of the ordinary hard-working O'Brazeelians became tainted with the surrounding moral degradation, others became disgruntled with these perilous developments. When the growing rancour and animosity had reached a stage where the very fabric of their Christian community was threatened, the island elders arrived at the above-mentioned conclusion – that their bond with God could only be preserved by severing all contacts with the mainland and sinking the island under the water.

Historically speaking, the governor's account is set in the time of Gaelic lordship. Donegal had been conquered by three branches of the Northern Ui Neill in the fifth century, and it was subsequently wracked by wars of succession within these clans as well as by the rivalry of two of their most powerful dynasties, the O'Donnells and the O'Neills, which lasted for over a thousand years, from the sixth century until both were overcome by the English.²⁵ The O'Donnells had fiercely resisted English domination, but during the sixteenth century they occasionally co-operated with the English when such a move promised success in battle against their ancient enemies, the O'Neills. The last attempt by the O'Donnells to rebel against English rule and preserve the Gaelic order in the north west of Ireland ended in the defeat at Kinsale in 1602. Warfare, then, was endemic in that part of the country, a policy which does not appear to have contravened the

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁵ See <http://www.donegallibrary.ie/memory/history.htm> (accessed 5 January 2009).

principles of the Church. Quite the contrary, not only did members of ruling dynasties like the O'Donnells take up religious life, as with Colmcille in the sixth century, but more often than not they formed close alliances with great monasteries to forcefully extend their power, property and influence which in time led to the merging, nay, co-identity, of secular and ecclesiastical interests.²⁶

The ideals according to which Brasil Island is run could not be any more different from Gaelic Ireland. There is neither an aristocracy nor an institutionalized Church in O'Brazeel: this is a peace-loving country without colonial ambitions or even a defence force, and the political mandate emanates from the people. Here personal property is limited, and poverty, corruption and injustice do not exist. Nor is this ideal society compatible with English rule, which had been or was in the process of being imposed on Ulster to replace the old Gaelic order.²⁷ Apart from the three most obvious stumbling blocks, namely the monarchy, the Church and the Army, England's unsuitability for a utopian model, if we credit Brien O'Donnel's narrative, is further exacerbated by a certain flaw attributed to the members of the English ruling class, that is, a lack of inner virtue. This notion is illustrated in a parable about a Turk and an Englishman travelling together in Turkey. The Englishman has successfully made inroads in his attempts to convert the Muslim to Christianity when the two men happen to find a purse of money on the road. The Turk picks it up and hangs it on a tree nearby where the owner is sure to find it when he comes back in search of it. The Englishman, however, refusing to believe that no one but the true owner will take it, plucks the purse from the tree and puts it in his own pocket. Absolutely appalled at this instance of dishonesty and avarice, the Turk declares that, if ever he were to change his religion, he would embrace that one which practised what it preached, believing that "our rewards and punishments in the next life will depend more upon our practice, than on our knowledge".²⁸

Brien O'Donnel's critical shaft is directed here against this kind of hypocrisy which he considers to be prevalent in Ulster society. People

²⁶ See McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 9, 243 ff.

²⁷ The assumed author does not date his manuscript, but he refers to Queen Elizabeth's reign and to the Reformation then being in its infancy.

²⁸ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 12.

are Christian in name only,²⁹ and many of his fellow countrymen are so bigoted in their way of thinking “that if Christ himself came from heaven and told them they were wrong, they would not believe him”.³⁰ Unchristian behaviour is illustrated by a few uncharitable acts which, though not specifically targeting the English, represent an implied criticism of English class structure with its inequitable system of landownership. Among the landed establishment we hear of idle wasters and predatory defrauders whose self-interest is protected by the law, which, due to its inherently complicated nature, is controlled and interpreted by lawyers. And the latter are solely interested in increasing the wealth of their respective clients. Neither happiness nor charity can thrive in a society like this, where impoverished farmers are driven to theft in order to feed their families, and where honest people, unable to repay their debts, languish in prisons.³¹

Essentially this criticism of the state of affairs in Ulster mirrors the indictment of the social conditions in other European countries, as articulated by Thomas More’s mouthpiece Raphael Hythloday in Book I of his *Utopia* (1516). The envisioned counter-image, too, the island of O’Brazeel, in many respects so closely matches More’s ideal projection of Utopia that Hythloday’s admiration for the Utopians – “among whom, with very few laws, all things be so well and wealthily ordered, that virtue is had in prize and estimation, and yet all things being there common, every man hath abundance of everything”³² – might equally have been put into Brien O’Donnel’s mouth in praise of O’Brazeel.

The greatest resemblance between the two model islands would seem to lie in their forms of government, which are almost indistinguishable. Magistrates, whom More calls “philarchs” and “chief philarchs”, are termed “wardens” and “directors” in “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”; their functions, responsibilities and mode of election are virtually identical, as is the role of the president – whether titled “prince” or “governor” – who holds this position for life. Furthermore neither island has any need for lawyers, simply because they have only few laws and these are clearly understood by everybody. Strict

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11-14, 18, 48.

³² Thomas More, *Utopia*, tr. Ralph Robinson, Ware, 1997, I: 53.

rules regulate all aspects of public life and many private concerns. An example of the latter would be the marriage age, which in Utopia is not below twenty-two for men and eighteen for women, while the respective ages in O'Brazeel are thirty and twenty-five. The two systems correspond in many other ways, but it would make for tedious reading if we were to compare every aspect of their respective political and social structure.³³ The essential point is that both islands represent highly ordered and regulated states where everybody is bound to contribute towards the common good.

More interesting and revealing are the differences, and of these the two most conspicuous concern property and religion. If we look at property in Utopia we find that, thanks to the basic communism that is practised there, all the necessities of life and all public services are free. So there is no need for money or for property.³⁴ In O'Brazeel, on the other hand, property and money are extremely important factors: they are in essence the criteria on which the divisions within society are based. Property and money, or the lack of it, separate the islanders into three categories within which their role is prescribed by established procedure.

All the land of the island is equally divided among the families,³⁵ but only the two eldest children of each family are entitled to an inheritance. The one who receives the land is referred to as “proprietor of land” while the sibling who gets a fixed sum of money is henceforth called “proprietor of money”, and only these two privileged children are allowed to marry. But they are not free to choose any partner they wish: they must adhere to a rule which stipulates that land must always be united with money, as demonstrated by the following example. A male proprietor of land is obliged to marry a woman who is a proprietor of money, which he then passes on to his oldest brother or sister. If it goes to a brother, he then is obliged to marry a woman who is a proprietor of land, by which means he becomes the owner of the land, and the money is

³³ There are also differences in detail and emphasis, and for some aspects dealt with in one text there is no equivalent in the other; of these slavery and capital punishment are the most obvious.

³⁴ Money is only used in exchange for external favours or services like foreign militia, but not for internal purposes.

³⁵ “A Voyage to O'Brazeel”, 23.

given to her family: “Thus matters are regulated that no inheritance can be divided, but all the farmers are kept upon an equality according to the original design.”³⁶ When proprietors die they are obliged to leave all their effects to the public stock and apart from their portion in land or money, their children get nothing.³⁷ The rigid uniformity of the scheme is further underscored by the repetitious occurrence of the number thirty. At the age of thirty all men are given the right to vote, and as already observed, this is also the marriage age for men. The parents must hand over their land to son or daughter as soon as their child turns thirty. Furthermore each division of land is valued at thirty pounds a year, the dowry for a woman is ten times thirty pounds, and the governor gets thirty pounds per annum, and so on.

All the other children, the non-proprietors who form the third category of society are called “younkers”, and they are not allowed to marry, except in the rare circumstance where they can buy the birthright of proprietors who do not feel inclined to marry, or where they may be called into the rank of proprietors “to supply the defects of such families as have but one child; or none at all”.³⁸ The whole workforce of the island is drawn from the ranks of younkers who, once their labouring days are over, are all maintained out of the public stock, but who must, like the proprietors, leave everything to the state at their death. Some are sent to receive higher instruction in academies, and from these are chosen such public servants as administrators, wardens, teachers, directors and governors.

Curiously enough, the structure of O’Brazeelian society remarkably resembles the scenario outlined and dismissed as deficient by Hythloday in Book I of *Utopia*. During a heated dispute about property and money, Hythloday, who considers property to be the root of all evil, repeatedly asserts that there can be no justice in a country as long as there is any property, and money the standard of all other

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-30. The O’Brazeelian property regulations reflect the tradition of imitable inheritance, a practice which prevented subdivision and fragmentation of farms. Originally introduced to Ireland by the Normans, this measure gathered momentum after the Great Famine when population growth was controlled by late marriage and when inheritance of farms or tenancies was restricted to the eldest son, and when only one or perhaps two daughters would receive a dowry while the rest of the children remained empty-handed.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

things. Even if one strictly regulated the amount of property, landholding, or income of each person, and also limited the Prince (that is, the governor in O'Brazeel) in such ways that he “might not grow too great”, the end result would still only amount to mitigation but not to the eradication of the evil.³⁹

At this point it is worth recalling what the publisher of *The Ulster Miscellany* says about property. To him it is a “good” thing, a “valuable blessing” and one of the “glorious privileges” he vows to uphold, albeit in moderation. Moderation is indeed one of the key topics addressed in various guises throughout the whole anthology. Restraint is constantly preached, along such lines as these: “Prerogative and power are useful, so is a chord; but overstretching will spoil both, and he that overstretched the first, ought to be stretched in the second.”⁴⁰ From this it logically follows that property, too, has to be limited or confined, because too much of it breeds greed. So the editor warns the reader not to carry it to excess, but to cherish it, because property is “that necessary Wealth that keeps the Fabrick in a Flow of Health”.⁴¹ A little further on in the anthology, in a piece of fictional dialogue entitled “Advice to a Son”, another, or perhaps the same, writer develops the idea of property being a necessary constituent of society:

God has sent men into the world in a worse condition than any other of his creatures. The brutes have no occasion to secure a property; they bring their cloathing into the world, and their food grows spontaneously to their mouths; whereas, man must procure both ...; as it is the produce of the field that must feed and cloathe him, he must necessarily acquire a property in land and cattle.⁴²

As a precaution against robberies, God has endowed man with reason to recognize the benefits of society, “that is, a convenient number of men entered into a confederacy to support each other, in preserving their lives and properties to the uttermost of their power”.⁴³

³⁹ More, *Utopia*, I: 50 ff.

⁴⁰ “Thoughts on Various Subjects”, in *The Ulster Miscellany*, 235.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴² “Advice to a Son, ‘Letter IV: On Government’”, in *ibid.*, 129.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 130.

This means that the notions of both property and society form part of God's original design. Their immediate end is the common good, but their ultimate purpose is advancement of the glory of God. They are God-given rights which no man, whether he is prince or king or governor has a right to challenge.

This brings us to the other significant difference between Utopia and O'Brazeel, which is religion. In *Utopia*, where life is governed by reason, all inhabitants are free to choose their own denomination, and all religions are tolerated. In O'Brazeel, life is ruled exclusively on the basis of Christian morality. Moreover, O'Brazeel represents Christendom as yet undivided by schisms: it reaches back to the early Church and the purity of its apostolic teachings. Especially in this regard, but also in others, "A Voyage to O'Brazeel" is clearly modelled on Bacon's *New Atlantis* (c. 1621). In the latter the reader also accompanies voyagers who visit a hidden island where they are made welcome, and where in a question-and-answer session with the governor they learn all about the history, government, institutions and prevailing social conditions of this remote place called Bensalem.

The similarities between the islands begin with their foundation myth. Importantly, both islands embraced Christianity soon after Jesus' crucifixion – O'Brazeel within only a few years, Bensalem about twenty years after the event⁴⁴ – and in each case it was one of Jesus' disciples himself – Apostle Matthew and Apostle Bartholomew – who converted the islanders. Thus, their conversion to Christianity was based on direct personal experience. And because this took place long before the Church itself was institutionalized, the islanders' faith is based upon a true understanding of the disciples' conception of the supreme authority of Jesus Christ, and not on church tradition, custom or practice. The islanders have preserved the purity of their religion by strictly guarding it against any contamination or corruption by any other writings. Thus the repertoire of "holy" texts in Bensalem consists exclusively of the Scriptures, the Apocalypse and a letter from the apostle Bartholomew.⁴⁵ It is similarly restricted in O'Brazeel, where it consists of the Old Testament, the Gospel of Matthew and a letter from Matthew's good companion Joseph Justus,

⁴⁴ Francis Bacon, *The New Atlantis*: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/bacon/atlantis.html>, 7 (accessed 20 October 2008).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

containing a “compleat system of religious duties, and divine truths”. These alone represent their holy writings, their only standard or rule of faith and practice.⁴⁶

For the governor of O’Brazeel this is a crucial point which he repeatedly brings up in his discussion with Brien O’Donnel, a professed Roman Catholic. For example, when Brien demands to know why their sacred writings are not included in the O’Brazeelian canon of divine books although they are of equal if not superior authority, the governor explains that the churches which the apostles founded “were pure and perfect”. The Roman canon of scripture, however, represents a conglomerate consisting of several distant writings of the apostles. In his view this is where the church has gone wrong. Matthew and Joseph Justus led by example, and their virtue and goodness was understood and copied by the O’Brazeelians. But when in the course of time Christianity spread into regions further and further afield, it became impossible to set such personal, practical examples as a means of conversion. The written word was introduced, and with it an external dogmatic uniformity was imposed on all peoples, some of whom lived under very different circumstances or simply did not understand the necessity for the rules. Confusion arose, leading to innumerable divisions and even wars and persecution.⁴⁷ Catholicism thus stands firmly rejected. But so is Protestantism, as Brien O’Donnel is quick to retort – without being corrected by the governor – because the argument equally applies to Protestant communities. Indeed, Brien thanks the governor for having furnished him with a very good argument against a sect of what he terms heretics which have lately sprung up in Ulster, and “who call themselves reformers, and Protestants”.⁴⁸

In line with its early-Christian ethos, public worship in O’Brazeel is kept pure and simple, and there is no mention of a temple or church building. Furthermore, not only is episcopacy rejected, but even the role of the priest is pared down to a minimum. Two orders of younkers attend on divine business: the doctors or teachers instruct the children, and the preachers or exhorters refresh the minds of the adults in their duties of Christianity, but neither of them is allowed any

⁴⁶ “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”, 51.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

power, dress or ornament. To Brien O'Donnel's thinking, this is stripping religion a little too bare, whereas the governor counters, that this manner of worship is in fact preserving the spirit of Christ and his apostles.⁴⁹

Both Bensalem and O'Brazeel are objects of divine favour, chosen islands in fact whose special status is recalled in epithets such as "land of angels" and "island of saints". Their "holy and happy" ground is a foretaste of the final Kingdom of Christ, the Promised Land of prophecy, the New Jerusalem in which the saints rule on earth.⁵⁰ The transmutation from ordinary to sanctified island in each case involves a miracle in which light figures prominently. In *The New Atlantis* a wise man instantaneously recognizes a pillar of light for what it is, a heavenly sign, indeed God's finger, and, literally seeing the light, he at once enters into a covenant between God and Bensalem, and henceforth the islanders enjoy divine protection.⁵¹

O'Brazeel certainly has the edge on Bensalem because its relationship with God is on an even more intimate basis. In response to the islanders' earnest plea to sink them to the bottom of the sea, God sends them his personal messenger, the prophet Elias, who arrives in the guise of an ordinary man on horse-back, dressed in mean clothes. "Brethren", he addresses them: "I am informed that you have been soliciting heaven for a very extraordinary thing." But would their hearts not fail them, if the water overwhelmed them? No, the islanders will not falter, and their determination to perish in the sea in God's favour rather than live in sin, effectively seals their agreement with God.⁵² In recognition of their newly-acquired blessed status Elias miraculously turns the bad soil of their island into a good fertile quality. More importantly, he also brings them the glorious light of revelation. This is the special light of the New Jerusalem, requiring no sun, moon or candle to shine, "for the Lord giveth them light"⁵³. Accordingly, the governor likens their light to that which accompanied the Israelites on their way to the New Jerusalem,⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁵⁰ See Revelation 5:10; 20:4.

⁵¹ Bacon, *The New Atlantis*, 7.

⁵² "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 22.

⁵³ Revelation 21:23; 22:5.

⁵⁴ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 16, 18, 25, 27.

proving beyond doubt that, like the Israelites, the O'Brazeelians are God's elect. As befits their privileged status, as soon as the miracle has occurred both islands vanish from view. Bensalem disappears into a solitary situation "hidden and unseen by others" into the greatest wilderness of waters, while O'Brazeel takes up its submarine location. Thus distanced in space, both are kept isolated from the sins of the world and their mysterious quality is kept intact.

Yet despite their privileged concealment, the islanders do keep in touch with the outside world. The reasons for doing so, however, are based on somewhat different rationales. In Bensalem the learned men have set up a scientific academy dedicated to the study of the works and creatures of God – the idea being that the better they understand the true nature of all things, the higher is the glory to God and the greater the benefit for man. So when they send out their "brethren" (incognito, let it be said) to visit other countries, theirs is a sacred mission in the pursuit of knowledge. When their mariners set off, they carry a quantity of treasure with them in order to acquire books, patterns, instruments and whatever else they need for their studies and experiments, and thus they maintain a trade, not for gold, silver, or spices, nor any other commodity of matter, "but only for God's first creature, which was light; to have light ... of the growth of all parts of the world".⁵⁵

Unlike these seekers of light, the O'Brazeelians are definitely pursuing commercial interests. They own a storehouse on the Irish coast and have engaged agents to conduct business for them. Younkers are in charge of the trade, selling commodities like beef, hides, butter, wool and linen, in return for which they bring home money and other goods they might be in need of. While the emphasis is laid on commerce and money, they are also interested in learning other forms of trades, arts and sciences which might usefully be employed in improving conditions and creating employment at home.⁵⁶

The evidence assembled so far has focused upon those aspects which highlight the influence both More's *Utopia* and Bacon's *New Atlantis* had on the conception of "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", but it is most certainly not a case of the former two being rolled into one. Far

⁵⁵ Bacon, *The New Atlantis*, 13 f.

⁵⁶ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 29.

from it, while the author of “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” was certainly inspired by these two publications, he used only some of the ideas expressed therein that suited his purpose. The subject of all three works is the deliberation on the best possible form of government, but whereas More’s and Bacon’s tracts are in essence treatises of political philosophy, the Irish piece is all about nation-forming and culture-building in Ulster. More specifically, the image of O’Brazeel apotheosizes Christian ur-religion, prosperity and happiness. Its author targeted a specific readership – hence the definite framework of references with authentic historical events and an identifiable geographical location – amongst whom, in line with the express aim of the publisher of *The Ulster Miscellany*, he obviously intended to foster a love of fatherland which was a-political and non-partisan, a patriotism which embraced social responsibility and selfless devotion to the good of the public. To this end, he created an ideal state of Ulster which would hold an appeal across all religious, ethnic and political divides, and to which young and old, men and women, landowners as well as traders, could subscribe. What is more, this ideal home is not an entirely elusive cloud-cuckoo-land that exists only in the mind of its author: it rather belongs to the readers’ own heritage in that it is an island which in the past had formed part of Ulster.

The then contemporary Protestant élite in the south of Ireland, too, had, as I have already indicated, tapped into the past to raise a patriotic consciousness, without however embracing all the people on the island. By deliberately choosing one tradition over another – adopting the Gaelic past and writing the Old English heritage out of history – and by excluding the culture of the New English, they limited the attractiveness of their kind of patriotism from the very outset. How much more attractive is O’Brazeel, where all divisive ethnic and cultural elements are taken out of the equation, and where only one criterion is to be met: true Christianity. If Catholic readers should take umbrage at the governor’s anti-Popery remarks, they would at the same time have to acknowledge that the story itself came from within their community, purportedly written down by one of them. Ultimately, they would surely be gratified to realise that it was one of their own who was chosen to visit O’Brazeel. The professed Roman Catholic Brien O’Donnel is portrayed as a true Christian,

indeed as a saint who by definition already belongs to the island. In the end, he will overcome the last few lingering reservations based on his Catholic upbringing, the governor is quite sure of that. He is less sure about Brien's son, whom he considers worthy, but not as good as his father, and so he advises the latter to help improve Manus' growing virtue and give solidity to his good resolutions.⁵⁷

Manus O'Donnell's introduction to "A Voyage to O'Brazeel" bears witness to the success of the advice, because here we learn that Manus has a very strong purpose in relating the story of his and his father's visit to O'Brazeel, namely, to "reform mankind, and win them to a love of practical piety and virtue, by shewing them how far others have excell'd that way, and how gloriously they were rewarded even in this life".⁵⁸ So Manus is not only following in his father's footsteps, but he has also internalized the island's particular brand of Christianity: O'Brazeel, he now acknowledges, is the way forward.

It was a smart move on the part of the author to let the son pass on the Christian message. As already noted, the whole anthology targeted a younger readership. What young man would not identify with a fellow like Manus who felt like killing his own father when he noticed him boring holes in the bottom of the boat? One would also imagine that most young men would empathize with anyone who is inwardly mocking his father's "sermonizing strain",⁵⁹ and who has the audacity to ask the governor very technical and scientific questions pertinent to the island's ability to function under water,⁶⁰ and who even puts potentially embarrassing questions to him concerning the exercise of birth control.⁶¹ Attractive to young people would also be the assertion that O'Brazeelian society is not unfavourably disposed to pleasure and gratification. For example they allow themselves the use of ornaments. In moderation, naturally, but seeing the works of nature around them adorned and beautified, they fail to see why they should appear unadorned to each other. After all, "it is not the use, but the abuse of a thing that is offensive".⁶² Nor are they averse to drinking,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 28. *Utopians* would shudder at this idea, because not only do they shun everything that would have added pleasantness to their individual appearance – a

but again moderation applies, and two glasses of fine cider seems to be the norm.

A further example of the author's pandering to the needs of the younger generation is the long drawn-out love story of Verdone and Moyla⁶³ at the centre of "A Voyage to O'Brazeel". Verdone has chivalrously saved Moyla's life twice, and although these two young people are also deeply in love with one another, they cannot get married for the simple reason that they are both younkers. Though heartbroken and disconsolate, they stoically accept their fate. When it becomes obvious that these young lovers are wilting away, many people are prepared to lend a helping hand. Eventually the combined effort of a doting father, the altruistic sacrifice of a young male proprietor prepared to sell his birthright, together with the willingness of the whole assembly to overcome all other obstacles, ultimately brings about a happy end, an occasion which is then celebrated with much splendour and joy.

To put this in perspective, one cannot help feeling that neither More nor Bacon thought women and children worthy of serious consideration. Their islands represent patriarchies, where old men are being honoured with particular respect, and where fathers can demand absolute obedience from their wives and children. Despite participating fully in activities related to work, education, and so on, women in *Utopia* still serve the men and accept that a wife's main asset is unquestioned obedience to her husband.⁶⁴ Women are married out, while the men stay, and the children's fate depends on the number of siblings. If the parents are too fruitful and exceed the number of children allowed per family, an "easily observed" rule prescribes their removal to other less prolific families.⁶⁵ It comes as no surprise to learn that here even chastisement is governed by regulation. Men are entitled to correct their wives, and parents have power to punish their children, unless the offence demands that a public example be made of them where "they have done any so horrible an offence that the open

woman's beauty being her probity and obedience – but all the men and all the women wear the same garments, all of one colour which was that of natural wool: see More, *Utopia*, II: 68, 72.

⁶³ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 32-41.

⁶⁴ More, *Utopia*, II, 101.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 73.

punishment thereof maketh much for the advancement of honest manners".⁶⁶

In *The New Atlantis* large families are celebrated. However, on closer inspection it becomes obvious where women and children stand in the order of things. An elaborate ceremony called the “feast of the family” is designed to show that Bensalem is “compounded of all goodness”. The celebration is granted to any man who lives to see thirty persons descended of his body. During the feast the man is honoured and showered with gifts, the King’s charter containing many concessions and privileges, etc., and while he is served by his devout children, amongst whom he nominates a son to succeed him, the only privilege granted to his good wife who bore him all those children is the honour of being allowed to observe the ceremony – behind closed doors that is, where she may watch from behind curtains, but where she herself must not be noticed.

In O’Brazeel there is also a slight bias in favour of men,⁶⁷ but broadly speaking we find a more benevolent mindset informing all activities here. The people’s social, moral and spiritual precepts are grounded on the principles of Christian virtue, and as these principles are accepted by all, everybody participates voluntarily. Thus there is no need for punishment here where there are no wilful crimes anyhow because all those who were not attracted to a virtuous life had been given the chance to leave the island before it went under. Even now, younkers who might, for example, disagree with the practice of celibacy are free to leave.⁶⁸ Women inherit property just like men, and like their male counterparts travel between O’Brazeel and other countries in pursuit of trade as well as knowledge. Furthermore, all contribute equally to the public purse, the election process is transparent, and a very detailed example demonstrates how disputes are settled fairly and amicably. What the extended treatment of all these issues indicates quite clearly is that “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” was not simply intended to envision a perfect model of humane society, but that by using realistic features as well as practical

⁶⁶ More, *Utopia*, II, 100.

⁶⁷ “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”, 29. In the case of the two eldest children being male and female, the land would always go to the male child, for instance.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

examples it was also designed to illustrate in detail how such a vision could be implemented in Ulster to the benefit of all.

However, as the religio-political vision is grafted on to the fantasy of a submarine island, the question has to be asked just how earnest the tale is in its reforming spirit. The answer to this seems to be contained in the treatment of the source material. Considering where the author's initial idea about O'Brazeel originated from it stands to reason to assume that he knew of the *Ogygian Tales*. Its publication had been advertised nine years earlier and it had O'Brazil in the title (see Chapter 7, pages 159-65). Familiarity with the island, one might speculate, may also be due to the coterie's connection with Brooke and Digby.

Apart from these two possibilities the author himself reveals two definite sources for his knowledge of O'Brazeel. As his reference to nautical charts shows, he knew of the island's cartographic existence. Apostle Matthew, we are told, crossed over to O'Brazeel, "which at that time lay off the western coast of that County about seven or eight leagues, as may be yet seen in some of your old maps of Ireand".⁶⁹ That the author was also familiar with folklore traditions is made clear by his reference to the commonly held "fabulous" belief that the island is kept under a magic spell by spirits or fairies and that its disenchantment is possible only through sacred means. This is also how Gerald of Wales and Richard Head understood the enchanted island to operate, but "A Voyage to O'Brazeel" turns this folklore tradition on its head. Here it is the good Christians who live on the island, protected by sacred fires, and the iniquitous conquerors are the ones capable of effecting the disenchantment by destroying these fires and replacing them with their own common version. We therefore have to differentiate between two kinds of fire: one that is positive and connected to Christianity and another which is destructive and connected to colonialism. Should the latter ever be lit on the island, the O'Brazeelians would lose their liberty.⁷⁰

The fuel for the sacred fire is brought to O'Brazeel in the shape of acorns by God's messenger Elias, who instructs the people to plant the nuts all around the mountain in the middle of the island. Miraculously, they grow into tall trees within only eight days, and with the wood of

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

these oaks four large fires are to be kindled round the mountain, and all the fires in the houses are to be lit only by this timber, leaving no common fire on the whole island. As soon as all of this and a few other preparatory measures are accomplished, the island is ready for its underwater journey. A deep hole is dug through to the sea underneath, and the island, which is not fixed but floating, goes down very fast. Similar to the O'Donnells' experience, nobody comes to any harm because, thanks to the oak fires' capacity to repel the water, the islanders travel within a tunnel.⁷¹ When they have reached the final depth, a glorious arch forms over the island keeping it safe and dry, and to keep it that way, Elias warns them to keep the celestial oak fires perpetually burning. The island's fate depends on these oak fires in more than one way. If outsiders were able to lay their hands on the O'Brazeelian oaks or even acorns, they could use these as firewood to invade the island, extinguish all the existing fires and raise the island to its former level.⁷²

Elsewhere, fire is frequently referred to as a traditional means of disenchantment for magical islands. However, in no other tale about Brasil Island is there any specific reference to oak fires. Oak woods once covered Ireland – Derry even derives its name from the tree⁷³ – and throughout the major cultures of Europe the oak was foremost amongst venerated trees: anciently connected with the gift of prophecy, sacred to many peoples and often associated with their supreme deity. In ancient Ireland, the druids were said to have worshipped and practised their ceremonies in oak groves, and in Irish mythology one of the four sacred trees, the *Éo Mugna*, was an oak that in season fruited three times. But the oak also figures in the Bible, and in the Irish Christian tradition it is associated with saints of such great stature as Columba and Brigid. Given the pious intent of the story, allusions to the oak are most likely to have been made within this religious context. In the Bible we hear about the oak tree at Shechem where Jacob buried the foreign gods of his people (Gen. 35:4), and Joshua set up a stone under an oak tree as the first covenant of the Lord (Josh. 25:26-7). For the O'Brazeelians the oak tree also marks an end to all other spiritual as well as worldly authorities and the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 23-25.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷³ Derry comes from the Irish word *doire*, meaning “oak grove”.

beginning of an exclusive relationship with God. It is their belief that they now have a special place in the divine order of things.

Of all the major early Irish saints with likely pagan Celtic antecedents, none is more venerated than Brigid, whose vital dates are given as c. 460-c. 528, and who, thanks to many miracles of plenty, as well as acts of kindness and generosity, attracted volumes of lore.⁷⁴ Brigid founded her main church, Kildare Abbey, on the plains of *Cill Dara*, which translates as “the church of the oak”. Her cell was placed under a large oak tree and her church was said to be protected by a perpetual fire surrounded by a circular hedge. Gerald of Wales describes it:

In Kildare ... which the glorious Brigid has made famous, there are many miracles worthy of being remembered. And the first of them ... is the fire of Brigid which, they say, is inextinguishable. It is not that it is strictly speaking inextinguishable, but that the nuns ... have so carefully and diligently kept and fed it with enough material, that through all the years ... it has never been extinguished.⁷⁵

There are a number of reasons why the O’Brazeelian oak fires should echo Brigid’s fire cult. Everything associated with Brigid – the Celtic heritage, her early pre-conquest dates plus her humane attributes – makes her a non-controversial figure, acceptable to Christians of all denominations and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, she is extremely predisposed to performing miracles, and miracles form an essential part of “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”.

How scrupulously the author went about selecting the biblical ingredients out of which he constructed the story of Elias’ visit to O’Brazeel becomes clear when we examine the miraculous occurrences.⁷⁶ When Elias hands over the acorns to be planted around the mountain, he demands that it be henceforth called Mount Horeb.⁷⁷ While there are no references to Mount Horeb in the New Testament, it is the holy mountain of Exodus where miracles occurred involving

⁷⁴ MacKillop, *Myths and Legends*, 89-92.

⁷⁵ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, 81-82.

⁷⁶ Elias is the Latin version of the prophet Elijah.

⁷⁷ “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”, 23.

fire and water.⁷⁸ It is mentioned numerous times elsewhere in the Old Testament in the accounts of the wanderings of the Israelites.⁷⁹ Not only was it in Horeb that the Lord made a covenant with the children of Israel,⁸⁰ but he also sent Elias there. After having been miraculously fed on a cake which nourished him for forty days and forty nights, Elias eventually reached Horeb, “the mount of God”, to receive God’s instructions.⁸¹ This is yet another parallel drawn between the O’Brazeelians and the Israelites – we already learned about the divine light which envelops both (see pages 181-82) – and now we know that they share a mountain of the same name to which God sends his messenger Elias.

This kind of meticulous attention to detail is also evident in the author’s choice of Matthew as the Apostle in charge of the conversion of the O’Brazeelians. Matthew, it will be recalled, does not come alone, he arrives in O’Brazeel with “his companion and fellow labourer ... Joseph surnamed Justus”,⁸² who remains on the island when Matthew moves on. One might think that the surname is given here simply to suggest that he was a morally upright man. However, according to the Acts of the Apostles, there was indeed a Joseph Justus who belonged to the wider circle of Jesus’ disciples, and who is mentioned as one of two candidates to replace Judas Iscariot. The exact phrasing of his name speaks for itself. It reads, “And they appointed ... Joseph ... who was surnamed Justus ...”.⁸³ Along with Joseph, Matthew leaves behind a copy of his gospel. Like the glorious light shining on O’Brazeel, the choice of Matthew and his teachings

⁷⁸ A bush burns without being consumed (Exodus 3:1-2), and Moses strikes a rock to obtain drinking water (Exodus 17:6).

⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 1:2, 1:6, 1:19, 4:10, 4:15, 5:2, 9:8, 18:16, 29:1; Psalms 106:19, Malachi 4:4, 1 Kings 8:9, 2 Chronicles 5:10.

⁸⁰ Deuteronomy 4:10, 1 Kings 8:9.

⁸¹ 1 Kings 19:6-18.

⁸² “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”, 20.

⁸³ The Acts 1:23. In Christian tradition, this man is venerated as Saint Justus of Eleutheropolis. When Brien O’Donnel learns about Matthew and Joseph Justus, he finds the simple use of the first name, or in Joseph’s case first and second, a little unsettling, wondering why the governor does not give the title of saint to the two holy men who converted the island of O’Brazeel. This elicits the cutting remark from the governor that there must be a scarcity of saints in those churches where a few are singled out to be given that title. True to his conviction that every good Christian is a saint *per definitionem* he sees no need for using that particular title.

can be illuminated within the concept of the Second Coming of Christ, the anticipated return of Jesus from Heaven to earth. In the four gospels John the Baptist is presented as Jesus' forerunner, as the herald of Christ's kingdom on earth. While there is some suggestion that John the Baptist may be the prophet Elias, we find a definite connection between the two only in the Gospel of Matthew where John is linked with the returning Elias.⁸⁴

In "A Voyage to O'Brazeel" God reveals himself to the O'Brazeelians through Elias. Indeed, as far as their tradition is concerned, God in this way indicated to them that they are the chosen people. He has predestined them to carry out his mission, namely to convert, before the end of the world, both Jews and Gentiles to the Christian faith. When that time has come, the governor asserts, Elias will return to O'Brazeel and "lead us out to that great work, and give us the power of working miracles to confirm our mission".⁸⁵ Brien O'Donnell has difficulty with this tradition and protests that "Elias is already come" and that "miracles are ceased". But the governor ably counters his two objections. First of all he argues that although Elias appeared as John the Baptist, this should not be understood in a corporeal, but rather in a spiritual sense. John the Baptist came in Elias' power and spirit, so it was not Elias himself. Elaborating a little on this idea, he pleads that Elias, like Christ himself, may very well have two advents, and that in time to come his second advent may be in person. Therefore, "Elias may come personally before the second appearing of Christ".

The other argument about there being no more miracles he feels is altogether unjustified. Just because none have occurred lately does not mean they have ceased forever: "They had a long cessation among the Jews, yet were renewed at the coming of the Messiah, and may be so again before his second coming."⁸⁶ It is a commonplace that many miracles are recorded both in the Old and the New Testament and that their ultimate purpose seems to be to demonstrate the power of God or of a saint through whom he works. Jesus, to whom many miracles are attributed, explains in the Gospel of Matthew, that miracles are based on faith in God as well as prayer:

⁸⁴ Matthew 3:1-3.

⁸⁵ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 55.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

If ye have faith ... ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible to you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer⁸⁷

It is precisely this kind of absolute trust in God that the majority of the O'Brazeelians demonstrates when they pray to God pleading with him to sink their island into the ocean. Only those "not having faith enough" cannot go through with the operation and leave for the mainland.⁸⁸ God acknowledges the O'Brazeelians' unwavering belief in his power by promptly performing through Elias a number of miracles – acorns grow into mature oaks in eight days, the barren soil is converted into fertile land, the island is safely transported and sustained under water, and so on.

By hoping that when he returns, Elias will grant the O'Brazeelians the power to work miracles the governor expresses the belief that the occurrence of miracles is a necessary part of their holy mission. He trusts that the combination of their "holy writings, and the working of miracles, and the cooperating spirit of the Almighty ... will work a thorough conviction".⁸⁹ Again we find a parallel situation in the New Testament where after Jesus' ascension the apostles asked God that miracles be done in support of their missionary work. As soon as their request was granted, the apostles began successfully to perform many miracles and wonders among the people.⁹⁰ Miracles in "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", then, are rendered eschatological. The transportation of O'Brazeel into its subaqueous location is not due to the magical forces of folklore. Instead it needs to be seen in the same light as the beneficial parting of the Red Sea for the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. So the author would have seen no conflict between the Christian ethos of his ideal society and its miraculous location.

Because the O'Brazeelians will resort to peaceful means only and will not even enter into disputes about religious subjects,⁹¹ miracles are indeed badly needed. Even on rational grounds they are necessary, the governor admits, not only for the conversion of non-Christians, but also to reinforce belief among the disparate Christian sects, because

⁸⁷ Matthew 17: 20-21.

⁸⁸ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 23.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁹⁰ Acts 4: 29-31; Acts 5: 12.

⁹¹ "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", 52.

they hate one another with more rancour than those who adhere to a totally different religion. He sadly concludes that “nothing less than a miracle can reconcile such dissenting persecuting brethren”,⁹² a point which is illustrated when, shortly before their departure, the O'Donnels are read out a summary of the O'Brazeelian creed. Brien's reaction is one of mild shock: “You and I profess the same religion”, he observes, “yet a Jew and a Mahometan can hardly differ more than we do”, enumerating all that was passed over in the summary, like infallibility, the Trinity, original sin, the Sacraments, and so on. Only slightly taken aback by the severity of Brien's reaction, because he has mistakenly assumed that Brien had “nothing of the spirit of popery” in him, the governor is nevertheless prepared for some resistance and has already written down arguments drawn from the scripture and from reason, which he gives Brien to read, confident that these will disprove every single objection.⁹³

In Ulster in the mid-eighteenth century, the political aspects of this vision may very well have struck a chord with many disillusioned or oppressed people who were emigrating to America in their thousands for a wide variety of reasons, including economic distress, excessive rents and tithes, exclusion from country and borough politics and religious persecution.⁹⁴ Even the religious message would have been well received by many because the evangelical movement had already prepared the ground for a radical re-thinking of what critics saw as the politically manipulated established churches. Evangelicals play down the importance of doctrine and hierarchy in favour of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, personal conversion experiences, piety, and reliance on the scriptures as the only basis for faith – all concerns which figure prominently in “A Voyage to O'Brazeel”. The evangelical revival that also occurred in continental Europe, in Great Britain, and in America and which transcended national, denominational, and theological boundaries, was quite strong in Ulster

⁹² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁹⁴ See Graeme Kirkham, “The Origins of Mass Emigration from Ireland”, in *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad*, ed. Richard Kearney, Dublin, 1990, 81-90; Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, New York and Oxford, 1985, 137-68; T. Parkhill, “Brave New World: 18th-Century Emigration to America”, in *Ireland of the Welcomes*, Dublin, 1992, 6-9.

during the eighteenth century.⁹⁵ Introduced in the early decades of that century, it really began to catch on in the 1740s, with the arrival of itinerant evangelists such as John Cennick, John Wesley and George Whitefield.⁹⁶ The vast majority of the evangelical clergymen in the Church of Ireland were educated at Trinity College, Dublin, termed by Hempton and Hill as “undoubtedly the educational powerhouse of ... evangelicalism in Ireland”.⁹⁷ Draffen, the main contributor to *The Ulster Miscellany* and likely author of “A Voyage to O’Brazeel”, attended this university during the same years as Brooke and Digby in the 1720s,⁹⁸ and it seems very probable that it was at this institution that he conceived his first ideas about his imaginary island.

With an admixture of humour and seriousness, the author of “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” in his prefatory note addresses criticism of his story allegedly levelled against him on the grounds of improbability. In tandem with the other two modes of dissociation from its contents – the concealment of his authorship and the claim that it is a translation from the Gaelic – the injection of humour would have helped to divert the attention of the ever-watchful eye of the authorities. In this regard we only need to recall Contarine’s advice to O’Conor concerning the handling of historical facts in the *Ogygian Tales* (see page 164). But the joco-serious manner with which the author of “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” treats the pretended objections also serves to further strengthen his position. To argue his case he playfully draws on and combines two sources, the Bible and natural science, thus converging scriptural with scientific explanations. In Bacon’s *New Atlantis* we have already seen how scientific and technical progress was linked to both the improvement of social conditions and to a closer relationship with God. Similarly, our author generated a vision of the New Jerusalem in which human effort is combined with divine authority to establish a blissful new society. He has the O’Brazeelians make practical use of their miraculous gifts in an effort to improve living conditions. Mount Horeb, to give but one example, is used to purge sea water of its salt in order to produce fresh water. Thanks to various

⁹⁵ David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society; 1740-1890*, London and New York, 1992: see particularly Chapter 1.

⁹⁶ *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, 180.

⁹⁷ Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society*, 15.

⁹⁸ Griffin and Mac Suibhne, “Da’s Boat”, 116, 118.

experiments, machines and instruments based on scientific and technical innovation O'Brazeel has a technically advanced society which blends in well with the paradisiacal serenity of the place.

In summary, then, this image of O'Brazeel amounts to quite a remarkable, well-thought-out pious yet progressive vision of an autonomous Ulster which serves as a model for possible unification with the rest of Ireland. It is presented as a popular sovereignty, underpinned by a radical and egalitarian philosophy, prudently governed by elected representatives, based on property and spiritually guided by a church returned to the purity of her apostolic origins.

Old Ireland's Misery at an End: Or, The English Empire in the Brazils Restored

This work was published in two different places during the same year, that is, in Boston, Massachusetts as well as in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1752. Griffin and Mac Suibhne, who identified Draffen as the likely author of "A Voyage to O'Brazeel", also tracked down the most probable author of this pamphlet. They believe it may have been the Reverend James MacSparran (1693-1757), who emigrated from Northern Ireland to America, first settling in Massachusetts and later in Rhode Island, and who had used the same printers, the Franklins of Newport to publish another pamphlet of his.⁹⁹ Besides the evidence which Griffin and Mac Suibhne derived from such circumstantial particulars, there are also many textual clues which, as we shall see, further substantiate their supposition.

What "A Voyage to O'Brazeel" and *Old Ireland's Misery* have in common is that they comprise scriptural, political and folkloric elements. They also share a number of features in the conception of Brasil Island. In both cases the island is bound up with millenarian prophecy. Both texts portray the island as hidden under water, and as its concealment is deliberate on God's part it follows that the islanders are the chosen people. Like the biblical New Jerusalem it has not yet materialized, but its emergence is prophesied in time to come. The difference between the two texts is that "A Voyage to O'Brazeel" presents a secularized version of the thousand-year reign of peace and is thus couched in peaceful terms without apocalyptic destruction intervening, whereas the emphasis in *Old Ireland's Misery* is on the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

imagined violent upheavals before the eventual Kingdom of God. Both texts share the same location, in that they are set in Donegal. “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” designates Brasil Island an area off its western coast; *Old Ireland’s Misery* puts it off its northern coast. Strangely, though, despite specific references to “the North Side of the County of Donegal” the given latitudinal position for the latter, “lying in 47 Deg. 13 Min. North Latitude” – no mention of longitude – would place the island south of Ireland.¹⁰⁰

Old Ireland’s Misery is cryptic to a degree and can be read in two ways: first as a satiric broadside against the then burgeoning apocalyptic literature that focussed on the cataclysmic events before the millennium, and second, as a political tract that uses religious analogy and folklore to project a harmonious union between England and Ireland. It is best to outline the story briefly first. It is quite short, taking up only eight pages of large print. The place: the harbour of Loughros on the west coast of Donegal; the date: 5 June 1752. The attention of three men in a fishing boat – named as Thomas White, John Brown and William Cunningham – is drawn to a mermaid sitting on a sandbank in a clearly distressed state. She will not divulge the reason for her sorrow to the men, asking instead for the Reverend Mr John Smith, who is duly fetched and soon arrives on horseback. To him she reveals herself as the only daughter of the Prince of Lebanon, a member of the half Tribe of Manasses, which has been kept hidden from the rest of the world ever since their expulsion from the Holy Land. For seven-hundred-and-thirty years these people have been languishing in concealment, lamenting their own wrongdoing in Jerusalem. While a quarter of the Tribe of Manasses was, like herself, turned into mermaids, “another Part is in the Brazils, covered in the Sea by the Hand of the Lord” but for seven hours in every seven years, the island is dry. All will be changed utterly in twenty months’ time, when a North wind will clear the island of water for ever and “then we will all return to the Land of Jerusalem … and People out of most Parts of the Earth will inhabit it, which will cause great War between the Christian Kings and Princes”.¹⁰¹

Having dwelt upon the biblical prophecy, the mermaid turns to the enchanted island “so often seen by Mariners off the Irish Coast”,

¹⁰⁰ *Old Ireland’s Misery*, 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

giving a brief account of its geographical features and climate. She also makes reference to two places on the island. One is the allegedly famous city of South-Castle which for beauty surpasses any city in Europe, or the known world, but apart from its huge white and red marble walls – “29 Furlongs round” and “25 Cupits high” – we are denied any further description of its splendour. The other place mentioned is the Palace of Phoebus, lying some 300 miles farther north from South-Castle, which for glorious appearance also exceeds all other palaces. The mermaid’s description of the enchanted island ends abruptly with the prediction that here, too, bloody battles and contests will be fought over the election of kings, ending with the victory of the English crown. Then the NEW IRELAND will be subject to the English Government and old Ireland will be relieved from all taxes and duties, with the result that all those people who have of late gone to America will return and live in this plentiful country. People from the farthest part of the world will come and live here, “and the World will be united into one Religion, and serve one God”.

The Reverend Mr Smith wants to know if the cities and castles will survive intact. She answers the question in the affirmative, adding that they will be inhabited by Christians. She also predicts that several parts of the island will become visible on 15 August, and that people will run to see it, “supposing that it will be found”,¹⁰² but a great blast of wind will suddenly cover it, and it will not be seen again until it will finally be recovered and shall no more disappear. A most horrible war will come among the Christian kings and princes, which will be:

... so cruel that men would lament to see so many thousands slain. The last tumult and rebellion in Scotland and in some parts of England – the Jacobite rising in support of Bonny Prince Charlie – had not “wrought fruits of Repentance”; the Almighty would send plagues to punish the disobedient and multitudes would lie dead in the streets. And “there shall be Wars and Rumours of Wars in all Parts of the World, both by Land and Sea”.¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰³ As the electronic copy of my version of the text (Newport, Rhode Island, Evans no. 40634) ends abruptly on page 6, I am using the last two pages of the story as provided by Griffin and Mac Suibhne in “Da’s Boat”, 126-27.

Amidst a terrible noise of thunder, this being the signal for her return, she glides gently along the surface repeating the following lines:

An enchanted Isle lies close to the *Irish* shore,
 Whose poor inhabitants always sigh and roar,
 In these strange Countries that's seldom seen,
 With thirty-eight Cities which have been
 Never as yet discovered, but unknown
 To other Nations have laid hid alone;
 Not found by foreign Sword nor foreign Trade,
 Tho' many ships across their Voyage have made,
 But unacquainted live 'till God shall please
 To manifest his Secrets and show us these;
 When 25 Moons are spent it will be found,
 Which surely will enrich the British Crown.

The text obviously consists of two discourses which are developed along analogue lines. One concerns the ultimate destiny of humankind in biblical terms; the other relates to the political destiny of Ireland echoing the scriptural precedent. In both cases deliverance by God is prophesied.

Apocalyptic discourse was prominent not only among the Protestant clergy: many poets and writers likewise had become fascinated with the biblical notion of an apocalyptic battle between good and evil. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular, English literature, regardless of whether it was produced in England, New England or Scotland, was shot through with apocalyptic prophecy. Connecting the Kingdom of Christ with the kingdoms of this world, such prophecies were generally used in support of the political and social order of one nation that was deemed worthy to triumph in the end, or it would be directed against the evil order of another that would eventually be overthrown forever. The question occupying many English minds was how England would fare. Could it be viewed as a covenant nation? Would the British monarchy be the elect nation to lead the righteous people to the New Jerusalem or would it be among the sinful nations cast down as the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelations predicted?¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford, New York and Basingstoke, 2002, 7-8.

There was far less agonizing about the final outcome in Scotland where many people unquestioningly thought of themselves as heirs of the Israelites. Scotsmen generally saw themselves in a covenant relation to God and were convinced that their country was the one that would be judged among the righteous. Christ's kingdom would be established under Scottish leadership, and thus Scotsmen were destined to fill a great role in the last drama of history.¹⁰⁵ The dire destruction of this world as a necessary prelude to the kingdom to come, this last phase of mankind as we know it, was fondly dwelled on by writers of all Christian denominations, but by dissenters in particular. Their apocalyptic visions teem with revenants and ghostly companies of Highland soldiers marching through the countryside, broadswords falling from heaven and open graves emerging from the earth. Often the harbingers of disasters appear in the shape of weird spectres that did not spring from the scriptures, but rather "had their roots deep within folk tradition". As it had such a strong populist appeal, the rhetoric of hill preachers was especially saturated with this curious yet powerful amalgam derived from biblical as well as folkloric sources.¹⁰⁶

James MacSparran, the likely author of this tale, would have been very familiar with this peculiar tradition. There were very close cultural links between Ulster and the West of Scotland in any case, but from the mid-seventeenth century onwards Scottish Protestant dissenters began to settle in huge numbers in the north of Ireland. So much so that toward the close of that century the Ulster countryside became a "natural haven" for fugitive hill preachers.¹⁰⁷ Apart from that, MacSparran had a Scottish-Irish background. Though born in Dungiven, County Londonderry, in Ulster, and raised there in the Presbyterian faith by his uncle, who was a minister of that church, James MacSparran's ancestors came from Scotland and he himself was educated at the University of Glasgow. However, as Kerby A. Miller pointed out, the MacSparrans were not the typical Ulster Scots

¹⁰⁵ S.A. Burrell, "The Apocalyptic Vision of the Early Covenanters", *Scottish Historical Review*, XLIII/135 (April 1964), 6-9, 13.

¹⁰⁶ William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity*, Aberdeen, 1988, 21-22.

¹⁰⁷ Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century*, New York, 1998, 70-71.

of lowland Presbyterian ancestry. They were Scottish Catholics, Gaelic-speaking highlanders, many of whom were driven out of Scotland in the 1640s. Apparently the MacSparrans avoided expulsion by converting to Presbyterianism.¹⁰⁸

Following in his uncle's footsteps, James MacSparran began his clerical career by serving as a Presbyterian minister in Derry City. Having emigrated to America in 1718, he soon became minister of the Congregational church in Bristol (then in Massachusetts, later in Rhode Island).¹⁰⁹ However, he ran foul of the Reverend Cotton Mather (1663-1728), Boston's pre-eminent champion of Puritanism, who came from one of the most influential families in the early history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but who is nowadays mainly remembered for his notorious connection with the Salem Witch trials (1692). Cotton Mather instituted various charges against MacSparran, one of which was "unguarded conversation".¹¹⁰ Upon a favourable report of a committee of investigation and his subsequent complete exoneration, his adversary then questioned the genuineness of his clerical credentials. The town decided that MacSparran should be given the opportunity to return to Ireland in order to establish their authenticity.¹¹¹

He arrived back home in Ireland in 1719. Possibly because his credentials were indeed flawed or, more likely because he felt aggrieved at the humiliating treatment he had received – it seems he had already encountered difficulties with his Presbyterian colleagues in Derry over doctrinal or personal matters prior to his leaving for America¹¹² – in any event, MacSparran never returned to that church or denomination. Renouncing all dissenting traditions, he embraced

¹⁰⁸ *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815*, eds Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, David N. Doyle, Oxford, 2003, Chapter II: "The Process of Irish Emigration"; no. 8 – Rev. James MacSparran, 1752; 55-56.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹¹⁰ T.H. Murray, "Rev. James Mac Sparran: Irishman, Scholar, Preacher and Philosopher, 1680-1757", *Journal of the American-Irish Historical Society*, III/4 (1900), 52-61: www.archive.org/details/journalamerican11socigoog (accessed 23 March 2009).

¹¹¹ *Wilkins Updike, A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island: Including a History of Other Episcopal Churches in the State* (1847), ed. Daniel Goodwin, Boston, 1907, I, 367.

¹¹² *Irish Immigrants*, 56-57.

Anglicanism and soon entered the Church of England, in which he remained all his life. Within a year, he was made a deacon by the Bishop of London, was then ordained a priest by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1731 he received the degree of D.D. (Doctor of Divinity) from Oxford. At that stage in his life he had been back in New England for a good while. The Society for propagating the gospel had sent him, at his own request, to Rhode Island in 1721, as minister at the Episcopalian church of St Paul's, Narragansett, a post he would hold for the next thirty seven years.

In America, James MacSparran was proud to be known as an Irishman.¹¹³ Not only could he speak Irish, but on occasions he would preach in Irish, and it was his great desire to return to Ireland one day.¹¹⁴ He made quite a touching entry in his diary to this effect upon hearing that his brother had died in America: "O that I were well settled in my own country, and that that poor man had never transported himself into these Parts, to the Detriment ... of his Family."¹¹⁵ He admitted to the same feeling in one of his letters where he expressed the hope that God would restore him to his native land, or at least near it.¹¹⁶ If necessary, he would defend Ireland and its people, even including the Catholics.¹¹⁷ He sometimes bemoaned the

¹¹³ Murray, "Rev. James MacSparran".

¹¹⁴ In a letter to William Stevenson, dated 21 August 1752, MacSparran revealed that once back in England, his next push would be to be seated in Ireland, but because he had no friends there to depend on for preferment, he had little hope of fulfilling his dream. This is one of the three letters to friends in Ireland which were published by MacSparran under the title *America Dissected* (see n.119).

¹¹⁵ *A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services, Written During the Years 1743-1751 by the Rev. James MacSparran*, ed. Daniel Goodwin, Boston, 1899, 67 (entry 18 November 1751).

¹¹⁶ James MacSparran, *America Dissected: Being a Full and True Account of All the American Colonies; Shewing, the Importance of the Climates; Excessive Heat and Cold, and Sudden Violent Changes of Weather; Terrible and Mischievous Thunder and Lightning; Bad and Unwholesome Air; Destructive to Human Bodies; Badness of Money; Danger from Enemies; but, Above All, the Danger to the Souls of the Poor People that Remove thither, from the Multifarious Wicked and Pestilent Heresies that Prevail in those Parts; In Several Letters, from a Rev. Divine of the Church of England, Missionary to America, and Doctor of Divinity; Published as a Caution to Unsteady People who May Be Tempted to Leave their Native Country*, Dublin, 1753, repr. in Updike, *A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett*, III, Appendix A., 52-53.

¹¹⁷ Murray, "Rev. James MacSparran".

lack of respect with which the Irish were treated, claiming that “our countrymen” are “less esteemed than they ought to be”.¹¹⁸ In particular he challenged the haughty disposition of the New-Englanders towards the Irish: “As the *Jews* had their *Nazareth*, the *New-Englanders* have their *Ireland*, but, as what is always due to too national a Spirit, they are as much despised in other *English* Plantations, as any *Teague* is by them.”¹¹⁹

To equate Nazareth with Ireland is significant. It echoes the scriptures where Nathaniel, hearing for the first time about Jesus of Nazareth, prejudicially asks: “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth was held in low esteem by the Hebrews, and yet this is the place from which the Saviour has risen, as Nathaniel soon comes to acknowledge.¹²⁰ Likewise the English and the New Englanders show prejudice against the Irish, while Ireland is in fact morally superior. Comparing England with Ireland MacSparran wrote: “If our Accounts from Home may be depended upon, Religion runs low, and *Ireland* is like to regain its ancient Name of *Insula Sanctorum*, compared with the greater Island.”¹²¹ Or stronger still: “The Accounts of open Irreligion of the greater Island, inclines me to imagine that Ireland is on the Brink of obtaining ... its ancient Name of *Insula Sanctorum*.¹²² In apocalyptic rhetoric this does not augur too well for England, whereas Ireland stands a good chance of becoming the elect nation.

These few details about MacSparran’s life and writings greatly enhance our understanding of *Old Ireland’s Misery*. The millenarian theme is already alluded to in both the title and the subtitle. In the latter the mermaid’s advent is referred to as the “Second Appearance”, and the title’s envisaged end of “Old” Ireland’s misery occurs later on in the story when after the convulsions Ireland emerges as the New Ireland and thus as the equivalent of the New Jerusalem in the parallel discourse.

¹¹⁸ MacSparran, *America Dissected*, 41.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²⁰ John 1: 46 and 49. My attention to this reference was first drawn by Kerby A. Miller *et al.*, *Irish Immigrants*, 68.

¹²¹ MacSparran, *America Dissected*, 43.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 50.

However, for Scotland, the cradle of dissent, the author clearly held out no hope. Quite the contrary, because of its vices in the past – rebellions, support for Bonnie Prince Charlie, disobedience and lack of repentance – Scotland is specifically singled out as the one nation to have incurred God's wrath and thus deserving all the plagues, wars and destruction to come. To lend even greater force to the prophecy, the author adopted the prophetic tones of the Bible. For example, when the mermaid predicts that “there shall be Wars and Rumours of Wars in all Parts of the World, both by Land and Sea”, she uses words which echo Jesus' warning that, “ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars ... in divers places”.¹²³

The mermaid's assertion that she is descended from the half-tribe of Manasses is an intriguing claim, not only because this incorporates her into the twelve tribes of Israel destined to inhabit the New Jerusalem, but also because this is a further clue to MacSparran's authorship. According to the biblical account, after the Exodus from Egypt the Israelites entered the Promised Land which they divided between the ancient tribes. The tribe of Manasses (also rendered Manasseh) settled in central Palestine – some to the east, some to the west of the Jordan River: hence the division into two half-tribes. Manasses was a wicked king whose evil reign angered God,¹²⁴ and in punishment he brought the Assyrians upon Judah, but later Manasses repented and God forgave him. However, after the Assyrians had conquered the Kingdom of Israel in the late eighth century BC, sending the Israelites into exile and captivity, we lose track of the Manasses. In time the two half-tribes were assimilated by other peoples, but in legend they became known especially, and were separately counted as lost, as part of the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel”.¹²⁵

Since at least the seventeenth century, Jews as well as Christians have been advocating theories concerning the continued hidden existence or future return of these tribes.¹²⁶ In England arose the theory of British Israelism (also called Anglo-Israelism) which

¹²³ Matthew 24:6-7.

¹²⁴ 2 Kings 21:1-16.

¹²⁵ Of the twelve ancient tribes of Israel only those of Benjamin and Judah remained and became the ancestors of modern-day Jews while the other ten tribes disappeared from history.

¹²⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Lost_Tribes (accessed 12 April 2009).

claimed that the northern tribes of Israel migrated to north-western Europe, and that the Anglo-Saxons in particular were its descendants. With the expansion of the British Empire, the theory spread to America. But it was the exploration of the American continent that added new ideas and speculations to the conundrum, suggesting a definite connection between the American Indians and the lost Israelites. Although most proponents of this idea favoured the Indians of Southern America, some also related the natives of Central and North America to the ancient tribes.¹²⁷

Two men keenly interested in such theories were staying as guests in MacSparran's house for some time in 1728 and/or 1729. They were the portrait painter John Smibert (1688-1751) and George Berkeley (1685-1753), then Dean of Derry, afterwards Bishop of Cloyne. These two men wished to travel among the North American Indians in order to see for themselves whether there were any indications of a link between them and the Lost Tribes. Although well-meaning people in America desired him simply to "convince the Indians of their extraction from the Jews", Smibert felt it might be a better idea to establish first of all what the Indians themselves knew about their ancestors. So when he came among the Mohican tribes near New York, he asked them straight out, "Whose descendants are you?", to which they replied: "We are of Israel." Eager to hear more about their ancient tradition, he explored further by enquiring whom they had learned this from. To his great surprise he was informed that "Mr. and Mrs. Simmons, of Scotland" had told them so. Then he probed their own traditional views and learned all about their origin myths which, needless to say, had absolutely nothing to do with Israel or with the Lost Tribes.¹²⁸ One can only imagine the mirth this story generated in the MacSparran household.

¹²⁷ See <http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Archive/TenLostTribes.asp>, 4-5 (accessed 12 April 2009).

¹²⁸ The whole incident is related in a footnote of the edited version of MacSparran's book *America Dissected*, 44-46. Claiming that the "great object of the Dean and Smibert was to see the North American Indians", the footnote gives the reader the impression that the main purpose of these two gentlemen's visit to America was to investigate the fate of the Lost Tribes, but Berkeley had in fact hoped to establish a college in Bermuda for the education of American Indians, and Smibert accompanied him as prospective professor of Fine Arts in that college. The project failed, however.

Obviously MacSparran privately discussed the different claims and theories concerning the Lost Tribes, and on a professional level he would also have meditated on the ancient Israelites, but we know that he even dreamed about them. In one of his dreams he envisaged that he himself was connected with them and had thus become part of the chosen people:

I dreamp't of a divine Appearance, that a Beautiful Building began to flash fire and that it was the *Shechinah*, that it contained seven stones that 6 of them were wrote on the inside and outside with the Names of the tribes of Israel that the 7th was for my name to be wrote in. May God Almighty grant me the white stone promised to his chosen [illegible] the meaning of the Dream.¹²⁹

We may reasonably suppose that by linking Ireland with one of the ancient tribes of Israel, MacSparran in *Old Ireland's Misery* gratified his own dream while at the same time putting the English, the Scottish and the Americans in their place. A crafty ploy enables MacSparran to make the desired connection between Ireland and the Israelites: it hinges on the word “the Brazils”. In *America Dissected* he uses the term the Brazils to denote the country in South America.¹³⁰ In *Old Ireland's Misery* he splits the half-tribe of Manasses into two quarters, one of which is allocated a submarine island in the Brazils, obviously intended to mean the country in South America where, supposedly, the lost tribes are to be found. The other quarter of the tribe are turned into mermaids and sent to an enchanted island also called the Brazils, but this island is in Europe, close to Ireland, and obviously refers to Brasil Island.

The plural form of the name stands out. At the time of his publication, the island had always been referred to as either the Island of Brasile or O'Brazeel or variations thereof. There appears to be only one exception: one other author also used the plural form and he, too, came from Northern Ireland. Unfortunately we only have an indirect reference to this book, which is otherwise untraceable. William Shaw Mason comments on it thus: “A book, still extant, printed in 1748, and written by a person who resided near the Giant's Causeway, gives a

¹²⁹ Goodwin, *A Letter Book*, 48-49.

¹³⁰ MacSparran, *America Dissected*, 13.

long account of an enchanted island annually seen floating along the Antrim coast which he fancifully calls ‘Old Brazils’”.¹³¹ As it was published only five years before *Old Ireland’s Misery*, it seems likely that MacSparran was familiar with it, and it may very well be that some of the more obscure passages in his portrayal of the island reflect those of the earlier book.

Handing the moral victory to Ireland does not mean that MacSparran was anti-English. Far from it, his loyalty to the English Crown cannot be doubted. After all he was hoping to be consecrated as the Church of England’s first American bishop, and as is evident throughout *America Dissected* he took great pride in English achievements. “His Tory prejudices were obvious”, remarks Kerby A. Miller, noting that MacSparran reserved his praise only for royal colonies in America where the Anglican church was legally established, while pointing out “schism and heresy” as well as “immoralities and disorders” in those colonies, where dissenters ruled.¹³²

Nevertheless what he did criticize was the economic treatment of Ireland by England. Like his friend George Berkeley, he resented the fact that Irish economic freedom was impaired by English legislation, like the Cattle Acts, the Woollen Act and similar restrictions on Irish trade. “I wish Ireland were at Liberty to ship us their Woollens”,¹³³ he complained in *America Dissected*, where he also voiced his strong opposition to rumoured efforts to form a legislative union between England and Ireland. His position was that of many other Irish Protestant patriots of his time who wanted internal Irish matters to be dealt with at home and wished to be governed solely according to Irish laws and institutions.¹³⁴ In *Old Ireland’s Misery* the military and political battles will be won by the English Crown and, as the title suggests, the English Empire will be restored in the Brazils. It is implied that Ireland will be instrumental in its restoration because England will be brought back to its former glory in that part of the

¹³¹ Mason, *A Statistical Account*, II, 516.

¹³² Kerby A. Miller, “Revd James MacSparran’s *America Dissected* (1753): Eighteenth-Century Emigration and Constructions of ‘Irishness’”, *History Ireland*, XX/4 (Winter 2003), 19.

¹³³ MacSparran, *America Dissected*, 38.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

Empire where its position is strongest on religious grounds. This English victory indicates the triumph of Protestantism, but it also brings to an end the old fraught relationship between England and Ireland. From then on there will be no more taxes and duties imposed on the latter. The New Ireland, although subject to the English Crown, will gain legislative independence.

The corollary of this would be another matter close to MacSparran's heart, namely that all the people who have lately emigrated to America will return to their native Ireland. Not only did he himself feel homesick for Ireland, but his book *America Dissected* was expressly written to dissuade Irish people from emigrating to America. Apart from the lesser evils like intemperance of climate, greed, and so on, the subtitle of the book specifically warns of "the Danger to the Souls of the Poor People that remove thither, from the multifarious wicked and pestilent Heresies that prevail in those Parts".

On a socio-political level MacSparran's vision of the New Ireland will greatly benefit Ireland, and at the same time it will "enrich" the English Crown. The most desirable outcome of this union between England and Ireland is that there will be no more division or dissent because both countries will be peacefully united into one religion and serve one God, a harmonious state which echoes the prophetic vision of the scriptures. The Lord has promised that he would bring back the Israelites to their own land and unite the Kingdom of Judah with the Kingdom of Israel, and "one king shall be king to them all; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all ...; so shall they be my people, and I will be their God".¹³⁵

So a happy end in political and religious terms, but there is a further bonus in store. The two separated parts of Manasses, those members of the tribe living in "old" Europe will come together with their kinsfolk in the "new" American continent because, in line with St John's Revelation according to which every island will disappear and there will be no more sea,¹³⁶ the two Brazils will be connected by land, never to be covered by water any more.¹³⁷ This outlook, too, would have given MacSparran great personal satisfaction because he

¹³⁵ Ezekiel 37: 22-23.

¹³⁶ Revelation 16:20, 21:1.

¹³⁷ *Old Ireland's Misery*, 5, 7.

had recurrent nightmares about water, and he was particularly disturbed by dreams in which he saw himself separated from his friends by water.¹³⁸

He would have also derived great pleasure from the folkloric elements in his story. Reference to the Brasil Island's resurfacing every seven years is, as we have seen, commonly made, but its association with a mermaid is a new constituent. On a superficial level her appearance seems logical enough, considering that the dwelling place of this creature is a submarine island, and it is also true that mermaids frequently occur in Irish folklore. However, Ireland's most popular folktale about mermaids concerns one such lady called Liban who was captured by fishermen in the north of Ireland. She had lived under water for hundreds of years, and it turned out that she had originally been a little human girl who had survived a flood by being transformed into a mermaid. The story ends with the tidings that after her rescue Liban performed a number of miracles and later became *Saint Murgen*.¹³⁹

If it were just an ordinary folktale, no matter how popular, one could not necessarily assume that MacSparran was acquainted with it, but a number of other factors attaching to the story make it highly unlikely that he had no knowledge of it. First of all, this tale is a watered-down version of the fabled origin of Lough Neagh, which is not only the largest Irish lake but which also forms part of MacSparran's home county of Londonderry. Furthermore, this Liban is indeed set down as a Saint in the Irish Calendar of O'Clery on 18 December, and the *Felire of Oengus* (Calendar of Saints, written c. 797-808), commemorates her on 27 January. Then there are the "official records" of her capture. Under the year AD 571, there is the following brief entry in the *Annals of Ulster*: "In this year the *muirgeilt* was captured."¹⁴⁰ In the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*, the date for her capture is mentioned under the year 558: "In this year

¹³⁸ Goodwin, *A Letter Book*, xxxviii; see also the dreams MacSparran confided to his Diary on 10 and 12 July 1745, 33.

¹³⁹ Peter Haining, *The Leprechaun's Kingdom*, London, 1979, 77.

¹⁴⁰ *Annals of Ulster; Otherwise, Annals of Senat: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from AD 431, to AD 1540*, ed. and tr. William M. Hennessy, Dublin, 1887, I, AD 431-1056, 63.

was taken the Mermaid, i.e. Liban, the daughter of Eochaidh ... on the strand of Ollarbha, in the net of Beoan.”¹⁴¹

A fuller version of Liban’s fate is given in the Old Irish legend entitled *Aided Echach Meic Maireda* (“The Destruction of Eochaid, Son of Mairid”) which is contained in the *Lebor na Huidre* (“Book of the Dun Cow”), the late-eleventh/early-twelfth-century Irish manuscript collection.¹⁴² It will be useful to give a brief outline of the legend:

When during the first century AD, Mairid, the king of Munster, married Ebliu he already had by a former wife two sons, namely Eochaid and Rib. Ebliu developed an unlawful passion for Eochaid, and at length induced him to elope with her. When they took flight, Rib as well as a body of a thousand men accompanied the pair. Soon however, the druids announced to the two brothers, that it was not destined for them to settle in one place; they therefore separated. Rib took a westerly direction, and with ill omen was driven to the river Shannon where he was instrumental in the formation of Loch Ree, the lake in which he and all his men were drowned.

Eochaid proceeded northwards and settled in Ulster. In his palace was an enchanted well, which, through the neglect of its keeper, burst forth one morning, forming the present Loch Neagh (from modern Irish *Loch nEathach*, meaning Lake of Eathach/Eochaid), and drowning the whole household except three persons. One of these three was Liban, Eochaid’s daughter. For twelve months God preserved her safe in her bower beneath the water, but when she expressed the wish to be turned into a salmon, her wish was granted, and in the shape of half woman, half fish she roamed from sea to sea for the space of three hundred years.

It so happened that when St Beoan from Bangor and his crew were passing by in their currach, they heard Liban singing beneath the water. St Beoan talked to her and upon leaving she promised that she would meet him again, that day twelve months, in the bay of Larne, in the county of Antrim. At the appointed time she was caught in a net, and on being brought to shore, she told her story in melancholy verse. The prose supplement adds that she was at once baptized into the

¹⁴¹ *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, from the Earliest Period to the Year 1616*, ed. and tr. John O’Donovan, Dublin, 1856, I, 201-202.

¹⁴² *Lebor na Huidre: Book of the Dun Cow*, eds R.I. Best and Osborn Bergin, Dublin, 1929, 95-100. The principal scribe of this manuscript collection died in 1106, but there are later interpolations of the 13th century.

Christian faith by St Comgall of Bangor, and the name he gave her was *Muirgen*, that is, “born of the sea”, or *Muirgeilt*, “traverser of the sea”. She died immediately, went straight to heaven – a holy virgin, ordained by God – and miracles and wonders were performed through her.¹⁴³

Obviously there are remarkable similarities between Liban and MacSparran’s mermaid, who both began their existence as human girls, but then became entangled in catastrophic events, enchantments and underwater dwellings. They are both beautiful princesses whose fathers are kings who, tainted by sin, leave their home territory, disperse, separate from their kinsfolk and then vanish under water. Both girls are turned into mermaids by God who protects them, and though they roam the seas for hundreds of years, they are destined to return to Ireland. Each of them makes two appearances, and ultimately they join God’s chosen people.

Apart from the fact that it must have pleased MacSparran tremendously to model his mermaid on an Irish figure, there is yet another little sting in the tail. The two mermaids will only tell their story to one of God’s anointed. Liban talks to three saints, Beoan, Brendan and Columba, but not to the crew in Beoan’s boat. The mermaid in *Old Ireland’s Misery* will not answer the fishermen’s questions, insisting “that it was not them she wanted, but the Reverend Mr. John Smith, Minister of that Parish, and that she would give him a full Account of her Misery and Place of Abode”.¹⁴⁴ MacSparran had frequently complained about young scholars being given clerical positions without ordination, dismissing them as “vagrant, illiterate Preachers”.¹⁴⁵ He infuriated the dissenting clergy when he started preaching against the laity and vigorously supporting episcopacy. A pamphlet war broke out after his sermon, “The Sacred Dignity of the Christian Priesthood Vindicated”, was printed in Newport.¹⁴⁶ It is no

¹⁴³ This summary is loosely based on the following translation: John O’Beirne Crowe, “Ancient Lake Legends of Ireland: No. I, *Aided Echac Maic Mairedo* (The Destruction of Eochaid, Son of Mairid)”, *Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland*, 4th series, I (1870), 94-112.

¹⁴⁴ *Old Ireland’s Misery*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ MacSparran, *America Dissected*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ Miller, “Revd James MacSparran’s *America Dissected*”, 19; Updike, *History of the Episcopal Church*, Chapter XI.

coincidence, then, that MacSparran has his mermaid follow proper procedures by demanding to speak about biblical matters only to the Minister of the parish.

I suspect that his apocalyptic vision is not to be taken entirely seriously. In New England it was mainly the puritans who had indulged in apocalyptic fervour and who had made the visions of the Revelation a formative influence upon the consciousness of their congregations. “The Puritans filled their diaries, sermons, and public papers with apocalyptic discourse”, and most notably so MacSparran’s erstwhile adversary, Cotton Maher,¹⁴⁷ who had warned that the Last Judgment was near at hand, portraying himself as one of the leaders in the final charge against the Devil’s legions.¹⁴⁸ Such apocalyptic visions were clearly meant to strike terror in the hearts of their congregations. So by choosing a beautiful mermaid as the harbinger of disasters to come, MacSparran seems to inject a humorous tone straight away because traditionally these heralds are made of sterner stuff (see page 199). I would also see his naming of specific dates, measurements, numbers, and so on, in the same light. Apocalyptic literature is full of such details, and as many days of predicted destruction had passed without incident, MacSparran seems to poke fun at visionaries who know with assurance when and where the predictions of the Bible would come true.

To conclude the discussion of our two texts from northern Ireland, I hope to have shown that both “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” and *Old Ireland’s Misery* are truly creative pieces of writing. The two authors imaginatively explore Brasil Island’s complex symbolic possibilities. Coming from opposite sides of Protestantism – apostolic and episcopalian – they both use the island for patriotic ends, albeit with different political goals. “A Voyage to O’Brazeel” is aiming at a totally independent Ireland, while *Old Ireland’s Misery* is merely looking for legislative independence for Ireland within an English Empire, not a British Empire, as Scotland is specifically ruled out.

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Edwards: *Apocalyptic Writings; “Notes on the Apocalypse;” An Humble Attempt*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, New Haven and London, 1977, 8. The Introduction to this book gives an excellent overview over the development of apocalyptic thinking and writing.

¹⁴⁸ See Biography of Cotton Mather: http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/salem/sal_bmat.htm (accessed 26 June 2009).

PART V

GAELICIZATION

CHAPTER 9

“HY BRASIL: PARADISE OF THE PAGAN IRISH” IN MODERN LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

In contrast to England, where Brasil Island acquired a somewhat pejorative connotation, the island enjoyed a positive reception in Ireland. As already indicated in Chapter 3 (page 65) and discussed further in Chapter 7 (pages 164-66), in the course of the eighteenth century, the English-speaking patriots began to take a growing interest in the ancient Gaelic past which ultimately led to a convergence of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish cultural energies. Patriots from both sides of the divide were united in their appreciation of the west of Ireland as the locus of a pure pre-colonial Irish people, as the last surviving bastion of Gaelic culture and identity. Detached from the Irish mainland and the furthest away from England, in particular, the western isle, real or imaginary, came to be indicative of qualities thought to be authentic and indigenously Irish.¹

Consequently, Brasil Island was not only warmly embraced and incorporated into traditional lore, but it was also completely Gaelicized. An Irish pedigree was fabricated which included a Gaelic name and an ancient pagan as well as a medieval Christian track record. The thus newly acquired Irish identity found favour with poets and writers in both the south and the north of Ireland, and even further afield as English, American and Australian poetry and fiction bear witness to. Even geographers did not need much persuasion to accept Brasil Island’s Irish roots and made a case for this island as the basis for the naming of the South American country Brazil.

The initial move towards the Gaelicization of the name appears to be due to a simple, but doubtless deliberate, mistake. As far as I can ascertain, it goes back to the early 1780s, when William Beauford, in his treatise on the ancient topography of Ireland, first referred to the

¹ For a discussion of the importance of the western isle in Irish Literature, see John Wilson Foster, “Certain Set Apart: The Western Island in the Irish Renaissance”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, LXVI/264 (Winter 1977), 261-74.

island as Hy Brasail, the Hiberno-English spelling for *Í Breasil* or *Uí Bhreasail*, thus suggesting a Gaelic root.² Although Hy Brasil has remained the preferred option for English speakers until today there is a noticeable tendency among Irish speakers to dispense with the suggestion and apply the full Gaelic rendering of the name.

Beauford was a schoolmaster with a keen interest in the study of Gaelic antiquity. The reason why he used the prefix “Hy” had to do with the difficulties English speakers had with Irish place names and which he saw mainly arise from the fluctuating state of Irish orthography. Different letters or combinations of letters frequently express the same sound, he observed, giving the following example: “Thus *O*, *Hy*, *Y*, *I*, *Eochadh*, *Eogha*, and *Ibh* have the same sound, being like the English *O*, open, *Eoghan* is pronounced *Owen*”³ Accordingly many Irish place names beginning with what sounded like an *O* in English were transcribed as *Hy*; for example the ancient kingdom of *Uí Failghe* (now Offaly) in Leinster was anglicized as *Hy-falgia*.

So when Beauford referred to O’Brasile as Hy Brasail he went by sound, because as far as he was concerned *O* and *Hy* were interchangeable. What he disregarded, however, is the fact that the *O* in O’Brasile stands for the Romance definite article and has nothing to do with Irish. On the early maps Brasil Island is marked as *insula de brazile*, *ilha do brasil*, and so on, but from the mid-sixteenth century onward, instead of *ilha* (“island”) *do* (contraction of preposition “de” and the article “o”) *brasil* we now find O’Brasile (or variations thereof) on Portuguese charts. Vidago explained that toponyms began to be cut short by ellipsis and words like river, mountain or island were dropped, but cartographers kept the article “o” before the name (as in Oporto); hence O’Brasil – sometimes linked into a single word, sometimes written with an apostrophe.⁴ We can observe this very change in the English sources. In all the early documents, the name is

² William Beauford, “Antient Topography of Ireland; with a Preliminary Discourse; Illustrated with a Map of Antient Ireland; to which is Added, Some Observations on Irish Antiquities; with a Particular Application of them to the Ship Temple Near Dundalk”, in *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis*, III/11, Dublin, 1786, 249-426.

³ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴ J. Vidago, “Glossary of Portuguese Words Used as Components for Topographical Features and Landmarks in Early Portuguese Cartography”, *Imago Mundi*, X (1953), 46.

made up of three words, but from the early seventeenth century onwards, we almost exclusively find the truncated version of O’Brasile.

In Irish *Í* or *Ui* were frequently prefixed to the progenitors of families and to the lands they possessed; so when annexed to the name of persons, it signified a district, clan or chief. *Í Bresail* or *Ui Bhreasail* denoted something like the “land/descendants of Bresal”. *Ui Bhreasail* (anglicized Hy-Breassail, now Clanbrassil) was indeed a tribal name in County Armagh, which is why some linked Brasil Island to this ancient clan in Ulster, but offered no explanation as to why the “land of Bresal” in the north-east of the country should in any way be associated with an island to the south-west of Ireland.⁵

As Bre(a)sal is not an uncommon personal name in Irish, several other historical figures were also taken into consideration, but in the end no prospective personage emerged to fit the bill. It has to be said, however, that even if a likely candidate had been found, it would have been difficult in any case to explicate how a historical chief could have claimed an imaginary island as his territory. Equally fruitless was the attempt to find a Christian missionary after whom the island might have been named. Perhaps an early Irish monk, it was argued, who, aspiring to find the terrestrial paradise, might have sailed into the unknown from the western shores of Ireland. For a while St Breccan was contemplated because he was connected to the Aran Islands, but no strong arguments could be found in support of the idea.

Yet the notion that Brasil Island had an Irish history was too tempting to let go of and the search began to focus on other possible origins of the name. Many went to great lengths to prove a Gaelic root by conjecturing far-fetched etymologies, despite the fact that the Old Irish dictionary lists *bre(a)sal* either as an English loanword or derived from Latin *bresilum*. Either way, it is defined as the name of a dye (“red raddle”) used for marking sheep.⁶ Others probed into mythology and conjured up ever more fanciful Celtic kings. Even scholars like Tomás Ó Flannghaile, lecturer and examiner in Irish, got

⁵ Another place name commemorating a historical chief called Breasal was Rath Breasail (English, “Hy-Breasil”) in Co. Tipperary, where the Synod of Rath Breasail was held around 1110.

⁶ *Dictionary of the Irish Language, Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials*, Dublin, 1913-76, s.v. “bresal”.

carried away. Although somewhat perplexed that “in later times” Hy Brasil had been added to the list of designations for the pagan Elysium and also expressing his surprise at its Irish rendering (“a name sometimes written even in Irish *Hi-Breasail* or ‘Brassil’s Isle’”), he nevertheless went on to speculate that it probably derived from *Breasal Breac*, a legendary king from the Book of Leinster.⁷

In support of its supposed Gaelic origin an additional accent was often put on the “a” in *Brasil*, which could take any of the following diacritics, á, à or â, despite the fact that there is no *accent grave* or *accent circonflexe* in Irish. Or, as we have just seen in Ó Flannghaile’s example, the name was spelled with a double s. Both means were used to emphasize that the stress fell on the first syllable, in contrast to pre-nineteenth-century maps and texts where the island is spelled *Brasile*, *Brazylle*, *Brazile* or *Brazeel*, and so on, indicating that the stress must have fallen on the second syllable, as it does in the case of the South American country.

It would be a little laborious, perhaps even embarrassing, to go through all the etymological conjectures proposed over the years. A few examples will suffice to show the general tendency towards elevating the island to a higher plane. Typically, it was suggested that the name was compounded of two or three different words, for example:

O (island) + *breas* (king, royal) + *il* (god) = the Royal Island (Vallancey, 1786, 52-53);

bras (fiction) + *aoi* (island) and *ile* (great) = great imaginary island (Hardiman, 1831, 369, n.);

I or *Hy* (island) + *brath* (for ever) + *Saophal* (life) = isle of everlasting life, or isle of the Blest (O’Donoghue, 1893, 304);

breas (large) + *i* (island) = large island (Winsor, 1884-9, I, 50);

Hy + *bress* (good fortune, prosperity) = Fortunate Isle (Nansen, 1911, I, 357, II, 228);

breas-ail = blessed island (Parry, 1981, 43);

Hy (island) + *breasil* (mighty and beautiful) = mighty island (Ó Síocháin, 1982, 107);

breas (grand) + *ail* (wonderful) = most-blest island (Leslie, 1998, 36);

⁷ *The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth* by Micheál Coimín, ed. Tomás Ó Flannghaile, Dublin, 1907, xiii-xiv.

bres (noble, fortunate, happy) + land/island = island of happiness, or land of the fortunate (Singer and Kimbles, 2004, 113);

Í (island) + *bres* (beauty, worth, might) = beautiful island (MacKillop, 2006, 122).

The Celticist James Carney quite rightly objected to such fabrications and asserted that *Hy Brasil* is not derived from a Gaelic source. The term “is nowhere found in Irish literature or folklore”, he argued, pointing out that it crops up “exclusively in non-Gaelic and comparatively late sources”.⁸

Beauford did *Brasil Island* a great service in more than one way. Apart from providing it with a Gaelic-looking name, he also placed it firmly in the Gaelic tradition by ascribing to it the unfounded epithet “paradise of the pagan Irish”. He did this in connection with the belief of the Aran Islanders who were “still persuaded, that in a clear day they can see from this coast *Hy Brasail*, or the enchanted island, the paradise of the pagan Irish; and concerning which they relate a number of romantic stories”.⁹

Beauford came in for severe attacks on his “Antient Topography”. Charles O’Conor, author of the *Ogygian Tales* (see Chapter 7) for example, reacted immediately to it by sending a letter to the editor Colonel Vallancey, in which he accused Beauford of completely lacking in knowledge; worse still, O’Conor complained, “through the far greater part of his topography of Ireland, he publishes his dreams, without any mask of plausible argument, to set off the ignorance or the dreams”.¹⁰ Equally scathing was John O’Donovan, who also called Beauford’s knowledge into question and who dismissed the essay as an “absurd and impertinent Tract on ancient Irish topography”.¹¹ And so, too, did Hardiman, calling it a work of no authority and likening it to “the dreams of a sick man in a phrenzy”.¹²

⁸ Carney, “Review of ‘*Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*’”, 47.

⁹ Beauford, “Antient Topography”, III/11, 282.

¹⁰ Charles O’Conor, “Third Letter from Charles O’Conor, Esq. to Colonel Vallancey”, in *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis*, IV/13, Dublin, 1786, 132.

¹¹ O’Donovan and Curry, *Antiquities of County Clare*, 282. The Index in this edition erroneously gives Beauford’s first name as Daniel.

¹² See James Hardiman, MS 1780, 146, Manuscripts Department, Trinity College Library, Dublin.

Nevertheless, Beauford's dream would soon come true. In 1797, Seward's *Topographia Hibernica* practically reprinted Beauford's comments on Hy Brasail, using the same spelling and reiterating the notion that it was the ancient paradise of the Irish.¹³ The island was then given a scholarly stamp of approval in a lecture delivered to the Royal Irish Academy in 1824, during which John T. O'Flaherty confirmed that seeing Hy-Brasail from the shores of the Aran Islands had indeed been "the universal tradition of the ancient Irish" and that nowhere else were the "Celtic habits, feelings, and language better preserved than in the southern Isles of Aran".¹⁴ O'Flaherty gave expression here to the already indicated patriotic belief of the time that the western isle was the cradle of true Irishness, and thus it is hardly surprising that the Aran Islands, in tandem with Hy Brasil, took centre stage in antiquarian interest.¹⁵ But artists, too, recognizing its mythic potential, came to use Hy Brasil as an invocation of Ireland's golden past, and in particular of the delightful Tír na nÓg, the abode of the great legendary heroes.

When we attempt to pinpoint the sources on which the dissemination of this fallacy relied, it is amazing to realize how few names are involved. Of crucial importance to its success was Hardiman, who played a pivotal role in the whole development. It will be recalled that in his *Irish Minstrelsy* (1831), Hardiman made reference to an *Unpublished History of Ireland*, allegedly written in 1636, in which Brasil Island was associated with mythical invaders of Ireland (see Chapter 3, pages 61-62). Although the authenticity of the

¹³ William Wenman Seward, *Topographia Hibernica or the Topography of Ireland, Antient and Modern*, Dublin, 1797, s.v. "Arran-Isles".

¹⁴ O'Flaherty, "A Sketch of the History and Antiquities of the Southern Islands of Aran", 139. O'Flaherty believed that Hy Brasail was an actual island once and that it was part of Atlantis, together with which it sank beneath the ocean (see Chapter 3, page 78).

¹⁵ It is ironic that genealogical research, carried out by John Messenger, revealed that all of the families in the Aran Islands trace descent from immigrants who arrived there towards the latter end of the seventeenth century. Messenger, who also reported on a scientific study which shows that the Aran islanders closely resemble the English in phenotype and blood make-up, furthermore pointed out that numerous English surnames were recorded in the first census in 1821, a finding which testifies to the fact that successive English forces occupied Aran: see John Messenger, "Literary vs. Scientific Interpretations of Cultural Reality in the Aran Islands of Eire", *Ethnohistory*, XI/1 (Winter 1964), 48.

manuscript must now be very much in doubt, it has been very influential in persuading eminent people, such as Westropp, to believe that Brasil Island could be traced back at least to the seventeenth century. The *Unpublished History* was, and still is, the most widely quoted source in regard to Brasil Island.

Hardiman was certainly astute when it came to publicizing his ideas. As editor of O’Flaherty’s *Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, he glossed O’Brasile as follows:

This fabulous island has been so fully noticed in recent publications, that it is only necessary here to refer to some of them, viz.: *The Tour of M. Boullaye le Gouz in Ireland, AD 1644* ... and *Irish Minstrelsy* “O’Brazil” has been celebrated by our gifted countryman, Gerald Griffin, in a pleasing poem¹⁶

Apart from his own *Irish Minstrelsy*, then, Hardiman only names two other works. Bizarrely, Brasil Island is not mentioned in M. de la Boullaye le Gouz’s travel account, but in the appendix its editor, T.C. Croker, refers to Hardiman’s *Irish Minstrelsy* and quotes from the ill-founded *Unpublished History of Ireland*.¹⁷ Thus, Hardiman discreetly managed to draw attention to his own work twice, and the only other source remaining is Griffin’s poem “Hy-Brasail”, which we shall examine later.

Turning to M’Carthy, who was the first writer to dispatch St Brendan to Hy Brasil, we find that he specifically named two sources for his portrayal of Brasil Island: Hardiman’s *Irish Minstrelsy* and Griffin’s “Hy-Brasail”. Even more revealing is his explanatory comment on Hy Brasil which reads as follows: “The frequent allusion to this subject in works recently published, render it unnecessary to give any more particular description of it in this place.”¹⁸ The fact that he repeated almost verbatim Hardiman’s assertion and that he resorted to the very same two sources would suggest that he had to rely on just these two because of his inability to find any additional ones. Elsewhere in his “Voyage of Saint Brendan”, M’Carthy cites Caesar

¹⁶ *A Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, 68.

¹⁷ *The Tour of the French Traveller M. de la Boullaye le Gouz*, 68-70. Ironically, Croker was not fond of the *Irish Minstrelsy* because he found the work too “deeply tinged with the writer’s political opinions” (see Appendix II, 68).

¹⁸ M’Carthy, “The Voyage of Saint Brendan”, 93.

Otway and Mr and Mrs Hall, all of whom make references to Brasil Island. Did they, perhaps, provide him with ideas on the island? Otway certainly did not because he was quite dismissive of the belief in phantom isles and referred to Hy Brasil as “the baseless fabric of fairy vision”.¹⁹ Samuel Hall, in a private letter, admitted freely that he knew nothing about the island. When he was gathering material on counties Galway and Mayo for his book *Ireland, Its Scenery, Character, &c.*, he turned to the antiquarian John Windele for information on Hy Brasil in the early 1840s. “In one of your letters you allude to a ‘lost island’ of which I know nothing ...”, he wrote. A few months later he needlessly corrected himself, saying: “I wrote – or ought to have written ‘lost island’ – not ‘lone island’ – meaning Hy brazil of which I know nothing.” Clearly uncertain about its spelling, he crossed out “Hy brazil” and replaced it with “Brasil”.²⁰

Subsequently in their book, which was published in 1842, Mr and Mrs Hall made two references to the island. One concerned the Irish peasantry whose Elysium, they stated, was Tir na n’oge [sic], also called Hy Brasil. It was the Halls’ opinion that the belief in Hy Brasil “was the origin of all those fabled islands that have been luring dreamers, from the days of Saint Brendan, down to the discovery of Brazil, aided probably by some ... optical delusions”.²¹ However, in another passage they claimed, “the old bards and popular tradition describe *Hy Breasail* as a country of perpetual sunshine, abounding in broad havens and noble rivers, in forests, mountains, and lakes”. They went on to depict vistas of surpassing beauty and loveliness and to recount stories of the inhabitants’ everlasting youth and perpetual happiness – in short, delights we are familiar with from the Celtic

¹⁹ Caesar Otway (1780-1842) was a Church of Ireland chaplain. In his travel sketches arising from a tour of Connaught, he talked about the local inhabitants and their views on enchanted islands. Apparently the people of the area were convinced that the phantom islands were remnants of some great convulsion that buried parts of the land beneath the waves. They believed that part of the sunken land was still above water, but was “kept from the ken of man by enchantment”. Otway, questioning this myth, commented, “this is O’Brazil. This is the happy land to which St Brendan and his companions sailed This is the land that rises all so suddenly to the view of the men of Antrim ...”, only to vanish just as quickly before their very eyes. This is what he called “the baseless fabric of fairy vision”. See Otway, *A Tour of Connaught*, 388.

²⁰ “Letters to John Windele”, Windele Collection, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin: MS. No. 4B 2/60 (325 and 345).

²¹ Hall, *Ireland*, I, 394.

otherworld depictions. But whereas in the first instance *Hy Brasil* was claimed to be the Elysium of the pagan Irish, in the second we learn that it was only similar to it: “it resembles *Tir-na-n’oge*.” The two slightly different interpretations and the two variations of the name – *Hy Brasil* and *Hy Breasail* – point to two different sources, but the only authority the Halls cited in connection with the island is Hardiman’s *Irish Minstrelsy*.²²

Let us look at a few more examples. Edward Hayes, the editor of *The Ballads of Ireland*, asserted that the legend of *Hy Brasil* “is one of the best known of our national traditions”. For background information on Griffin’s “*Hy-Brasail*” and McGee’s “*The Voyage of Eman Oge*” he referred to O’Flaherty’s *Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*, and “other old books, English as well as Irish”, on whose authors and titles he remained silent.²³ Although he made no reference to it, from the information provided it is obvious that Canon John O’Hanlon (pseudonym “*Lageniensis*”) (1821-1905) also had recourse to O’Flaherty’s *Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught* when he put together the chapter on “*Hy-Breasail; or, the Blessed Island*” for his book on *Irish Folklore*. The works he specifically named are Griffin’s “*Hy-Brasail*”, Colonel Vallancey’s *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis* (which included Beauford’s essay), M’Carthy’s “*Voyage of Saint Brendan*” as well as *A Voyage to O’Brazeel*, the eighteenth-century tract from Ulster, which was discussed in Chapter 8 (see pages 167-95).²⁴ Apart from citing O’Flaherty, Hardiman, Griffin and *A Voyage to O’Brazeel*, W.G. Wood-Martin in his *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland* furthermore provided information from two other unspecified sources.²⁵ Clearly, one of these is Richard Head’s *O-Brazele* (see Chapter 6, pages 141-53) and the other is an article which appeared in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* in 1856. The latter in turn draws on O’Flaherty, Griffin and Head.²⁶ Finally, when we examine Charles Squire’s *Mythology of the British Islands* to see what he based his

²² *Ibid.*, III, 436.

²³ Edward Hayes, *The Ballads of Ireland*, London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, 1855, II, 103, 157-58.

²⁴ *Lageniensis, Irish Folklore*, 114-25.

²⁵ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, I, 212-18.

²⁶ “Notes on Old Irish Maps”, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 1st series, IV (1856), 126-27.

information on Hy-Breasail on, we find that his source is Wood-Martin's *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*.²⁷

When Wood-Martin's book came out in 1902, over a hundred years had passed since Beauford had written his "Antient Topography" and some seventy years since Hardiman had published his own work and that of O'Flaherty. Despite great efforts to find older sources, none could be unearthed and so the same handful of authors, clichéd images and unsubstantiated claims were continually reiterated. Perhaps it was this repetition of formulaic expressions that fostered the belief in Hy Brasil's ancient tradition. Tellingly, Harry Percival Swan, otherwise keen to put a name to all his sources, simply signs off his comments on Hy-Brasil, the "heaven of the pagan Gaels", with the words, "very old tradition".²⁸

In the meantime Hy Brasil had established itself as a popular motif in literary circles, although it was rarely developed as a theme. Predominantly it formed part of an ornate imagery intended to create an appealing perception of Gaelic Ireland, either by evoking the rich delights of the Celtic otherworld or by lamenting the glories of the past. Interestingly, in a number of cases the implied or express advice given to the reader is to take great pleasure in these images, but not to hanker after the lost golden age. The following examples serve to illustrate the different moods, attributes and political or religious ideals with which poets and writers invested Hy Brasil.

Let us start with Gerald Griffin (1803-40) who made such an impact with his ballad "Hy-Brasail [in some editions O Brazil or O'Brazile], the Isle of the Blest". Because it was a great success and also instrumental in propagating the idea that this island was the paradise of the pagan Irish, the full text is given here:

On the ocean that hollows the rocks where ye dwell,
A shadowy land has appeared, as they tell;
Men thought it a region of sunshine and rest,
And they called it Hy-Brasail, the isle of the blest;
From year unto year, on the ocean's blue rim,
The beautiful spectre showed lovely and dim;
The golden clouds curtained the deep where it lay,

²⁷ Charles Squire, *The Mythology of the British Islands*, London, 1905, 133.

²⁸ Harry Percival Swan, *The Book of Innishowen: A Guide Book and Conspectus of Information Relating to the Barony of Innishowen, County Donegal*, Derry, 1938, 74.

And it looked like an Eden, away, far away!

A peasant who heard of the wonderful tale,
In the breeze of the Orient loosened his sail;
From Ara, the holy, he turned to the west,
For though Ara was holy, Hy-Brasail was blest.
He heard not the voices that called from the shore -
He heard not the rising wind's menacing roar;
Home, kindred, and safety, he left on that day,
And he sped to Hy-Brasail, away, far away!

Morn rose on the deep, and that shadowy isle,
O'er the faint rim of distance, reflected its smile;
Noon burned on the wave, and that shadowy shore
Seemed lovelily distant, and faint as before;
Lone evening came down on the wanderer's track,
And to Ara again he looked timidly back;
Oh! Far on the verge of the ocean it lay,
Yet the isle of the blest was away, far away!

Rash dreamer, return! O, ye winds of the main,
Bear him back to his own peaceful Ara again.
Rash fool! For a vision of fanciful bliss,
To barter thy calm life of labour and peace.
The warning of reason was spoken in vain;
He never revisited Ara again!
Night fell on the deep, amidst tempest and spray,
And he died on the waters, away, far away!²⁹

In the chapter on Folklore, we saw that phantom islands were indeed ill-omened and often associated with death, but this is not what Griffin had in mind. A deeply religious man, he frequently adopted a didactic tone in his works, and what he is clearly cautioning against here is of being deluded by beautiful spectres. Clearly the moral to be drawn is that one should not strive after a fanciful dreamland in exchange for a pious life of labour and peace. And yet the depiction of the shadowy pagan world, which the foolish peasant sets sail for, had the opposite effect on his readers: it inspired them with a wonderful vision of the ancient Irish Elysium, and thus Griffin's ballad gained immediate and

²⁹ Hayes, *The Ballads of Ireland*, II, 103-104.

lasting fame. It was frequently cited and anthologized, though not so much for its didactic import, which tended to be ignored, as for its powerfully evocative images of the ancient paradise.

The popularity of Griffin's ballad no doubt inspired Thomas D'Arcy McGee (1825-1868) and William Larminie (1849-1900) to write their own poetic version of *Hy Brasil*, in which even the moral lesson seems to be modelled on Griffin's message. In McGee's "The Voyage of Eman Oge" the young title-character, a born chieftain who is constantly immersed in tales of old, feels nothing but contempt for his present life which he spends on Aran, surrounded by holy men. Driven by this deep yearning for the fabled *Hy Brasil*, he is forever watching out for it until one day it suddenly appears in all its dazzling glory, and he manages to set foot on its precious strand. What befalls him there, the poet cannot tell, only that a year later he is found back on Aran's shore: a washed-up, hollow-cheeked, haggard corpse. But he is revived by the tolling of the holy bell and thereupon he falls on his knees and humbly prays to "God of this Irish Isle". There will be no more sighing for fairy lands, he vows, and no more "despising my lot or my race", only pious toiling and the hope for forgiveness.³⁰

A similar moral, though not motivated by a religious drive, but reading rather like a Joycean epiphany, can be derived from Larminie's poem "The Finding of *Hy Brasil*". Here is the full text:

As, unto one that watches many a year,
Where Eirë's [sic] hills look far into the west,
In hope perchance that from the ocean's breast
Its head the bright *Hy Brasil* may uprear, –
The golden hills he dreams of once appear
Half seen among the clouds of sunset drest,
In many-tinted splendour, but his quest
Finds not again that vision far or near.

So, mocked by glimpses of a glorious time,
Long have I gazed far into Eirë's past;
But now at length on the enchanted strand,
And those evasive splendours, more sublime
Than dream, the potent fire-spell has been cast;

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 157-60.

Lo! On Hy Brasil’s long-sought shores I stand.³¹

The poem is remarkably confessional because the poet projects his own changing view of Ireland into his portrayal of Hy Brasil. According to John J. O’Meara, Larminie converted from indifference, perhaps even condescension, towards Ireland to a passionate love for his native land.³² We may take the speaker in the poem, then, to be the voice of the poet, who, dismissive of the present state of Ireland, used to longingly look out over the ocean for a vision of the country’s splendid past, the embodiment of which is the elusive Hy Brasil. However, once he discovers his love for the country, he is aware of the enchanting beauty all around him and he realizes that he has found what he was looking for: Ireland is Hy Brasil.

Another voice warning against pining for an illusory Ireland was that of Belfast writer Rosa Mulholland (1841-1921), who came from an upper-middle-class Catholic background. Through her novels she sought to promote a sympathetic understanding of Irish society, and thus she portrayed Irish Catholic life in a way that her English readership would find acceptable.³³ In her story “The Wild Birds of Kileevy” (1878), it is the gentle but slow-witted lad Kevin who anxiously wants to know whether Shawn, the local storyteller, has ever seen Hy Brasil. Shawn admits to often thinking that he had, but each time it turned out to be an optical illusion. Once, when he was quite certain that he had spotted it far out at sea, his heart leapt with joy, only to realise a moment later that he had been fooled again – with the sun fading, the apparition disappeared. Kevin expresses his disappointment, but Shawn admonishes him: “Don’t you mind looking for it”, he says, shaking his head, “many have wasted their lives in that search. Don’t turn out a wild goose, but stick to your spade!”³⁴

Mulholland repeated that same lesson in an article entitled “The Irish Exile’s Home-Sickness” where she warned Irish emigrants of the

³¹ William Larminie, “The Finding of Hy Brasil”, in *Glanlúa and Other Poems*, London, 1889, 72.

³² John J. O’Meara, “William Larminie, 1849-1900”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, XXXVI/141 (March 1947), 90.

³³ *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, s.v. “Rosa Mulholland”.

³⁴ Rosa Mulholland, “The Wild Birds of Kileevy: A Tale”, *Irish Monthly*, VI (1878), 534-35.

danger of imagining a homeland that does not exist. Telling their children of an exaggeratedly holy and enchantingly beautiful Erin will inevitably lead to a rude awakening:

The children grow up, dreaming of an Ireland which exists no more than does the Hy-Brasil believed in by our forefathers, appearing on the ocean verge between golden cloud and golden wave in the glamour of the sunset, with the spirits of the ancient Irish saints walking with shining faces on its diamond-strewn shores.³⁵

Emily Lawless (1845-1913) was no great admirer of Gaelic Ireland and she certainly did not promote Irish self-government. She presented Hy Brasil as part of the medieval mindset, evoking the past without romanticizing it. In her novel *Maelcho*, she connected the island with characters meant to be the bearers of authentic Gaelic identity. Cormac Cas, “the ollamh, or brehon – in other words, the lawyer, bard, chief adviser of Morogh … O’Flaherty”, relates in a song the events of the conquest of Ireland and the brutal murder of the Gaelic warriors, whom he now imagines to be in the land of Shadows, or “even in the land of O Brasil”.³⁶ Maelcho, the title-character, who is called “the greatest senachie in Ireland”, too, refers to Brasil Island. This occurs in a meandering recital about three good young men who “set out across the sea to Hy Brasil, the land of eternal youth, where nobody ever dies, and where the pigs are prettier and the wolves tamer than robins and chickens in Ireland”.³⁷

Two authors adopted a whimsical take on Hy Brasil. Geraghty M’Teague’s story “A Legend of Clare” appeared in the *Irish Penny Journal* in 1841.³⁸ It is partly set in the imaginary island of Kilstapheen (see Chapter 3, pages 69-72) and partly in “O’Brassil”. This light-hearted romp not only combines elements of folklore, fairy tale and legend, but also makes a mockery of antiquarians who subscribe to earthquake theories according to which the west of Ireland had fallen victim to some huge cataclysmic inundation. Lady

³⁵ Rosa Mulholland, “The Irish Exile’s Home-Sickness”, *Irish Monthly*, XX/233 (November 1892), 563.

³⁶ Emily Lawless, *Maelcho: A Sixteenth-Century Narrative*, London, 1894, I, 86-87.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 239-40.

³⁸ Geraghty M’Teague, “A Legend of Clare”, *Irish Penny Journal*, I, 46 (15 May 1841), 362-65.

Gregory also uses a humorous approach in her “wonder play” *The Jester*. She says in her notes that she had been asked by a small boy to write a play that could be acted at school.³⁹ She kept her promise and invented an unbounded wonder-world in the “Island of Hy Brasil”, set in time “Out of Mind”, and peopled with human beings as well as otherworldly characters. The title-character, a ragged fool and a mischief-maker, who takes pleasure in confusing the order of the world, turns out to be Manannán, god of the Sea and great master of all enchantments, who transforms an ogre into a rat for three terms of seven years, forcing him to depart on all fours at the end of the play.

Robert Dwyer Joyce (1830-83), who unabashedly revelled in the beautiful vision of Hy Brasil had no qualms about celebrating it in glowing terms. With his “Romance of Meergal and Garmon”, he created a most exuberant poem about Hy Brasil,⁴⁰ in which he tells the story of young Garmon who, from the highest pinnacle of the cliffs of Moher, suddenly espies beautiful Hy Brasil, the Land of Glory. Luckily he has the foresight to pluck a blessed shamrock before sailing off in the direction of the island, to which he is guided by a smiling mermaid. Within a stone’s throw of Hy Brasil, Garmon sees its golden shore starting to recede and the mermaid disappearing. Remembering the shamrock “with the earth still fresh upon it”, he throws it to the wind which duly bears it to the strand, thus fixing the island in place forever. Garmon fetches his beloved Meergal and together they sail back to Hy Brasil where they live happily ever after in an environment that bears every single hallmark of the otherworld. The last stanza reads:

When the stars are on the waters, and the peasants by the shore,
Oft they see that boat of beauty with the sparkling diamond prore,
Sailing, sailing with the lovers o’er the silent midnight sea,
To the beautiful Hy Brasil, where they’re blest eternally.

In a footnote Joyce explains that Hy Brasil is supposed to be identical with Tír na nÓg, the paradise of the pagan Irish, which the peasantry believe they can still see at sunset from the western coasts of

³⁹ Lady A. Gregory, *Three Wonder Plays*, London and New York, 1923, 221-22.

⁴⁰ Robert Dwyer Joyce, “Romance of Meergal and Garmon”, in *Ballads, Romances and Songs*, Dublin, 1861, 79-86.

Ireland.⁴¹ It would seem, then, that Joyce had no other agenda than to recreate a beautiful vision of what he considered to be traditional belief. Another children's book in which the island is featured was written by Christine Savery and bears the title *Red Knights from Hy Brasil*.⁴² It tells the story of some English children on a visit to Ireland. Due to a misunderstanding, the children – whose surname is Knight and who were actually born in Brazil – are understood to have come from Hy Brasil, invoking the usual clichéd connotations: “Tir Na Noge”, Land of the Ever Young, Land of the Blessed, and so on.

For the poet-journalist John Francis O'Donnell (1837-74), Hy Brasil embodied clear political ideals. As a young lad he became a writer for the *Nation*, the platform for patriots and nationalist poets, and in keeping with the prevailing spirit of the journal O'Donnell gave his poetry a decidedly political character. Promulgating the idea of national pride, he used Hy Brasil as part of the Gaelic world usurped by foreign invaders. In his passionate poem “Our Faith – Our Fatherland” he depicts Ireland, the Island of Saints and Scholars, before the Norman invasion thus:

A perfect Paradise of perfect bloom –
 The Pharos of the west, whose brilliancy
 Blazed like a star amid the ocean gloom.
 ...
 Inheritance of peace blessed each abode;
 And from the morning watches till the sun
 Sank in Hy Brasil, firing the vast dome,
 Up swelled the myriad-voiced, sweet orison
 From the green altar burning on the foam.⁴³

As is evident from his poem “Ossian”, O'Donnell also presents Hy Brasil as an essential feature of the otherworld which Ossianic heroes aspire to:

There are pastures full fat in the heavens;
 Red deer that are swift as the cloud,
 When rolls from Hy-Brasil the tempest, and, inland,

⁴¹ “Romance of Meergal and Garmon”, 86.

⁴² Christine Savery, *Red Knights from Hy Brasil*, London, 1955.

⁴³ John Francis O'Donnell, *Poems*, ed. R. Dowling, London, 1891, 219-21.

The forests grow dim;
There are women delightful and fragrant,
By sunshines of saffron o’erbowed –
Yet who has seen them?⁴⁴

The poem “Love Consecrate” by Daniel Corkery (1878-1964), is a similarly impassioned affair – with touches of religion and nationalism plus an acceptance of the pain of martyrdom for the cause of freedom. In this poem *I Bhreasail* forms part of the visionary transformation of Ireland.⁴⁵

William Rooney (1873-1901) was a journalist, poet and a friend of Arthur Griffith, with whom he set up *The United Irishman*. Rooney regularly contributed to several nationalist papers and when he died in 1901, *The United Irishman* printed the last two poems “he ever wrote”. If true, Rooney’s last poem was “Hi Breasail”,⁴⁶ which conveys the enthusiasm for a “land of Heart’s Desire” that characterized the patriotic visions of a Celtic Elysium. The poem was included in his collection of *Poems and Ballads*,⁴⁷ a copy of which was sent for review to James Joyce in Paris. Joyce’s review was scathing. He neither found spiritual energy in these poems nor beauty nor integrity. “But one must not look for these things”, he wrote, “when patriotism has laid hold of the writer”.⁴⁸

William Sharp (1855-1905) was seriously enamoured with the mystery of Hy Brasil. He confessed to dwelling “with ever-wondering delight in that land of lost romance which had its own day”.⁴⁹ In an

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

⁴⁵ Daniel Corkery, “Love Consecrate”, in *I Bhreasail: A Book of Lyrics*, London, 1921, 72.

⁴⁶ *The United Irishman*, V/115 (11 May 1901), 5.

⁴⁷ William Rooney, *Poems and Ballads*, ed. Arthur Griffith, Dublin, [1901], 55.

⁴⁸ Joyce reviewed the book on 4 December 1902, and his comments were printed in the *Daily Express* on 11 December 1902. His review is reprinted under the title “An Irish Poet”, in James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry, Oxford, 2000, 61-63 (see also 301-302).

⁴⁹ *William Sharp (Fiona Macleod): A Memoir*, compiled by his wife Elizabeth A. Sharp, London, 1910, 2. Sharp was a Scottish writer who published both under his *nom de plume* and under his real name. He is considered by many as the most remarkable figure in the Scottish Celtic Renaissance. He was an acquaintance of W.B. Yeats, who remembers him in his *Autobiographies* somewhat unflatteringly as someone who “never told one anything that was true”: see William B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London and Basingstoke, 1979, 341.

article written for *The Gael* he numbered it among the “magic kingdoms” of Ireland,⁵⁰ a kingdom whose disappearance he was grieving. Thus a feeling of loss and wistful longing pervades the two quite similar poems he wrote about the island, one of which is entitled “Hy Brasil”.⁵¹ His other, slightly shorter poem called “I-Brasil” reads as follows:

“I-Brasil”

There’s sorrow on the wind, my grief, there’s sorrow on the wind,
Old and grey!
I hear it whispering, calling, where the last stars touch the sea,
Where the cloud creeps down the hill, and the leaf shakes on the
tree,
There’s sorrow on the wind and it’s calling low to me
Come away! Come away!

There’s sorrow in the world, O wind, there’s sorrow in my heart
Night and day:
So why should I not listen to the song you sing to me?
The hill cloud falls away in rain, the leaf whirls from the tree,
And peace may live in I-Brasil where the last stars touch the sea
Far away, far away.⁵²

The reminiscences of Griffin’s poem are clearly intended, as the last line shows, but the message differs, in fact the moral point conveyed by Griffin is questioned here. There is no reason, the poem suggests, why one should endure the sorrows of the troubled present and not probe into the peace that Hy Brasil may offer. Whether by “peace” he is merely evoking emotional calm and tranquillity or whether there is a socio-political undercurrent, or perhaps even the suggestion of Christian unity, is open to debate. Sharp’s retelling of the traditional *Children of Lir* suggests that the pagan Elysium and the Christian Paradise which are presented as mutually exclusive in Griffin’s poem can peacefully coexist. In his own version of the old legend of “The

⁵⁰ Fiona Macleod, “The Magic Kingdoms”, in *The Gael: A Monthly Journal Devoted to the Preservation and Cultivation of the Irish Language and the Autonomy of the Irish Nation*, Brooklyn, NY, 1903, 135.

⁵¹ Fiona Macleod, *From the Hills of Dream: Mountain Songs and Island Runes*, Edinburgh, 1896, 140.

⁵² William Sharp, *Poems and Dramas*, London, 1910, 252.

Four White Swans”, Sharp, although claiming that he has closely followed the original translation of Joyce’s *Old Celtic Romances*, omits to mention that the inclusion of Brasil Island was his idea. “Hy-Brásil” far away in the west, is the otherworld which his children of Lir praise as the Isle of Joy or the Isle of Youth Eternal, where they expect to be reunited with their own people, and in particular with their father Lir, together with whom they will then continue to travel on to the gates of Paradise.⁵³

Alfred Perceval Graves (1846-1931) was another writer to connect a mythological figure from traditional lore with Hy-Brazil: in his case it is Manannán, the god of the sea. Among his poems grouped together as “Songs of the Sidhe”, we find “The King’s Cave”, in which Hy-Brazil makes a sudden, explosive but eagerly awaited appearance in “lulled Atlantic’s cradled sleep”:

...

With hand to brow the Monarch hoary
Stood rapt upon the Western ray,
Till in a gulf of golden glory
The bright bark melted o’er the bay.
Then cracked the glass of calm asunder!
Then roared the cave the sea cliff under!
Then sprang to shore, with hoofs of thunder,
Mannanan’s steeds of ghostly grey,
Yet ere the shock, a cry of wonder,
“Hy-Brazil here!” rose far away.⁵⁴

In the poetry of Dora Sigerson (1866-1918) we find a dichotomy between this world and the magic of Hy-Brasail, but in sharp contrast to Griffin and more in line with Sharp, Sigerson’s emotional response inclined toward the latter. In “I have been to Hy-Brasail” the lyrical I indulges in a vision of the island, full of youthful laughter and love. However, when facing reality,

...

⁵³ Fiona Macleod, “The Four White Swans”, in *The Laughter of Peterkin: A Retelling of Old Tales of the Celtic Wonderworld*, London, 1897, 66, 77, 111, 113.

⁵⁴ *The Irish Poems of Alfred Perceval Graves: Songs of the Gael; A Gaelic Story-Telling*, ed. Douglas Hyde, Dublin, 1908, 7-8.

Lost is the magic island,
And I cannot find the shore.

Since I have left Hy-Brasail,
Age has encompassed me,
She plucks me by the shoulder
And will not let me be.

Her face is grey and mournful
Her hand is hard and cold,
Yet I have left Hy-Brasail
Before my time was told.⁵⁵

The actual world is portrayed as one of grief and decay from which Hy-Brasail promises relief. In Sigerson's rather sentimental ballad "Earl Roderick's Bride", death in Hybrasil seems preferable to life in a miserable world. The Earl's heartbroken spouse each night mounts Hybrasil Hill from where she watches the lights in her parents' house, weeping bitter tears at the loss of her home and her husband's cruelty. Unable to bear the pain of her pitiful existence any longer, she goes out to the hill for a last time and vanishes in the waves of Hybrasil Lake.⁵⁶

I.F. Galwey, who came from Ulster, delighted in the vision of Hy Brasil without contrasting it with the harsh reality. To him, the island embodied both the Gaelic past and the otherworld which, like Sharp, he presented as compatible with the Christian Paradise. Revealingly, in his *Hybrasil, and Other Verses* (1872), which he dedicated to the Bishop of Derry and Raphoe he commented: "The Islands of Hybrasil have, like Hesperus, been celebrated from ancient times as the abode of immortal bliss, and to these legends Irish saintly lore has given a deeper and more sacred character."⁵⁷ Indeed, his title-poem – the first and longest poem in the collection – reads like a fusion of Griffin's and M'Carthy's ballads on the subject, an impression which is reinforced by the choice of the headings which he gave to the two

⁵⁵ Dora Sigerson, *Love of Ireland: Poems and Ballads*, Dublin and London, 1916, 15-16.

⁵⁶ Dora Sigerson, *The Collected Poems*, London, 1907, 21-31.

⁵⁷ I. F. Galwey, *Hybrasil, and Other Verses*, Dublin, 1872, 9-22.

parts of his poem, namely, "Far away" (the last words of Griffin's poem) and "The Voyage" (the title of M'Carthy's poem).

In the first part, Hy Brasil makes an appearance on the horizon. Fascinated, the observer watches the beautiful scene unfolding before him, in which whispering voices and rays of light reveal the "wondrous lore" of days gone by. Sweet images of happier times are called to mind, filling his heart with sadness because he knows that there is little hope of ever resurrecting the Gaelic past. In the second part, the observer is gripped by a burning desire to see for himself Hybrasil's sunny shore, and so he sets sail in search of it. Soon, however, a fierce storm shatters his frail vessel, which drifts helplessly with the tide. Tired and exhausted, all the voyager now wishes for is to die. Just then a soft, unearthly voice admonishes his despondency. He is encouraged to mend his boat, overcome all perils and trust in God, who will soon guide him, not to the lost heaven of his dreams, but to God's Paradise. As a sign, the most exquisite light is revealed to him, which from then on comforts and guides him wherever he goes. The cherished aspiration of a return to the golden past may be unfulfillable, but Hybrasil, shining like a beacon, at least promises a happy hereafter:

And I know its radiance calm and pure
Beams from Hybrasil's shore,
Where those who to the end endure
Shall rest for evermore.

Another Northerner, who expressed dreams not unlike those of Galwey was John Mitchel, the Young Irelander from Derry. When filled with an intense longing for Ireland, Mitchel was yearning for a glimpse of Hy Brasil. Combining memory and dream, he put in his *Jail Journal* of 1854:

I can behold, in vision, the misty peaks of a far-off land – yea ... my wistful eyes can see, looming, floating in the sapphire empyrean, that green Hy Brasil of my dreams and memories – "with every haunted mountain and streamy vale below".⁵⁸

⁵⁸ John Mitchel, *Jail Journal*, Dublin, 1913, 65.

There is an exquisite aura of melancholy about *Hy Brasil* because it embodies a once and future Ireland that exists in dreams only and can never be achieved or be real. Mitchel expressed an equally tender feeling of sadness when he wrote about the death of Thomas Davis:

Disappointment and despondency, too, had their share in wearing down his frame. He saw the powerful organization wherein he had trusted gradually weakening ... until its hearts died within it: and through the gloom, even his eye of faith could hardly discern an outlook to a brighter future. The Green Flag of sovereign Irish nationhood that had streamed so proudly through the day-dreams of his youth, was fading into distance like the glories of *Hy Brasil*.⁵⁹

Richard Kirkland made some very enlightening observations with regard to the Northern Revivalists and their engagement with *Hy Brasil*, which he interpreted as a peculiar form of aesthetic and political masochism. As the Revivalists' search for *Hy Brasil*'s perfection was ultimately frustrated, the island became the place of a promise deferred. After the partition of Ireland, *Hy Brasil* moved even further out of reach, now lying "at two degrees of separation".⁶⁰ It became an unrealistic vision, yet its very unattainability appealed to the nationalists' imagination. Kirkland regards the poem "I-Breasil" by the County Antrim poet Ethna Carbery (1866-1902) as one of the foundational texts of the Northern Revival. The speaker in the poem allows herself the pleasure of an imaginary stroll through wonderful I-Breasil, described in terms of the happy otherworld, but she ends with a reality check:

But I move without in an endless fret,
While somewhere beyond earth's brink, afar,
Forgotten men, in a rose-rim set,
I-Breasil shines like a beckoning star.⁶¹

⁵⁹ John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest*, Dublin, 2005, 89. Originally this article appeared in Mitchel's Tennessee-based newspaper, *The Southern Citizen*, in 1858.

⁶⁰ Richard Kirkland, *Cathal O'Byrne and the Northern Revival in Ireland, 1890-1960*, Liverpool, 2006, 217.

⁶¹ Ethna Carbery, *The Four Winds of Eirinn*, ed. Seumas MacManus, Dublin, 1918, 54-55.

Looking back over the literary exploration of Brasil Island in Ireland during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, we find that the island was interpreted in different ways, but regardless of whether it stood for an embodiment of the past or the future, pagan or Christian ideals, whether its appearance was wished for or warned against, its Gaelic provenance was unquestioned and has remained a constant ever since. Its newly created name – either in its Hiberno-English or Gaelic form – and the perception that the island belonged to the Irish tradition was adopted with extraordinary speed outside Ireland during that period, even as far away as Australia, as Henry Kendall’s poem “Hy-Brasil” (1890) shows.⁶² The assertion in the English *Percy Anecdotes* (1820-23) that *Hy Brasil* was an Irish denomination proves the confidence with which the island was regarded as an Irish phenomenon.⁶³

The Massachusetts author Thomas Wentworth Higginson included in his *Tales of the Enchanted Islands of the Atlantic* (1898) two stories which draw on two different cultural environments: one has an English background and the other is retold from an Irish perspective. Consequently the two tales reveal different attitudes towards Brasil Island.⁶⁴ The story “Kirwan’s Search for Hy-Brasail”⁶⁵ is founded on the fictitious letter of Captain John Nisbet which Richard Head penned in 1675 (see Chapter 6, pages 141-53). Higginson provided the story with a frame narrative. Set in the Aran Islands, it tells of the boy Kirwan, who was cut off by fog from other boats when out fishing for herring one day. After much drifting about, he was eventually taken on board by John Nisbet’s crew and from then on the story follows Head’s tale of the discovery of O-Brazile and the rich rewards the sailors receive for the good services they had done for the island. Back

⁶² Henry Kendall, “Hy-Brasil”, in *Leaves from Australian Forests: Poetical Works of Henry Kendall*, Hawthorn, Victoria, 1970, 146-48.

⁶³ *The Percy Anecdotes*, II, 241.

⁶⁴ Higginson himself was not aware of the distinction. From his copious notes it becomes clear that he familiarized himself with far more sources pertaining to Brasil Island than anyone else at the time. Apart from all the relevant works in Ireland (Hardiman, O’Flaherty, Griffin, etc) he drew on English sources (mainly in connection with the Bristol voyages), on many prominent authorities (von Humboldt, Winsor, Tassin) and he knew of sea charts, too, on which Brasil Island occurred.

⁶⁵ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Kirwan’s Search for Hy-Brasail”, in *Tales of the Enchanted Islands of the Atlantic*, London and New York, 1898, 125-33.

on Aran, Kirwan's account is met with distrust by some who doubt the discovery altogether and by others who think that the ancient gold pieces might have been procured by piracy, while some of Kirwan's playmates express the opinion that he has always been the greatest liar that ever spoke.⁶⁶ This tale, then, ends on a dubious note, reflecting the shiftiness which Brasil Island connoted in English texts. For "The Voyage of St Brandan" Higginson drew on Denis M'Carthy's ballad of the same title.⁶⁷ Although Higginson clearly distinguishes between the Isle of the Saints, Brendan's ultimate goal, and Hy Brasail, the enchanted island, he nevertheless has Brendan know of the island's existence and of the vain attempts made to disenchant it. No deception is implied here: Hy-Brasail is simply too far away to be reached by the fiery arrows which the priests are shooting towards it.

It is worth remembering that M'Carthy's coupling of Hy Brasil with St Brendan's travels falls in the same time-span as the Gaelicization of the island, and yet in the literature of the time both ideas were treated as long-standing traditions. As there seemed to be no conflict between pagan and Christian designation, Brasil Island came to represent at once the Celtic Elysium and the Promised Land. Dorothea Townshend presents us with a good example of this. In her 1904 biography of the Duke of Devonshire, otherwise known as the "Great Earl of Cork", Lord Treasurer of the Kingdom of Ireland (1566-1643), she clearly wanted to provide the reader with some background information to the following amusing entry in the Earl's diary for May 1623:

I gaue my tenant Thomas Brian Sailer my bill to pay him 20 [shillings?] if before Xmas next he bring me sufficient security that he hath discovered thiland of o Braseel and Landed theron; he gaue me 40 [shillings?] in gould, which I bestowed on my wife.⁶⁸

Townshend rendered this very incident as follows:

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

⁶⁷ "The Voyage of St Brandan", in *ibid.*, 108-24.

⁶⁸ *The Lismore Papers, viz. Autobiographical Notes, Remembrances and Diaries of Sir Richard Boyle, First and "Great" Earl of Cork; Never Before Printed; Edited, with Instructions and Notes and Illustrations from the Original MSS. Belonging to His Grace the Duke of Devonshire, Preserved in Lismore Castle*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, Printed for private circulation only, 1886, II, 77.

On a May morning of 1623 a sailor tenant ... Thomas Brien by name, came to him with tidings of O Braseel, as he called it, that earthly paradise “incomparable in its haze” of which the old bards sang, where the heroes Oisin and Connla dwelt with their fairy brides in the island of eternal youth. Legends told that St Brandan the navigator had landed on it, and in more modern times it has been suggested that the Hy Brasil legends of Galway sailors lured Columbus on his voyage to the western lands But the business-like Earl of Cork did not trouble himself much about St Brandan or fairyland; he only promised the sailor a reward if he could bring him sufficient proof that he had discovered and landed on the island, before next Christmas; and he on his part gave the Earl forty shillings in gold as a pledge that he believed in his own yarn⁶⁹

As this diary appears to be the earliest Irish record in which Brasil Island is mentioned, it is regrettable that the Earl himself did not discuss the charming incident any further and reveal, for example, who actually called the island “o Braseel” – was it he himself or his tenant? However, what Townshend’s embroideries demonstrate is how naturally it was taken for granted that Brasil Island belonged to an age-old tradition. Francis Bigger, one of the numerous voices claiming that St Brendan sailed to Brasil Island, even maintained that the island’s existence “was a common belief in Ireland *from all time*”.⁷⁰ Indeed one of the astonishing constants of this newly created myth is that Hy Brasil goes back to Celtic mythology, but that St Brendan, the “Christian Ulysses” as Wood-Martin quite appositely called the saint,⁷¹ was driven to go there from a Christian desire to see God’s “Land of Promise”. Patrick Kennedy demonstrates this dual role Hy Brasil plays by referring to it in the context of Irish Tales as “O’Breasil”, the sunken island where the spirits of the mythical invaders of Ireland enjoy everlasting bliss,⁷² but calling it “the Blessed Isle of Bresail” when connecting the island with St Brendan and his travels.⁷³

⁶⁹ Dorothea Townshend, *The Life and Letters of the Great Earl of Cork*, New York, 1904, 112-13.

⁷⁰ Francis Joseph Bigger, *Crossing the Bar: Some Post Mortem Beliefs and Legends and Incidents Mostly Irish*, Belfast, 1926, 23 (my emphasis).

⁷¹ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, I, 217.

⁷² Kennedy, *Fictions of Our Forefathers*, 10.

⁷³ Kennedy, *Legendary Fictions of the Irish Celts*, 299.

In a lecture delivered in Brazil in 1908, the Irish revolutionary Roger Casement consolidated all the different ideas concerning Brasil Island into one firm argument, at the centre of which he placed the legend of St Brendan, culminating in the statement that the name of the South American country of Brazil derives from Hy-Brasil.⁷⁴ Like M'Carthy, Casement was justifiably aggrieved at the neglect of Ireland's history and traditions by historians who, at the expense of smaller countries, would only acknowledge achievements of the larger, more powerful nations. Consequently people failed to recognize that Saint Brendan was in fact Irish and that Ireland was the home of his legend, and Washington Irving in particular is berated for calling him a "Scottish monk".

As far as Casement was concerned, the name "Brazil" was probably the sweetest sounding name any race on earth could possess and thus he deemed it detestable that such a beautiful musical name should have derived from a base commercial product like dye-wood, as Alexander von Humboldt had suggested. Not so, he objected, the distinction of naming the great South American country belongs to Ireland and to an ancient Irish belief: "Brazil owes her name to Ireland – to Irish thought and legend – born beyond the dawn of history yet handed down in a hundred forms of narrative and poem and translated throughout all western Europe, until all western Europe knew and loved the story, and her cartographers assigned it place upon their universal maps"⁷⁵ He remained silent on the titles in which Brasil Island may be found; but not by choice. From his unpublished handwritten notes on the subject it becomes clear that he was wracking his brains where he might find evidence that would prove his point. He noted down a number of arguments to be explored: Galway and Mayo peasants still see this imaginary island; "Brasil" exists as a surname in Ireland today; St Brendan doubtless had Hy-Brasil on his mind and tongue. Thus, he deduced that "Irish literature must be full of references to Brasil". But what texts? Where might he find a translation of the Latin Life of St Brendan, he wondered, and what about other authorities like Colgan, Messingham and Lanigan –

⁷⁴ *Origins of Brazil: A Search for the Origins of the Name Brazil; A Pamphlet Produced to Accompany the Lecture-Show by Angus Mitchell and Geraldo Cantarino at the Brazilian Embassy, London on 5 September 2000.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23, and 28-29.

did they make any mention of the island? Would there be any relevant references to Hy-Brasil in a book called *Notices of the Brazils* by the Rev. Robert Walsh, he asked himself, noting down other possible texts and titles that might provide him with the evidence he so longed for.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding his fruitless endeavours to procure works that would back him up, in the concluding remarks of his lecture, Casement expressed the hope that people would learn from the “enduring legend” of Hy-Brasil to appreciate the records of a race who have given so much to mankind, “besides the historic facts and ancient fable”.⁷⁷ It would appear that he swayed at least the editors of his lecture to his firm conviction because in the year 2000, Angus Mitchell still suspected that if people were only prepared to scan old Irish manuscripts they would find “countless references to Hy-Brazil”, and that in time to come Casement’s idea of a truly Irish origin for South America’s Brazil might well be vindicated.⁷⁸ Moreover, he even asserted that the earliest written mention of Hy-Brasil may be found in the *Navigatio Brendani* and furthermore that “Hy-Brazil … existed for well over a thousand years (and possibly for as long as three thousand years) in the folklore memory of the inhabitants of the west of Ireland”.⁷⁹ His co-editor Geraldo Cantarino repeated similar sentiments eight years later in an article published in *History Ireland*, where he maintained that with St Brendan the Celtic idea of a land of eternal life and the biblical Promised Land had fused into one, and that “the paradise, which for many years lived in pagan dreams, was finally found by the holy man”.⁸⁰

Even before Casement’s lecture, geographers as well as maritime and cartographic historians had begun to be persuaded by the arguments of Irish antiquarians who were claiming a Celtic root for Hy Brasil. The French geographer Ernest Hamy led the way by pronouncing in 1888 that the island definitely belonged to ancient

⁷⁶ MS 13,087 (23/ii), A, National Library of Ireland, Dublin. In the handwritten draft of the lecture as well as in the additional notes Casement spells the country “Brazil” and the island “Brasil”.

⁷⁷ *Origins of Brazil*, 29.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁸⁰ Geraldo Cantarino, “An Island Called Brazil”, *History Ireland* (July/August 2008), 36.

Irish lore. He had reached this conclusion after reading Hardiman's publication of O'Flaherty's manuscripts, and as proof for his conviction he provided a translation of the passage in *A Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught* (see page 64).⁸¹ Others followed suit by quoting Hamy, and opinion was only divided on whether the name of the enchanted island and the South American country had two entirely different etymologies or whether the name had originated in Ireland and thence travelled to America.

J. Vidago came down on the side of two separate roots, stressing that he saw no connection between the country and the island other than the coincidence of the same name. Hy Brasil's name is "purely Irish" he insisted "and is associated with the religious legends so popular in the Middle Ages. The other is connected with ... commercial enterprise in the Atlantic."⁸² The majority of geographers and historians are inclined to Vidago's stance, which has been repeated regularly until today.

Others were convinced that the Irish name was transferred to South America. Early proponents of this notion were Varnhagen (1854)⁸³ and Kohl (1861).⁸⁴ At first, Babcock also subscribed to this idea believing that due to some early crossing of the Atlantic from Ireland the name must have been passed along to the Azores and thereafter to the South American country.⁸⁵ This explanation was accepted by only a few geographers, most notably by L'Hoist (1940),⁸⁶ but it resonated very favourably among writers of popular journals.

⁸¹ Ernest-Théodore Hamy, "Les Origines de la Cartographie de L'Europe Septentrionale", *Extrait du Bulletin de Géographie Historique et Scientifique*, 1888, no. 6, Paris, 1889, 33.

⁸² J. Vidago, "The Island of Brasil", *Irish Naturalists' Journal*, VII/3 (September 1938), 71.

⁸³ Hennig, *Terrae Incognitae*, IV, 340. Hennig does not elaborate on the argument and only cites the following title as his source: F.A. Varnhagen, *Historia General do Brazil*, Madrid, 1854, I, 22.

⁸⁴ Although Kohl believed that the name had travelled from Ireland to South America, he thought it denoted "the island of logwood": see Johann Georg Kohl, *A Popular History of the Discovery of America from Columbus to Franklin*, London, 1865, I, 39. The original German edition was published in 1861.

⁸⁵ William H. Babcock, "Markland, Otherwise Newfoundland", *Geographical Review*, IV (1917), 314.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Noll, "Brasil": Herkunft und Entstehung eines Toponyms", 9.

Babcock later arrived at a different opinion. He concluded that Brasil Island was given a traditional Irish name, but that the Italians, who mapped it accordingly, naturally applied to it the meaning with which they were familiar in commerce. Thus both lines of derivation of the name met in the island of Hy Brasil, he argued, but the great Brazil of South America received its name as a tribute to the dye wood.⁸⁷ The Brazilian historian Gustavo Barroso followed Babcock only to a certain extent. In 1941, he argued that although originally the word “brasil” denoted two separate things – the dyewood tree and the Celtic otherworld place – the two terms merged together in a definite geographical appellation: the country Brazil. He was obviously keen to make Brazilian history a little more attractive, asking the rhetorical question: “What do Brazilians prefer: that the name of their own nation signify Blessed Land, Fortunate Land, Land of the Blest, or refer solely to an ordinary and utilitarian commerce of a dye wood?”⁸⁸

There could be no happier way to bring the debate to an end than by considering the fusion Hennig suggested: Hy Brasil denoted a mythical island and was of Celtic origin, but the name reminded seafarers from Southern European background of the word “brasile”.⁸⁹ So when they discovered the South American country with its wealth of dye-wood in around 1500, the explorers considered themselves so extremely lucky that they imagined they had landed in some kind of fairyland and thus named the area after the Irish Hy Brasil.⁹⁰

Having traced the creation and success of Hy Brasil’s Gaelicization, particularly during the nineteenth century, we shall finally turn our attention to what has become of the island in more recent times.

⁸⁷ Babcock, *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic*, 55.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Cantarino, “An Island Called Brazil”, 32-33.

⁸⁹ Richard Hennig, “Atlantische Fabelinseln und Entdeckung Amerikas”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, CLIII/3 (1936), 471.

⁹⁰ Hennig, *Terra Incognitae*, III, 306; IV, 339-41.

CHAPTER 10

FROM HIGH ART TO POPULAR CULTURE: HY BRASIL'S BROAD APPEAL

In the previous chapter we have seen how important the imagined West was to the poetic cartography of Irish writers, and when turning to the visual arts we find that here, too, it played a vital role. Looking back over Irish painting since the early twentieth century, Yvonne Scott commented in 2005: “It is difficult to overstate the importance of the west in Irish art over the last hundred years or so.”¹ It emerges from her critical review that, in particular, the iconography of the western isle resonated in artistic circles. Painters, patrons and viewers alike, were attracted to its imagery: the physical separateness, the vigour, energy and sheer wild beauty of it was seen to reflect the native Gaelic character. The western isle offered a perfect example of a people and a landscape that had remained untouched by modern civilization. As the pristine site of “authentic” Irish landscape and of pre-colonial Gaelic wholeness, Scott argued, it came to be adopted as a romantic metaphor for Ireland itself, forging associations with the mythical Celtic past – *Hy Brasil* and *Tír na nÓg*.² Although many painters identified with this landscape, it is hard to know how many of them actually depicted *Hy Brasil*, but among those known to have done so there is Jack B. Yeats, brother of the poet W.B. Yeats. On the whole, probably more revealing than the pictures themselves is their assessment by art critics.

Anglo-Irishman Yeats linked the role of the artist to the patriotic cause: “When painting takes its rightful place it will be in a free nation, for though pictures speak all languages the roots of every art

¹ Yvonne Scott, “The West as Metaphor”, essay published on the occasion of the exhibition “The West as Metaphor” at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin in 2005, 7.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

must be the country of the artist, and no man can have two countries.”³

Ireland was Yeats’ chosen country. When he depicted the West he drew on his childhood memories as well as on ideas of the West as an authentic Irish landscape, thus adopting both realistic and idealistic idioms. Yeats saw the natural vitality of this landscape not only as inherently Irish, but also under threat.⁴ In 1937 he painted a picture entitled *A Race in Hy Brazil*, which shows an island scattered with figures, flags and horses. It looks like a strand race, a theme which he had treated repeatedly and which captures the joyful entertainments of his youth in Sligo.⁵ In her discussion of this painting, Hilary Pyle began by pointing out that Hy Brazil was a mythical island that had “always been regarded as the physical counterpart of Tír na n-Óg”. Her reading of the painting was premised on this understanding: Yeats had constructed an Irish Cytherea; his painting was a depiction of the Celtic otherworld, capturing a scene of noble eternal pastimes. The figures, whom she interpreted as mythical, were getting ready for a champions’ race on the backs of fairy steeds.⁶

Equally definite comments have been made in regard to a Patrick Collins painting called *Hy Brazil* (1963). The painting is almost void, just showing a narrow band of land and what could be interpreted as a small rock formation. For one art critic, however, the very title “straightaway summons up misty Celtic Twilight vistas”,⁷ while to others it brings the Celtic otherworld to mind. The painting itself, it is argued, succeeds in evoking the symbolic character of Hy Brazil and the artist is praised for achieving the desired aim of expressing the elusiveness of perpetual youth.⁸

Some artists, like Cabrini Lynch and Rob Steinke, appear to have depicted *Hy Brasil* once, James McCreary at least twice, but, between 2003 and 2005 alone, Katherine Liddy produced nine paintings with

³ Quoted in Róisín Kennedy, “Divorcing Jack … from Irish Politics”, in *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures*, ed. Yvonne Scott, Dublin, 2008, 34.

⁴ Tricia Cusack, “A Living Art”: Jack Yeats, Travelling West and the Critique of Modernity”, in *ibid.*, 69, 83.

⁵ Hilary Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings*, London, 1992, I, 462.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 461-62.

⁷ Brian Fallon, “Cias at IMMA”, *Irish Arts Review*, XXII/4 (Winter 2005), 108-13.

⁸ *Images and Insights*, eds Elizabeth Mayes and Paul Murphy, Dublin, 1993, 120-21.

Hy Breasail in the title. As all of these are abstract paintings with only a hint of figurative representation, we can only guess from their full titles (such as *Hy-Breasail Appears* or *The Mist and Hy Breasail*) and from the names of works completed during the same period (such as *The Táin*, *Maelduine's Voyage* or *Brown Bull of Cooley*) that through her paintings Liddy wished to evoke a Gaelic ambience and that she was alluding to the older literary tales.⁹

Poetry and antiquarianism, as we have seen already, conventionally assigned Hy Brasil to the Gaelic past and, judging from the titles of the paintings and their critical assessments considered here, so too did the visual arts. A further illustration of this comes from Mark Brasington (b. 1957), an artist of dual (Irish and English) nationality, who has spent most of his career in Italy. Looking out over the Tyrrhenian Sea, on a clear winter's day, he saw distant islands appearing on the horizon which immediately suggested to him "Saint Brendan's vision of Hy Brasil – the elusive paradise off the west coast of Ireland".¹⁰ It is not quite clear whether Irish artist Sean Lynch had a Celtic paradise in mind when he produced his slide show on Hy-Brazil at the Galway Arts Festival in 2007, but his flyer certainly leaves no doubt that he considered the island to be part of Ireland's cultural heritage. With his show he expressly wished to combat "cultural amnesia" and to put the spotlight on "overlooked cultural artefacts".¹¹

At least two sculptors are known to have made a carving of Hy Brasil. One is John Haugh whose sculpture was shown at an exhibition in Dublin's Municipal Gallery in 1955, and which, according to Seán Corkery, attested to the imagination of the young artist.¹² John Behan's bronze "fish of Hy-Brasail" was on display at an exhibition entitled "The Hy-Brasil Expedition", held at the Graphic Studio Gallery, Dublin, in March 2012.

⁹ See <http://www.oisingallery.com/Painting.asp?PaintingID=2003100113; 2004033101; 2004033103; 2004033104; 2004033105; 2004040102; 2005051104; 2005091701; 2005051105> (accessed 14 September 2011).

¹⁰ See <http://mark.brasington.pagesperso-orange.fr/mbcv.html> (accessed 14 September 2011).

¹¹ Flyer by Sean Lynch, distributed at the Galway Arts Centre/Galway Arts Festival (16 July-11 August 2007).

¹² Seán Corkery, "Chronicle: Two Exhibitions; The Institute of the Sculptors of Ireland", *Furrow*, VI/6 (June 1955), 384.

Turning to music, we find that some composers were also drawn to Hy Brasil, as for example the English composer and poet Arnold Bax (1883-1953). He acknowledged that he derived a lifetime of inspiration from W.B. Yeats, the Literary Revival and the Irish landscape. Yeats' poetry and prose introduced him to Irish fairy tales and the magnificent heroic sagas. Bax writes:

There were three different earthly paradises as conceived by the ancient Gael. One: The Hollow Hill; Two: Hy-Brasil or the Land of Eternal Youth situated in an enchanted island in the Atlantic said, sometimes, even now, to be glimpsed in the Western seaboard of Eire; and Three: Moy Mell – The Pleasant Plain. I wrote tone poems about all these three places of bliss.¹³

He was the first to translate the hidden Ireland into musical terms, he claimed, but stressed that he owed it all to Yeats, who was the key “that opened the gate to the Celtic wonderland”. Hy-Brasil is the setting of his orchestral work named *The Garden of Fand* (1913-16) – a somewhat surprising choice of title. We come across Fand (or Fann) as the wife of otherworld lord Manannán in an early Irish saga called “The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn” (*Serglige ConCulainn*). Fand lures Cú Chulainn to her underwater realm for a tryst and he spends a blissful month in her company – much to the chagrin of his wife Emer. The ensuing dispute between all parties can be solved by the timely intervention of the druids who ply Cú Chulainn with a magical potion that makes him forget Fand and Emer her jealousy, while Manannán shakes a cloak between his wife and her lover, so that they might never come together again.

Frederick Delius (1862-1934) was also an English composer, though of German parentage. In 1913 he composed *I-Brasil*, a song for voice and piano, written to the poem by William Sharp, discussed on page 232. The result is quite striking, albeit, in line with the poem's lugubrious tenor, there is a dirge-like quality about the song. According to one critique, the song amounts to “nostalgic longing for

¹³ Quoted in the documentary broadcast on BBC Radio 3 (in 1983) entitled *The Golden Age Has Passed: A Centenary Celebration of Arnold Bax*, written and presented by M. Oliver: see <http://www.musicweb-international.com/bax/moliver.htm> (accessed 18 September 2011).

a mythic Neverland seemingly just over the horizon".¹⁴ From the published correspondence between Delius and his admirer and fellow-composer Philip Heseltine, it emerges that both romantically linked I-Brasil to old Celtic beliefs in mysterious fairylands far out in the western sea.¹⁵

More recent activity proves that Hy Brasil has not disappeared from the world of music. Irish-born Jerome de Bromhead (b. 1945), having been commissioned by the Culwick Choral Society (with funds provided by the Arts Council), composed a cantata entitled *Hy Brasil*, which was premiered in Dublin in 1981. Hy Brasil is presented here as the ancient resting place of the departed spirits:

...

For all the dead of Hy-Brasil
 For all the island's ghosts
 With nobody to mourn
 Hear the tears in my voice
 Hear the tears
 You loved the mother land
 Sea overwhelmed
 Come to me all men
 Come to me poor grieving souls
 I may make lament
 ...¹⁶

So far our attention has been focussed on the world of art, but if we examine other spheres of human activity, commercial enterprise for example, we find that Hy Brasil inspired a sense of mystical awe here, too. In 1985, Nellie Ó Cleirigh read to the Old Dublin Society a laudatory paper on Lady Aberdeen,¹⁷ a Scottish Countess who was the wife of the Marquis of Aberdeen, Viceroy in Ireland for two periods in 1886, and again from 1906-15. By all accounts, she was a

¹⁴ See <http://www.answers.com/topic/i-bras-1-song-for-voice-piano-rt-v-28> (accessed 19 September 2011).

¹⁵ *Frederick Delius and Peter Warlock: A Friendship Revealed*, ed. Barry Smith, Oxford, 2000, 219.

¹⁶ Quoted in Geraldo Cantarino, *Uma Ilha Chamada Brasil: O Paraíso Irlandês no Passado Brasileiro*, Rio de Janeiro, 2004, 335.

¹⁷ Nellie Ó Cleirigh, "Lady Aberdeen and the Irish Connection", *Dublin Historical Record*, XXXIX/1 (December 1985), 28-32.

remarkable woman who was actively involved in many areas, but she worked particularly hard to improve the lot of women. For example she set up the Women's National Health Association of Ireland and she founded, and for three years edited, *Sláinte*, a journal that was dedicated to health education, home improvements, recipes, and so on. In its edition of January 1911, Lady Aberdeen drew attention to the *Ui Breasail Show* to be held during the summer of that year.¹⁸ Exhibitions of Irish crafts, agriculture and manufacture were a regular part of her activities, but this particular show combined her two main concerns: health and industries. It took place at Ballsbridge (Dublin) from 24 May to 7 June 1911. According to Ó Cleirigh, it turned out to be Lady Aberdeen's biggest triumph: a great craft fair with music, sport and entertainment at which "everybody" exhibited. The organizers issued a specially designed postcard for the event. It shows a man and a woman garbed in Irish peasant clothes standing on the seashore and gazing at an island brilliantly illuminated by shafts of sunlight.¹⁹ The caption reads "Ui Breasail (The Isle of the Blest)". Exhibitors at the show could use the card for advertising purposes. On the back of it they put their own name, logo and stand number underneath the printed label of the show's general manager, the Countess of Carrick.

Ui Breasail was also used in the title of a book published by another society lady during the same year. Miss Lily Humphreys, who dedicated her *Ui Breasail Birthday Book* to Her Grace the Duchess of Abercorn,²⁰ compiled a calendar of birthdays of eminent people whom she had asked to contribute something personal, like a favourite poem or motto. Some withheld any personal recommendation, but most of the vicars, bishops, lords and ladies were happy to oblige; with some giving stern advice, like "Fear God, honour the King", and others, obviously experienced in the ways of the world, cautioning that "Soft words butter no parsnips", or "He aims too low, who aims beneath the sky". Miss Humphreys could not fill the whole calendar with birthday-people, but she filled those gaps herself, mainly with

¹⁸ *Sláinte, The Journal of the Women's National Health Association of Ireland*, III/25 (January 1911), 1.

¹⁹ See Image "Ui Breasail".

²⁰ *Ui Breasail Birthday Book*, compiled by Miss Lily F. Humphreys, Dungannon, 1911.

proverbs or lines from poems. On two occasions (4 February and 14 June) she reproduced lines from Griffin's poem "Hy Brasail". Interestingly, all eight of these are from the first three stanzas which contain the romantic images of Hy Brasil, while none are quoted from the fourth stanza which warns of the seductive nature of these. Hy Brasil – the poem as well as the concept – was clearly very close to Miss Humphreys' heart. Signing off her dedication, she put down "Ui Breasail, May 24th 1911": hence the title.

Around the same time as Miss Humphreys' calendar, yet another book appeared containing the very same name: it was a cookbook, entitled *Ui Breasail Home Recipe Cookery Book*.²¹ Lady Aberdeen wrote its foreword, which provides us with a clue to the naming and the purpose of her show in Ballsbridge. She starts off by asking:

A book of cookery recipes in *ui breasail*! Is it not a contradiction in terms? For do not the dwellers in that ethereal island subsist only on such food as honeyed dew or refections of a similar nature?

Ui Breasail's otherworldly status is thus left in no doubt and, moreover, the iconic island is perceived as an embodiment of perfection. Lady Aberdeen, who was striving to improve the situation of women in Ireland, reveals in this foreword that the ultimate aim of her *Ui Breasail Show* was to bring the ideal into practical relations with everyday life. She considered the cookbook as one of the means to accomplish this goal, because the first step to perfection is "to realise our ideals in kitchen, pantry, and in the daily menu". The cookbook was therefore welcomed by her as a herald of better things to come, bearing within it the potentiality of much comfort, happiness, and well-being. Besides recipes, it contains miscellaneous hints for the housekeeper (laundry tips, how to clean marble, and so on). And although a number of menu suggestions are quite simple the ingredients required for many dishes – such as lobster, anchovy sauce, ginger, tarragon vinegar, truffles, curries, chutneys – reveal an upper-middle-class perspective, they were certainly beyond the reach of ordinary people. It seems obvious that all three events of 1911 – the show and the publication of the two books – were targeting an

²¹ *Ui Breasail Home Recipe Cookery Book*, compiled by Mrs Margaret Hamilton, Dublin and Belfast, n.d.

audience that moved in more exulted circles; but at the same time, we may conclude, that the designation *Ui Breasail* is an indication of the ladies' confidence in the title's recognition and appeal.

In the previous chapter we examined how knowledge of *Hy Brasil* was transmitted in scholarly and artistic circles. But through what channels did it reach the broader public? For an answer we have to turn to journals. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, magazines and periodicals were an important vehicle for the dissemination of Irish culture. In previous chapters reference was made to the *Irish Penny Journal*, the *Nation*, the *Gael*, *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, the *Dublin University Magazine*, the *Irish Monthly*, the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* because *Hy Brasil* was featured in all of these – either in the form of poems, stories or articles. Besides more specific concerns of a political or cultural nature, most of these journals also published popular cultural material such as traditional stories, calendar customs, folk traditions and music. By far the broadest range of topics, however, was offered by an unassuming family weekly called *Ireland's Own: A Journal of Fiction, Literature and General Information*, which first appeared in 1902. Its “wholesome” diet was “Irish” with an emphasis on comforting and conventional fare that was meant to challenge the corrupt influence from abroad, especially from England. The journal endeavoured to be “a microcosm of all that's good about Ireland”.²²

Between 1903 and 1954, *Ireland's Own* touched upon the topic of *Hy Brasil* in at least half a dozen articles.²³ The first of these was devoted to St Brendan's voyage and different views regarding the saint's destination were presented, one of which was that the saint only reached some islands, now submerged, off the west coast of Ireland. *Hy Brazil* is marked out as the chief of these by the journalist, who saw its special status underlined by the fact that this “lovely and lost isle has ever been a favourite subject with Irish poets”. Denis

²² “Christmas 2003 Annual Out Now!”, *Ireland's Own*: see <http://www.finnvalley.ie/irelandsown/irelandsown.html> (accessed 4 October 2011).

²³ See 12 August 1903; 6 October 1928; 13 August 1932; 20 July 1935; 9 November 1946; 13 March, 1954.

M'Carthy is referred to and so is Gerald Griffin. The article ends with the first four lines of the latter's famous poem.²⁴

The second piece boasts that the Irish are undoubtedly "a romantic, ideal-loving people" and that this characteristic holds particularly true of the fishermen along the western seaboard. To these men the Atlantic isle is a vision of enigmatic beauty which would seem commonplace to the eye of the ordinary English tourist. But despite this show of pride, no attempt is made to overly romanticize the issue. The remainder of this, and the topic of the other articles, is all about mirages or enchanted islands. With the exception of the first, all articles print excerpts from O'Flaherty's *Chorographical Description of West or H-Iar Connaught*²⁵ and four of the articles quote lines from Griffin.²⁶ In fact the content of all six articles is more or less restricted to extracts, beside O'Flaherty, from Westropp and Hardiman; none of the pieces reveal any further thought or new ideas on the Hy Brasil phenomenon. Overall, the lackluster approach and use of glib phrases give the impression that the journalists were not all that keenly involved in or knowledgeable about the topic.

Apart from journals many travel books also carried stories about Hy Brasil. Travel accounts to the west of Ireland enjoyed immense popularity from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Plenty of these can be found in a wide variety of journals, but many also appeared in book form. Almost unfailingly they describe the tremendous thrill the traveller feels in anticipation of a glimpse of that magical island on the horizon and, predictably, many of the authors render a prose version of Griffin's well-known poem. Mary Banim's account of the Aran Isles is representative of this type of writing:

While we rested in this lovely spot a most beautiful appearance on the sea ... brought to our minds "Hy Brasail", the enchanted land ... which for ages has now and again been seen on the western horizon. This land of perpetual happiness and youth has often been seen far out in the ocean ... looking so enticing in the golden light that, in years gone by, many and many a fisherman has sailed out in his corrach

²⁴ M. Rock, "A Lost Atlantis, or An Early Irish Navigator", *Ireland's Own*, 12 August 1903.

²⁵ In one case the journalist got O'Connor's first name wrong calling him Roderick (9 November 1946), in another case his name did not appear at all (6 October 1928).

²⁶ The article of 6 October 1928 omits to mention his name.

[sic] to seek the lovely land that lay before him ... as if but a few miles off. But as he rowed farther and farther, so the land receded before him, until at last, as suddenly as the sun sinks in the west, the glorious vista faded from his eyes, and night found the bewildered fisherman vainly seeking for a trace of the beauteous vision that had lured him on. The fate of the fisherman was never known to the friends he left behind, for those who sought Hy-Brasail were never more seen on land.²⁷

Hy Brasil has even left a trace in the realm of politics. A humorous exchange involving the island was recorded during a parliamentary debate in Dáil Éireann in 1952. The Sea Fisheries Bill was discussed, and Mr MacCarthy, a supporter of the fishermen, pointed out how risky and dangerous the pursuit of their livelihood was and that the situation was further exacerbated by competition from abroad. From time to time, eight to ten foreign trawlers could be spotted tied up in Irish bays. Only recently, "in the course of a severe storm, people looking westward from the shores of Galway Bay had thought that Hy Brasil had again appeared, when, in reality, it was twenty of thirty foreign trawlers lighted up, all seeking shelter inside the Aran Islands".²⁸

While this contribution requires no further comment, the innuendo of a Gordon Brewster cartoon in the *Evening Herald* (12 October 1929) is not quite so obvious. It is entitled "Ui Breasil – A Western Haven" and shows a smiling "overtaxed citizen" with a big bag (of money, presumably) in a rowing boat headed for Coney Island. Floating in the water behind him are "Income Tax Demands", and an inscription underneath the drawing reads: "Court messengers, summons servers, and rate collectors are the only people denied a landing on Coney Island Co. Clare."²⁹ If it were not for this inscription, the famous resort in Brooklyn, New York, would spring to mind, but the location of County Clare suggests that the allusion is to a tiny island in the Fergus estuary, which opens into the river Shannon (west of Shannon Airport). Coney, another term for rabbit, might have

²⁷ Mary Banim, *Here and There Through Ireland*; reprinted from the *Weekly Freeman*, 2nd series, Dublin, 1891, 135-36.

²⁸ *Dáil Éireann*, volume 130 (28 March 1952), 892.

²⁹ Gordon Brewster, "Ui Breasil – A Western Haven": call no. 2199 TX 234; National Library of Ireland, Dublin (Department of Prints and Drawings).

been chosen to suggest that money could safely be buried there in rabbit warrens. The Shannon estuary, it will be recalled, was also the location of a submerged city, often called "Little Limerick" (see page 72). It may very well be that Brewster equated Coney Island with Hy Brasil because both offered ideal hiding places from the revenue. Then again the allusive cartoon and its choice of title may refer to contemporary circumstances whose meaning escapes us today.

In the arts, a more sceptical attitude towards Hy Brasil emerged when the Literary Revival drew to a close in the 1920s. With independence gained, the national imperative ceased to be an important issue. Largely unaffected by the aspirations of many of their predecessors, the new generation of writers, artists and intellectuals now questioned the ideals of the Literary Revival and rejected the nationalist appropriation of the western landscape. Concerned not so much with the Gaelic past as with the current problems of economic hardship, emigration, provincialism, personal and private issues, they focused on the orthodoxies of life in contemporary Ireland. As a consequence, the ethnocentric approach to the west, with all its concomitant romantic sentimentality, disappeared and most artists no longer drew on the Gaelic or the otherworldly dimension of Hy Brasil. Poets in particular, rather treated the island as a demythologized locus of imagination, and began to explore, without strain, Hy Brasil's diverse metaphoric possibilities.

Before illustrating the point, it has to be said that not every Irish writer or artist was spellbound by the Celtic past and succumbed to the idea of a mythical Hy Brasil. Some either ignored the *topos* altogether or made some non-committal reference to it; possibly because they were antipathetic to the Literary Revival or to cultural nationalism – like Joyce and Beckett – or because they harboured doubts about the genuineness of the heart of the matter. Max Drennan, for example, complained about the obsession of young writers with using dialect in whatever genre of literature they were trying their hand at, in an attempt to emulate the success of Synge, Lady Gregory and many other talented exploiters of Anglo-Irish dialects. The dialect they employ is Syngian, he commented: "all will try to talk not in prose, but in sweet, gloomy poetry, as peasants are supposed to do in the

West of Ireland, as they really do nowhere except perhaps in Hy Brasil.”³⁰

In *Finnegans Wake* (1939) James Joyce (1882-1941) alludes to the island three times:

... breach of promise with Brendan’s mantle whitening the Kerribasilian sea ...³¹

... Canwyll y Cymry, the marmade’s flame! A leal of the O’Looniys, a Brazil aboo!

... High Brazil Brandan’s Deferred, midden Erse clare language, nougontnoughtnought nein. Assass.

It is noteworthy that in two of the passages he connects Hy Brasil with St Brendan and that he places the island in Counties Kerry and Clare, its conventional location to the south-west of Ireland. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), however, puts it beyond the harbour of Cobh in County Cork, from where the emigrant ships sail to America, and thus the emigrants’ last view of Ireland is Hy Brasil, which Beckett peopled with cudgel-wielding priests and fireflies. The latter is an intriguing little detail because the insects, which are also called lightning bugs, have luminescent organs and produce light in flashes. One suspects that Beckett’s intention here is to mock those poets who typically present Hy Brasil as a shining beacon or a beckoning star.³²

Like Beckett, Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) also invokes the image of Hy Brasil as the last glimpse of Ireland in his poem “Last Before America”. But here the mood is somber and memories evoked are bitter as the emigrants escape from death and economic hardship. Hy Brasil is termed

... now an image
For those who despise charts but find their dream’s endorsement

³⁰ Max Drennan, “The Short Story: A Literary Chat”, *Irish Monthly*, XLV/525 (March 1917), 160.

³¹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, London, 1975, 442. The next two quotations are from pages 464 and 488. In each case McHugh annotates Hy Brasil as a “legendary island” west of Ireland: see Roland McHugh, *Annotations to Finnegans Wake*, London and Henley, 1980.

³² Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, eds E. O’Brien and E. Fournier, Dublin, 1992, 140.

In certain long low islets snouting towards the west
Like cubs that have lost their mother.³³

What is interesting here is that MacNeice, who was born in Belfast and brought up in County Antrim, expresses the same unattainable longing for Hy Brasil, that appealed so much to other poets from the North (see page 236).

The poet-narrator in the *Rough Field* by John Montague (b. 1929) is going in the reverse direction: returning to Ireland, he re-visits old places and, through memory and imagination, he recalls a lost world, while at the same time accepting the inevitable intrusion of modern ways. At the end of the eighth canto he says:

Sight of the Skelligs at sunset
restores our Hy Brasil:
the Atlantic expands on the cliffs
the herring gull claims the air
again that note!
above a self-drive car.³⁴

Hy Brasil is briefly allowed to reclaim its space, only to be expanded into realistic, even trivial, observations of the present: the encompassing landscape, the cry of the herring gull, the rented car. In Anne Kennedy's poem "Hy Brasil: Summer 1980" the island is portrayed as a Shangri-La for Beatle John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono. Lennon did actually buy a remote little island called Dorinish in Clew Bay off the Mayo coast in 1967 and had plans to turn it into a hideaway retreat – "his Hy Brasil".³⁵

The most playful treatment of Hy Brasil can be found in the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (b. 1952), who writes in Irish. By blending fantasy with realism and feminist perspectives she offers funny, if somewhat unsettling readings of the western isle. In the poem-sequence "Imram", which Paul Muldoon translated into English, the poet-narrator parodies the traditional voyage theme by describing her

³³ Louis MacNeice, "Last Before America", in *Holes in the Sky: Poems 1944-1947*, London, 1948, 30.

³⁴ John Montague, *The Rough Field*, Dublin, 1972, 70.

³⁵ Anne Kennedy, "The Mountain Has Always Been a Holy Place, IV – Hy Brasil: Summer 1980", in *The Dog Kubla Dreams My Life*, Dublin, 1994, 71.

own erratic expedition into Hy Brasil territory, in the course of which traditional folk tales are reshaped and given an unexpected twist. The island is manifested in various shapes and forms: enchanted isle, Valium-induced hallucination, tourist trap, heritage centre opened by former Taoiseach Charles Haughey, and so on.³⁶

Charles Haughey is also linked up with Hy Brasil in Julian Gough's novel *Jude: Level 1, a tour de farce*, which relates the antic adventures of a Tipperary orphan who is the spitting image of actor Leonardo Di Caprio.³⁷ Mary Burke's short story "Hy-Brasil" is an allegory of a vanished historical "Region" which could easily be interpreted as Ireland, but a "postscript" warns the reader not only to distrust "obvious interpretations", but the narrative itself because, after all, nobody can know the author's motives for creating the story.³⁸ Margaret Elphinstone's novel *Hy Brasil* (2002) is a contemporary adventure yarn set in Hy Brasil, a "near-mythical island" in the Atlantic. The plot involves an expedition to recover the treasure of a sunken Spanish galleon, a drug-smuggling operation, political intrigue and a love affair. Our last example is "Hy-Brasil", a story written and narrated by Paul Evans and broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 5 September 2012. Set in post-World War II, it tells of the narrator's search for peace and solitude. Hy-Brasil is his destination, but instead of the sanctuary he had hoped it would offer him the island turns out to be a nightmarish place. An evil magician, rainstorms and hellish creatures put the fear of God into him. Now yearning for home, he flees the island and heads for England.³⁹

The reinterpretation and fresh approach to Hy Brasil adopted by the writers is, however, not appreciated by the general public. Not everybody wants to see the romantic myths unmasked which have shrouded the celebrated island for so long. There are those who are reluctant to dispel the seductive myth,⁴⁰ in particular the bloggers who

³⁶ Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill/Paul Muldoon, *The Astrakhan Cloak*, Loughcrew, 1992, 72-103.

³⁷ Julian Gough, *Jude: Level 1*, London, 2007, 86-89.

³⁸ Mary Burke, "Hy-Brasil", in *The Faber Book of Best New Irish Short Stories 2004-5*, ed. David Marcus, London, 2005, 101-105.

³⁹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/player/b01mdg51> (accessed 12 September 2012).

⁴⁰ For completeness' sake it should be mentioned that there were also two television programmes in which the island featured. In 1972, Éamon de Buitléar gave one of his nature programmes (within the popular six part series *A Life in the Wild*) the title "Hy

have formed a real liking for it – as the many references to Hy Brasil in the social media prove – and the compilers of dictionaries of Irish Myths and Legends, too numerous to mention. Thanks to their efforts, mythic Hy Brasil lives on. Colin Langevald and Mark Valentine designed a “Hy Brasil Stamp”, originally issued by the magazine *Wildwood* in October 2004.⁴¹ As recently as 2006, an Irish electronic band was formed calling itself *Hybrasil*, “named after Brazil, a phantom island featured in a many [sic] Irish myths”.⁴² And when in 2006 a monastic property converted into apartments came on the market in Dublin, the developers named it *Hybreasal House* and put the following sales brochure on the web:

Breasal, the High King of the World lived in the South West. His country was called HyBreasal. The dreams of the Irish for generations was [sic] to live in Hybreasal, the most beautiful in the world. A ... lovely home, fit for the King of the World ... overlooking the ancient lands of Kilmainham, where King Brian, Prince Murrough and Prince Turlough rested, on their way to Clontarf in 1014.

To ensure that the ancient connection was not lost on the prospective buyer, a sculpture called *Ui Breasil* was erected which consists of two boulders that cast a shadow at noon at the time of the equinox.⁴³ Other instances could be cited, but, being in the same vein, would not add anything new. Wikipedia has put up a website with the revealing title *Irish mythology in popular culture*,⁴⁴ where other examples are listed that prove the enduring popularity of Hy Brasil.

Brasil”. Interestingly, this documentary is all about the island of Terceira in the Azores, where de Buitléar first learned about Brasil Island. The other programme appeared on the Irish Channel TG4 under the title “Cogar: Ar Thóir Hy Brasil” in December 2006. In this documentary Dáithí Ó hÓgáin explores the mythology and the extensive ties that the island has with the Irish public.

⁴¹ See <http://www.margaretelphinstone.co.uk/phdi/p1.nsf/suppages/0994?opendocument&p>. (accessed 8 August 2006).

⁴² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hybrasil> (accessed 19 May 2011).

⁴³ See “Hybreasal House”: <http://www.bovaledevelopments.ie/featureDevelopment.html> (accessed 23 August 2006).

⁴⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_mythology_in_popular_culture (accessed 18 September 2011).

CONCLUSION

It should be stressed that it was not my intention to destroy the idea of a Celtic myth or to subvert the stories about Saint Brendan. When I began to investigate the topic of this book, I was not tied to any preconceived ideas: I only knew for certain that the different identities ascribed to Brasil Island could not all be true because they were contradictory – even mutually exclusive. Unquestionably, happy otherworlds are featured in numerous early Irish tales and St Brendan's travels are beautifully captured in many a medieval story and it is also true that Irish folk tradition is teeming with enchanted-island lore. However, the findings of this study reveal that it was not until the nineteenth century that reference to Brasil Island or *Hy Brasil* was made in any of these sources.

We have seen that the island makes its first appearance in Genoese portolan charts in the fourteenth century. It is placed to the west of Ireland, where no such island exists and given the name *insula de brazile*. But it is only one of several islands in the Atlantic Ocean to which the cartographers applied this toponym. Although there is no conclusive proof, it seems very likely that the valuable dye *brasile* provided the name for all the islands. Early portolan-makers frequently used the names of precious commodities – like gold, ivory, pearls – for areas in which the desired commodity had already been found or where it was hoped future discoveries would be made. From its very conception, then, it seems that Brasil Island was based on wishful thinking which, on occasions, ran to subterfuge and even deceit, as we have seen in the cases of Edmond Ludlow and Henry Brooke.

Brasil Island's presence on the maps stimulated enterprising merchants to search for it. It is quite possible that the Bristolians, whose exploratory voyages during the fifteenth century are well documented, only used the excuse of searching for Brasil Island while their main object was to exploit the rich Newfoundland fishing grounds. But, as maritime historians point out, they doubtless would also have hoped to locate the island *en route*. Whatever the case may

be, the evident failure of the seafarers to discover the island, in turn inspired the imagination of some English writers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the novelist Richard Head in particular. A constant in these English narratives are ancient maps and treacherous sea voyages in search of Brasil Island against a backdrop of commercial and colonial interest. In works which describe the expedition as successful, we are presented with rather incompetent and subdued islanders whose communities would most certainly benefit from an English takeover.

However, in Ireland a case was made for Brasil Island as the representation of an ancient Irish tale with which the medieval Mediterranean seafarers became familiar and consequently put on their maps. But with no literary source forthcoming to back up the claim, Brasil Island was simply fashioned into a Celtic otherworld and associated with the powerful tales surrounding St Brendan. The problem of the name – *brasile* has no root in the Gaelic language – was overcome by providing it with fanciful etymologies, but neither its Irish version nor *Hy Brasil*, its Hiberno-English rendering, ever appeared on a map.

In its Irish guise, Brasil Island was at the height of its popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not only was it warmly embraced by scholars, writers and artists, but it also caught the public imagination. In fact, reference to the popular misconception of *Hy Brasil* is so pervasive that it is hardly surprising to learn from Dáithí Ó hÓgáin's survey of Gaelic folk records dating back to the mid-Fifties that this island was the most frequently mentioned enchanted island along the western seaboard. What is surprising is that in some areas the name of *Hy Brasil* superseded a name existing in local lore. Phantom isles in the west were connected with specific areas of sunken land and associated with local names, lore and superstitions. However, folk narratives about *Hy Brasil* could draw neither on specific landmarks – other than a vague location somewhere in the western Atlantic Ocean – nor on a local storytelling tradition nor on an older native tradition of writing. Indubitably, then, they have spread to folk tradition from the pens of nineteenth-century antiquarians and poets.

To conclude, what began as a possible error by a Genoese cartographer initiated a spate of exploratory voyages, and, more

importantly, it has for centuries provided English and Irish writers with a rich literary motif. But whereas writers and artists began to demythologize *Hy Brasil* during the second half of the twentieth century, the general public is not quite so ready to dispense with this seductive myth. Thanks to keen bloggers and to compilers of dictionaries of Irish Myths and Legends, the mythic *Hy Brasil* lives on.

APPENDIX:

CARTOGRAPHIC APPEARANCES OF BRASIL ISLAND

To provide a comprehensive catalogue of all maps showing Brasil Island is not only beyond the scope of this book, but also far beyond my ability – it would require the specialist skills and expertise of a cartographic historian. My more modest object has been to gather together and collate previously scattered data on Brasil Island. For this I relied mainly on information culled from books and articles devoted to the subject matter of sea charts, maps and atlases, maritime history, voyages of discovery, legendary islands, and so on.

Although the authors of some of these publications had the opportunity of examining the original cartographic material, there is a lack of consistency in their decipherment, which is not at all surprising considering the age and often poor condition particularly of the early charts. In some cases the inscriptions are quite illegible, allowing only for estimates of age and authorship. Thus, there is often disagreement in regard to the spelling of the island, date of the chart, name of the chartmaker and place of production. When searching through compilations of facsimile charts I discovered many more maps on which Brasil Island is marked that had not been previously noticed, but it was not always possible – even with the help of a magnifying glass – to decipher the exact name.

With all these restrictions in mind, then, the list I drew up can merely attempt to provide a rough guide to the cartographic history of Brasil Island. Emphasis is placed on the name (if legible) and location (if identifiable) given to the island on the maps, which are arranged in chronological order, as far as their date can be determined: [1] indicates a location to the west of Ireland; [2] suggests that Brasil

Island is identical with Teirceira; [3] indicates a location elsewhere, but not outside the North Atlantic Ocean.¹

To avoid unwieldy referencing, as a rule, I only refer to the following titles:

William H. Babcock, *Legendary Islands of the Atlantic* (1922); [abbr. Babc.]

Tony Campbell, *Census of Pre-Sixteenth-Century Portolan Charts* (1986); [abbr. Census]

Armando Cortesão and Avelino Taxeira da Mota, *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica* (1987); [abbr. Cortes.]

La Cartografía Mallorquina, eds Julio Rey Pastor and Ernesto García Camarero (1960); [abbr. Cart. Mall.]

Konrad Kretschmer, *Die Entdeckung Amerika's* (1892) and *Die Historischen Karten zur Entdeckung Amerikas* (1991); [abbr. Kretsch.]

Monique de la Roncière, and Michel Mollat du Jourdin, *Les Portulans, Cartes Marines du XIIIe au XVIIe Siècle* (1984); [abbr. R&dJourd]

Sandra Sider, *et al.*, *Maps, Charts, Globes: Five Centuries of Exploration* (1992); [abbr. Sider]

Thomas J. Westropp, *Brasil and the Legendary Islands* (1912); [abbr. Westr. I]

Thomas J. Westropp, *Early Italian Maps of Ireland* (1912/13); [abbr. Westr. II]

In certain cases, where other publications provide additional information on a particular chart, the respective author and year of publication are given.

Wherever possible, I accepted Kretschmer's suggested reading of the name because he paid special attention to its spelling, but variant readings are also noted. I included a few charts, which I could not properly identify, in the hope that someone else will. As regards the

¹ The original charts are scattered all over Europe and America. However, some libraries have made online scans available, and the best of these are those offered by the Huntington Library in San Marino, California: see <http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/hehweb/toc.html>; by Yale University: see <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/digitallibrary/portolan.html>; and by the British Library: see <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/>. A good collection, also at high resolution, can be found on the website of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London: see <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/>.

dating and present location of the maps, I largely followed Campbell's *Census*, which contains the most comprehensive and reliable corpus of early charts. The basic data of his work – together with further information on scans, illustrations, sources, and so on - are available online, and these are constantly updated.²

Cartographic Appearances of Brasil Island

1330 [1] *Insula de moutonis sive da brazile*, Dulcert/Dalorto; Florence, Prince Corsini Collection.
 Babc., 50-2, 56; *Census* # 166; *Cart. Mall.*, 54; Westr. I, 240-1; Plate XX; II, 408, 415.

Variant readings: *Insula de Montonis sive de brasile* (Babc.) *Insula de montoniis sive de brazill* (Westr. I, 241); *Insula de moutonis sive de brazile* (Westr. I, Plate XX); *Insula de moutoniis sive de brazill* (Westr. II, 415); *Insule de montonis sive de brazile* (Hennig, 1956, IV, 325); *Insula de moturius siue de brazili* (Cortesão, 1953, Table II).

1339 [1] *Insula de Brazil*, Angelino Dulcert; Paris, BnF, C+P, B. 696. Babc., 42, 57; *Census* # 13; *Cart. Mall.*, 55; R&dJourd., fig. 7; Westr. I, Plate XX; II, 408, 415; Plate XLII.

1339-50 [1] *Insula de brazil*, anon., attrib. to Dulcert; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 25.691.
Census # 48; *Cart. Mall.*, 52; Winter (1940), 106-112.

c. 1340-50 [2] *I. del Brasil*, anon., *Book of the Knowledge of All the Kingdoms, Lands, and Lordships that Are in the World*, tr. and ed. Markham, 1967, 29.

2nd half 14th c. *Brasil*, J. Cresques; Paris, BnF, C+P, AA 751.
Census # 12; *Cart. Mall.*, 60.

² See <http://www.maphistory.info/ListingExplan.html>, “Chrono Topony Table” (accessed 2 August 2010); and also <http://www.maphistory.info/portolanextra.html>, “Extra Charts” (accessed 7 December 2011); and <http://www.maphistory.info/portolanchapter.html>, “Post-1500 Charts” (accessed 7 December 2011).

2nd half 14th c. [1] *insula de Brazil*, anon.; Florence, Bib. Naz. Centrale, Portolano 22.
Census # 79; *Cart. Mall.*, 51; Kretsch. 216.

2nd half 14th c. [1 and 2] *insula de brasil*, anon.; Naples, Bib. Naz., Vitt. Eman. III., Sala dei MSS 8.2.
Census # 97; *Cart. Mall.*, 63; Kretsch., Plate IV,8.

Variant reading: *insula de brazil* (Cortesão, 1953, Table II).

1367 [1, 2 and 3] *Bracir* and *ysula de braçir*, Pizzigani Bros.; Parma, Arch. Di Stato Bib., Ms. Parm. 1612.
Babc., 40, 55, 56, 57; *Census* # 99; Kretsch., 216, 218; Westr. II, 415.

Variant readings: *ysola de nocorus sur de brazar* (*Babc.*, 56); *Brazir* (*Babc.*, 1920, 336-8); *brazil* and *insola de braçir* (Cortesão, 1953, Table II); *Bracie*, *Insula de Brazie* and *yxola Braxie seu Mayotas* (Von Humboldt, 1836-52, I, 413, 439, 443); *Ye. de Mayotas seu Braçir*, *Ye. de Braçir* (Dreyer-Eimbcke, 1990, 662); *brazir* (Nansen, 1911, II, 229); *Isola de motonus sive de braçill* and *ysula de braçir* (Westr. II, 415); *Insula de Bracir* or *Bracie* (Winsor, 1884-9, I, 49).

c. 1375 [2] *Insula de Brazil*, anon., attrib. to A. Cresques, “Catalan Atlas”; Paris, BnF, Manuscrits, MS. Esp. 30.
Babc., 58-9; *Census* # 28; *Cart. Mall.*, 57; Kretsch., 216; R&dJourd., fig 8; Westr. II, 415.

Variant reading: *Ile de Brasill* (Taylor, 1964, fig. 8a.)

c. 1385 [1, 2 and 3] *insula de brazir*, *insulas brazir*, Guillermo Soler; Paris, BnF, C+P. B 1131.
Census # 15; *Cart. Mall.*, 61-2; R&dJourd., 203 and fig. 9.

1385 [1, 2 and 3] *Insola de Bracir* and *Brasil*, Guillermo Soler; Florence, Arch. di Stato, C.N.3.
Census # 66; *Cart. Mall.*, 62; Kretsch., 216; R&dJourd., fig. 9; Westr. I, 241.

Variant reading: *insula de berzil* and *brazir* (Westr. I, 241).

end 14th/beg. 15th c. [2] *y. de brazil*, Nicolaus de Corbitis Atlas; Venice, Bib. Naz. Marciana, MS. IT VI, 213 (5982).
Census # 117.

end 14th/beg. 15th c. [2] *Brasil*, anon., “Pinelli-Walckener Atlas”; London, Brit. Lib., Dept. of MSS, MS. 19510.
Census # 47; Von Humboldt (1836-52), I, 439.

Variant reading: *y de brazili* (Cortesão, 1953, Table II).

15th c. [1 and 2] *Brazil*, anon. atlas; Venice, Bib. Naz. Marciana, MS. It IV, Cod. 9 (5090).
Census # 113.

15th c. [1] *lilla de brazill*, anon.; Florence, Arch. di Stato, Carte Nautiche, no. 16.
Census # A21; *Cart. Mall.*, 68.
Variant reading: *illa de brezill* (Nansen, 1911, II, 232-3).

15th c. *Brasil*, anon.; Paris, BnF, C+P, B. 8268.
Census # 16; *Cart. Mall.*, 69.

15th c. *Braxili* (or *Braçil*), anon.; Parma, Bib. Pal. II, 29, 1621.
Census # 101; Kretsch., 217.

15th c. [1] *Insola de brazil*, anon.; Modena, Bib. Estense, C.G.A 5d.
Census # 95; *Cart. Mall.*, 87.

Variant reading: *illa de brezill* (Nansen, 1911, II, 231).

15th c. *Brazile*, anon.; Rome, Bib. Vallicelliana.
Kretsch., 217.

15th c. *ille del brazil*, anon. atlas; Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana, Sala del Prefetto II, 5.
Kretsch., 217.

1403 [1] *isola de brazir*, Franciscus Becharius; New Haven, Yale Univ. Lib., Beinecke., Art Storage 1980.158.

1408 [2 and 3] *yn de braçil* and *yn de brazill*, Nicolaus Pasqualini; Wien, Österr. Nationalbibliothek, Cod. No. 410. Date and authorship are now in doubt.

Census # 1.

1411-15 [2] *brazile* (?), Albertinus de Virga, world map; location unknown.

1413 [1 and 2] *Insola de brazil* and *Brasill*, Mecia de Villadestes; Paris, BnF, C+P, AA 566.

Census # 11; *Cart. Mall.*, 70; R&dJourd., fig. 12.

1421 [1] *Brasill* (?), F. de Cesanis; Venice, Civico Museo, Coll. Correr, Port. 13 (Cicogna 3453).

Census # 119.

1422 [2] *ya de braçil*, Jacobus de Giroldis; Paris, BnF, C+P, C 5088. Babc., 57; *Census* # 18; Westr. II, Plate XLII.

1423 [1 and 2] *insola de brasilli* and *bazilli*, Mecia de Villadestes; Florence, Bib. Medicea-Laur., Ashb. No.1802.

Census # 75; *Cart. Mall.*, 71.

1424 [1 and 2] *braxil* and *ixõ de braxil*, anon., attrib. to Zuane Pizzigano, “Phillipps Chart”; Minneapolis, James Ford Bell Lib. Univ., No. B1424mPi.

Census# 141; Cortesão (1953), 1-13.

Variant reading: *brazil* (Kelley, 1979, 31).

bw. 1424 and **1499** [2] *Brasil*, Freducci; Weimar, Zentralbib. d. dtscr. Klassik.

Census # 35; *Cart. Mall.*, 67.

2nd quarter 15th c. [1 and 2] *I. de brazi*, anon., “Laurentian Sea Atlas”, also “Medici Atlas”; Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Gaddi. Rel. 9.
 Babc., 57; *Census* # 76; Kelley (1979), 23-7; Kretsch., 114, 184, 216; Westr. I, 241; II, 415.

Variant readings: *Brasil* (Von Humboldt, 1836-52, I, 439); *Insula de brazi* (Kelley, 1979, 24-5);
Insul de Berzi (Westr. I, 241); *Insule de brazil* (Westr. II, 415).

1425-50 *Braxili*, anon.; Parma, Arch. di Stato Bib. Pal., MS II, 32 No. 1624.

Census # 103; Kretsch. 217.

1426 [1 and 2] *Insulla de brazil*, Battista Beccario, planisphere; Munich, Bayr. Staatsbib., Cod.icon. 130.

Babc., 44-6, 57; *Census* # 37; Winsor (1884-9), I, 50.

1426 y.a de braçill, Jacobus de Gioldis; Venice, Bib. Naz. Marciana, It. VI, 212 (5694).

Babc., 57; *Census* # 116; Westr. II, 415.

1428 [1 and 2] *brazil* and *brasil*, Johanes Viladestes; Istanbul, Topkapi Sarayi Müzesi, no. 1826.

Census # 133; *Cart. Mall.*, 72; Winter (1954), 2.

1430 [1 and 3] *insula de brazilli* or *braxyilli*, Cholla di Briaticho; Siena, Bib. Com., SV 2.

Census # 109; Kretsch., 217.

c. 1430 [1] *Illa da Brazil*, Juan da Napoli, “Cornaro Atlas”; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 73.

Babc., 57; *Census* # 52.

1435 [1] *i. de brazil*, Battista Beccario, planisphere; Parma, Bib. Pal., II, 21, 1613.

Babc., 57, 152-3; *Census* # 100.

1436 [1 and 2] *Ya de brasil*, Andreas Bianco; Venice, Bibl. Naz. Marciana, MS Fondo Antico It. Z 76 (4783).

Babc., 57; *Census* # 112; Von Humboldt (1836-52), I, 435; Kretsch., Plate IV, 2; Westr. I, 241; II, 415.

Variant readings: *Berzil* (V. Humboldt, 1836-52, I, 439); *Y de borzil* (OED, 1989, VII, 523); *Ya de brazil* (Quinn, 1989, 81); *I. de Brazi* (Westr. I, 241); *y a de berzil* (Westr. II, 415).

1439 [1] *Brasil*, Gabriel de Vallseca; Barcelona, Bib. de Catalunya, preserved in Museo Marítimo, Caja II.

Babc., 57; *Census* # 128; *Cart. Mall.*, 73.

1439 [2] *de brasil*, Andreas Bianco; Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana.

De Albuquerque (1962), 211.

c. 1440 [1] *illa de brazill*, anon., attr. to Gabriel de Vallseca; Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale

Centrale, Port. 16.

Census # 78.

1443 *Brazi*, Giacomo de Ziredis (Giroldi); Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana, SP 2, 38 (Port III; SP II,3).

Census # 87; Kretsch., 216.

1447 *brasil*, Petrus Roselli; Chicago, Kenneth Nebenzahl, priv. coll.

Census # 178.

1448 [1 and 2] *y de Brazil de binar* and *de Braxil*, Bianco; Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana, F. 260 Inf (1).

Babc., 56-7; *Census* # 84.

Variant reading: *de Braxil* (Winsor, 1884-9, I, 50).

c. 1450 [1] (no name), anon. map of Ireland, watercolour (simplified version of an Italian nautical chart); London, Brit. Lib., Harley MS. 3686, f. 12.

c. 1450 unspecified map; Venice, Bib. Naz. Marciana. According to Winsor the island of Brazil appears in four places.
Winsor (1884-9), I, 50.

c. 1450 [1] *braçil*, Fra. Mauro portolan chart, publ. by Almagià in *Monumenta Cartographica Vaticana*, vol. I, 1944.
Winter (1954), 7; Winter (1962), 17-28.

1450-75 *Brasil*, anon., attr. to Petrus Roselli; Modena, Bib. Estense, C.G.A, 5 b.
Census # 93; *Cart. Mall.*, 80.

1450-75 anon., attr. to Petrus Roselli; Paris, BnF, C+P, C 5096.
Census # 20; *Cart. Mall.*, 81.

1462-4 [1 and 2] *Illa de brasil* and *lilla de brezill*, anon.; Modena, Bib. Estense, C.G.A.1.
Census # E 23; *Cart. Mall.*, 68-9.

2nd half 15th c. [1] *Brasil*, anon.; Badia di Cava, Bib. Mon. Naz.
Census # A 18; *Cart. Mall.*, 86.

1455 [1 and 2] *Insulla de Brazil*, Bartolomeo Pareto; Rome, Bibl. Naz. Cent. Vitt. Em. II, *Carte Nautiche* I.
Andrews (1984), 42; Babc. 57, 157-8; *Census* # 104; Kretsch., 216; Plate V.

Variant reading: *Insulla de branzil* (Kretsch., Plate V).

c. 1455 [2] *y. del bracil*, Soligo.
De Albuquerque (1962), 211.

1456 [2] *lilla de brasil*, Bertran and Ripoll; Greenwich, Nat. Mar. Mus., G230:1/7 MS.
Census # 41; *Cart. Mall.*, 82.

1456 *Brasil*, Petrus Roselli; Chicago, Newberry Library, E. Ayer Coll.
Cart. Mall., 77.

1457 [1] (name not legible), anon. Genoese world map; Florence, Bib. Naz. Pal., Port 1.
 Enterline (2002), 190, fig. 41.

c. 1459 [1] *Brazil*, Fra Mauro map of the world; Vatican Biblioteca, Borgia. V.
 Babc., 52; *Census* # 153; Kretsch., 216; Westr. I, 243; Plate XX.

Variant readings: *Berzil, queste isole de Hibernia son dite fortunate* (Babc.); *I. de Berzel, queste isole de Hiberniae son dite fortunate* (Hennig, 1956, IV, 328); *Berzil* (Von Humboldt, 1836-52, I, 439); *L'isola del Berzel* (Lelewel, II, 66); *I. del Berzel, anesta isola de hibernia, son dite Fortunata* (Westr. I, 242; Plate XX).

1462 [1] *Brasil*, Petrus Roselli; Paris, BnF, C+P, C 5090.
Census # 19; *Cart. Mall.*, 77.

1463 [2] *isola de braçill*, Graciosus Benincasa; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 18454.
Census # 45.

1464 *illa de brezill*, Petrus Roselli; Nürnberg, Germ.
 Nationalmuseum, La 4017.
Census # 38; *Cart. Mall.*, 78.

1465 [1 and 2] *Illa de brezill + illa da brezril*, Petrus Roselli; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS 2712.
Census # 53; *Cart. Mall.*, 78.

1466 [1] *brasil*, Petrus Roselli; Minneapolis, James Ford Bell Lib.
Census # 142; *Cart. Mall.*, 79.

1467 [1 and 2] *Isola de braçill (+ montorius)* and *Isola de braçil*, Graciosus Benincasa; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 11547.
Census # 44; R&dJourd., fig. 18 +19 ;Westr. I, 242.

Variant reading: *Isolo de Bracill* (Westr. I, 243).

1468 [1] *lilla de bresill*, Petrus Roselli; New York, Hisp. Soc., K 35. Babc., 57; *Census* # 150; *Cart. Mall.*, 79.

1468-82 (?) [1] (*montorio*), anon. Venetian atlas; Rotterdam, Mar. Mus., Engelbrecht Coll. Atlas 66. *Census* # E6.

1469 [2] *Brazil*, Graciosus Benincasa; Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana, SP2, 35 (Port.VI; 6). *Census* # 86; Kretsch., 216.

1470 [2] *Ila de bracill*, Graciosus Benincasa; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 31 318A. *Census* # 51; Cumming, *et al.*, (1971), 40-1.

Variant reading: *Isola de brazil* (Johnson, 1994, 107).

1473 [1] *isola de braçil*, Graciosus Benincasa; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 2855 (ff.7-8).

The word ‘montorio’ is inserted in the belt which divides the island into two: see <http://www.maphistory.info/PortolanScans.html> (accessed 9 December 2011).

1474 [1] unnamed island, Paolo del Pozzo Toscanelli; reconstruction of a lost ms map made on the basis of the written information that has been preserved (Harrisse, 1961, 381-84).

Kretsch., Plate VI,1.

c. 1475 [1] *brasil*, anon.; Mantua, Biblioteca Comunale, I. I.15, no. 1032.

Census # 83; *Cart. Mall.*, 67, 83.

1476 [1 and 2] *Isola de Bracill* and *I. de Bracil*, Andreas Benincasa; Geneva, Bib. Pub. et Univ., Ms Lat. 81.

Census # 130; Winsor, 1884-9, I, 56.

c. 1480 [1, 2 and 3] *ylla de brazil*, anon. “Catalan Map”; Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana.

Babc., 61, 63, 64; Seaver (1996), 212; Westr. I, 242; Plate XX.

Variant reading: *Ylle de brazill* (Westr. I, 242).

1482 [2] (*montorio*) *Isola de braçill*, Graciosus Benincasa; Bologna, Bib. Uni., Rot. 3.

Babc., 57, 159-60; *Census* # 61; Kretsch., 217, 219; Plate IV,1.

1482 [1 and 2] *llila de brasill + brasil*, Jaime Bertran; Florence, Arch. Di Stato, C.N.7.

Census # 69; *Cart. Mall.*, 82.

c. 1485 [1] *brasill*, Pedro Reinel; Bordeaux, Arch. Départmt. de la Gironde.

148[6] [1 and 2] *fila da brazil* and *insula da brazil*, Arnaldo Domenech; Greenwich, Nat. Mar. Mus., G230:1/9 MS.

Census # 42; *Cart. Mall.*, 84.

c. 1487 *llila de bersill*, anon.; Florence, Arch. Di Stato, C.N. 8.

Census # 70; *Cart. Mall.*, 86.

c. 1489 *Bracil* (or *Braçil*), copied from Nicolo Fiorino (1462), “Cornaro Atlas”; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 73.

Census # 52; Kretsch., 217.

c. 1489 [1] *Illa da Brazil*, copied from Francesco Cesanis (1421), “Cornaro Atlas”; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 73, ff. 14-15, (1-2).

Babc., 57; *Census* # 52.

1489 [1 and 3] *Insula Brazil* and *Insulla de brezil*, Albino de Canepa; Minneapolis, James Ford Bell Lib., B1489mCa.

Census # 143.

1492 [1] *Ins. de Prazil*, Martin Behaim globe; was preserved in Germ. Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, now in undisclosed location in Vienna.

Kretsch. Plate VI, 2.; R&dJourd., fig. 20; Westr. I, 242.

Variant reading: *Insula de prazile* (Hennig, 1956, IV, 332).

1492 [1] *Ja do brazill*, Jorge de Aguiar; New Haven, Yale Univ. Lib., Beinecke., 30cea/1492.

Census # 146.

1492? *illa de brazil*, anon; Paris, BnF, C + P, Ge AA 562.

R&dJourd., fig. 21.

1496 [1] *brasil*, Antonio Ortiz (cited by Christobal Cladera, *Investigaciones Históricas Sobre los Principales Descubrimientos de los Españoles en el Mar Oceano*, Madrid: A. Espinosa, 1794, xxii). Harrisse (1961), 638.

1497 (*Montanis? montoni?*) *de Brasill*, Conte di O. Freducci; Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bib., Cod. Guelf. 99.

Babc., 56; *Census* # 39; Westr. I, 243; II, 415.

late 15th/early 16th c. [1] *brazil* (?), anon chart; Turin, Bib. Reala, MS.O.XVI.5.

Census # E4.

late 15th/early 16th c. *Brasil*, anon. Portug. chart; Rome, Bib. Vallicelliana.

Kretsch., 216; Cortes. Pl. 80.

15th-16th c. [1] *Y. de Berzil*, anon.; Upsala, Reg. Accad. Bib.

Census A 45; Westr. I, 242; II, 415.

Variant reading: *brazill* (Westr. II, 415).

16th c. *Bracil* (or *Braçil*), anon.; Venice.

Kretsch., 217.

16th c. [1] *i. de braal*, anon.; Venice, Bibl. Naz. Marciana, MS C1, VI, 203.

Kretsch. Table IV, no. 7.

16th c. *Brasil* and *lylla de Brazil*, anon., attrib. to Joan Martinez; Naples, Bib. Brancacciana, II G. 16.

Cart. Mall., 114.

16th c. *Illa de brasil*, anon., attrib. to Joan Martinez; London, Brit. Mus., ADD. MS. 9947.

Cart. Mall., 115.

16th c. *Illa brasill*, anon., attrib. to Joan Martinez; Rome, Bib. Vaticana, Cod. Urb. Lat. 1710.

Cart. Mall., 116.

16th c. *Lilla de brazill*, anon., attrib. to Joan Martinez; Rome, Bib. Vaticana, Cod. Vat. Lat. 8920.

Cart. Mall., 116-7.

16th c. [3] *brasil*, anon., attrib. to Francesco Ghisolfi; San Marino, The Huntington Library, HM 28 f. 12.

16th c. [1] *brazill* (?), anon., attrib. to Jacopo Maggiolo; New Haven, Yale Univ. Lib., Beinecke., Art Storage 1980.156.

c. 1500 [1] *illa de brazil*, Portuguese world map wrongly attrib. to Chr. Columbus; Paris, BnF.

Lang (1955), 37 and map facing page 32; Quinn (1989), 90.

c. 1500 [1] name illegible, anon., attrib. to Pedro Reinel; Munich, Bayr. Staatbib.

Cortes., Pl. 7.

1500 [3] *y. de brasil*, Juan de la Cosa, world map; Madrid, Museo Naval.

Babc., 57; Davies (1956); Harris (1961), 332, 412-14; Kretsch. Plate VII, 26-9; R&dJourd., fig. 22; Westr. I, 243.

1500 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; London, Brit. Lib., Royal 14. C.V.

1501 *lilla brazil*, Juan Ortis.

Cart. Mall., 90-1.

c. 1502 [3] *Ylha do brasill*, anon. planisphere ordered by Alberto Cantino; Modena, Bib. Estense e Univ.

Harrisse (1961), 90, 317, 422-5. However, Morison (1940) claims that this map shows not a single mythical island: see 18-9.

c. 1503 [3] *obrassill*, Nicolas de Canerio (also known, amongst others, as Nicolay Caverio); Paris, BnF, C + P, SH archives 1.

Harrisse (1961), 111-2, 317; Stevenson (1908), 23.

c. 1504 [1] *y. Brasil*, Pedro Reinel; Munich, Bayr. Staatsbib., Cod. icon. 132.

Cortes., Pl. 8; Harrisse (1961), 435-6; Kretsch., Plate IX, 2.

1505 [1] *brasil* (?), Jehuda ben Zara; New Haven, Yale Univ. Lib., Beinecke., 30cea/1505.

1508 *Brisilge*, Jobst Ruchamer, *Sammlung von Reisen*, Nürnberg, 1508, Chapter 76, (quoted in von Humboldt, 1836-52, I, 439).

Kretsch., 217.

1508? [1] *montorius*, Conte di Freducci; London, Brit. Lib., MS. 22348 (f.5).

1508 [1] *brasil*, Andreas Benincasa; Rome, Vatican Bib. AV, Borgia VIII.

1508-10 [1] *Bracil*, Portuguese or Italian map; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 2803.

Babc., 74; Morison (1940), 19.

1510 [1] *bracil insula*, Vesconte Jacobo Maggiolo; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 2803, f. 6v.

1511 *Brasil* (?), Bernadus Sylvanus; in Ptolemy edition *Liber Geographiae cum Tabulis et Universali Figura ...*, Venice: Jacobus Pentius de Leucho, 1511.

Babc., 65; Kretsch., Plate X,1.

1512 [1] *isola de brasille* (chart 1); *Illa de brazill* (chart 4), Vesconte Maggiolo atlas; Parma, Bib. Pal., n.1614.

Grosjean (1979).

1513 [1] *Brazil*, Martin Waldseemüller, “Tabula nova Hibernie, Anglie et Scotie”, one of 20 “modern” maps included in edition of Claudius Ptolemaeus *Geographie opus*, Strasbourg, 1513, often referred to as the “Argentine Ptolemy”.

“Map no. 3”, in *Ireland from Maps*, Dublin, National Library of Ireland.

Babc., 82; Kretsch. Plate XII,1; Westr. I., Plate XX; Westr. II, 415, Plate XLIV.

1513 [3] *Obrassill*, Martin Waldseemüller “Tabula Oceani Occidentalis seu Terrae Novae”, also in Claudius Ptolemaeus *Geographie opus*, Strasbourg, 1513.

Nordenskjöld (1889), Plate XXXVI.

Variant reading: *Obrassell* (Westr. I, 243).

c. **1513** [1] *brazill*, *The Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, incorporated with the *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires, preserved in the Bib. de la Chambre des Députés, Paris.

Cortes., Pl. 34.

1514 (?) *Brasil*, Jaume Olives; Florence, Bib. Naz.

Kretsch., 216.

1515 (?) *de brasill*, Schöner globe.

Harris (1961), 317, 484-9.

1516 [1] *Obrazill*, Martin Waldseemüller, “Carta Marina”; Washington, Library of Congress, Geogr. & Map Div. Fischer (1903), 106.

1516 [1] *illa brazille*, Vesconte Maggiolo; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 427.

1519 [1] *Ia de brasile*, Vesconte Maggiolo; Munich, Bayer. Staatsbib., cod. icon. 135.

1519 [1] unspecified Ptolemy map.
Winsor (1884-9), I, 50.

1524 *Brazile* and *Brazille*, Vesconte Maggiolo; Milan, Bib. Ambrosiana.
Kretsch., 217.

c. 1525 [1] *I do brasil*, Pero Fernandes; Dresden, Sächs. Landesbib.
Cortes., Pl. 43.

1525 [1] *brasil*, anon., attrib. to Diogo Ribeiro; Mantua.
Cortes., Pl. 37.

1525 [1] *Obrasill*, Lorenz Fries and Johannes Grüninger, *Carta Marina Navigatoria Portugalien Navigationes...*, Strassburg, 1530; Munich, Bayerische Staatsbib.: see <http://daten.digitalesammlungen.de/~db/0001/bsb00012490/image>, 9 (accessed 18 January 2012).

1527 [1] *il brasil*, anon. attrib. to Diogo Ribeiro; Weimar, Thüring. Landesbib.
Cortes., Pl. 39.

1529 [1] *Brasil*, Diogo Ribeiro; Rome, Vatican Bibl. Borgiano III.
Biggar (1911), 30; Kretsch. Plate XV; R&dJourd., fig. 37; Westr. I, 244; II, 415.

1530 [1] *il brasil*, Diogo Ribeiro; Dillingen, Kreis- und Studienbib.
Cortes., Pl. 523.

1534 [1] *obrazil*, Caspar Viegas; Paris, BnF.
Cortes., Pl. 44.

c. 1534 [1] *brasill*, Jorge Reinel, port. chart of the South Atlantic;
Minneapolis, James Ford Bell Lib.

1535 [1] *brazil*, anon., attrib. to Pedro (?) Reinel; Greenwich, Nat.
Mar. Mus.
Cortes., Pl. 14.

1536 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS.
19927 (f.7).

1537 [1] *brazill* (?), Conte di O. Freducci; New York, Hispanic Soc.,
K14.

c. 1537 [1] *obrasill*, anon., attrib. to Caspar Viegas, 2 atlases.
Cortes., Pl. 45, B.

1538 [1] *brazil* (?), Conte di O. Freducci; London, Brit. Lib., ADD.
MS. 10132 (f.2).

1538 [1] *montorius*, Conte di O. Freducci; London, Brit. Lib., ADD.
MS. 22348 (f.5).

1540 [1] *brazil*, Jorge Reinel; Florence, Bib. Barone Ricasoli-Firidolfi.
Cortes., Pl. 15.

1541 [1 and 3] *Brazil* and *Insula do brassil*, Lyons edition of Ptolemy.
The second island is located near the Isthmus of Darien (Panama).
Scaife (1890), 211.

1541 [1] *Brasil*, Gerard Mercator Terrestrial Globe; Cambridge/Mass.,
Harvard Map Collection.
Hills (1970), 51.

1541 [1] *brassille*, Nicolas Desliens planisphere; Paris, BnF, C+P, DD
935.

R&dJourd., pp. 28-9; Winsor, 1884-9, I, 63.

1541 [1] *Brazil*, Michael Servetus/Ptolemy Atlas “Tabula nova Angliae & Hiberniae”; see <http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/m/map/imb/42.jpg> (accessed 13 December 2007).

1541-2 [1] *Brazill*, Battista Agnese; Munich; Bayr. Staatsbib., Cod.icon. 136.

1542 [1] *obrassill*, Jean Rotz; London, Brit. Lib., Royal MS. 20 E. 9, f.22.

R&dJourd., fig 40.

1542 [1] *brazil* (?), Rocco Dalolmo; Siena, Bib. Com. S.V.1.

1543 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; Paris, BnF, FF 14410.

1544 [1] *Brazill*, Battista Agnese “Western Europe”; Madrid, Bib. Nac., MSS. Res. 176.

c. **1544** [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 26, ff. 5v-6.

1545 [3] *brasil*, MS chart by Alonso de Santa Cruz, *Islario general del mundo*; Madrid, Bib. Nac.

Cumming, *et al.*, (1971), 41; Westr., I, 245.

Variant reading: *Debrasil* (Westr.).

1546 [1] *obrasill*, João Freire; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 35, f. 2.

1546 [3] *brasill*, Pierre Desceliers; Manchester, John Rylands Lib. Babc., 76; Kretsch., Plate XVII.

1547 [1] *brazil*, anon., “Vallard Atlas”; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 29, f.13.

1547 *brasil*, Benedetto Bordone, world map in *Isolario*, originally called *Libro*, first publ. in Venice in 1528; London, Brit. Lib. Maps, C.7.b.10.

Harrisse (1961), 559-61; Winsor (1884-9), I, 57.

c. 1550 [1] *insula [...] illes*, Lopo Homem; Roma. Cortes., Pl. 25.

c. 1550 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 25, ff. 4v-5.

c. 1550 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 10, ff. 5v-6.

c. 1550 [1] *illa de brasill*, Georg Andreas Böckler; New York, Hisp. Soc.

Sider (1992), fig. 31.

c. 1550 [1] *brasil*, anon., Oxford, Bodleian Lib., Cortes., Pl. 82.

1550 [1] *brazil*, Diego Gutierrez; Paris, BnF, C+E, S.H. Archives, no. 2.

R&dJourd., fig. 46.

1550 [1] *brazil* (?), Pierre Desceliers; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 24065.

R&dJourd., fig. 47.

after 1550 [1] *ya. de brasill*, Bartolomeo Olivio; New York, Hisp. Soc.

Sider (1992), fig. 12.

1552 [1] *Y. de brasill*, Georgio Sideri (Calapoda); Stockholm, Royal Library, Skoklostersaml. i.

Babc., 56; Westr. I, 245; II, 415; Plate XLIV.

Variant reading: *Montorius de brasill* (Babc.); *ya. de brazil montonu* (Westr. II, 415); *montoriu de brasill* (Westr. II, Plate XLIV).

1552 *Brasil*, Matheus Prunes; Naples, Abadía di Cava dei Tirreni. *Cart. Mall.*, 96.

1553 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 27, ff. 5-6.

1553 [1] *illa de brazil*, Matheus Prunes; Siena, Bib. Com., Sign. No., I, 3.

Babc., 60, 88; Babc., (1920), 341; *Cart. Mall.*, 97; Kretsch., 216; Plate IV, 5,6.

1553 *lilla de brasill*, Jaume Olives; Pavia, Bib. Univ., Sala MS. *Cart. Mall.*, 120.

1553 *Braçill*, Conte di O. Freducci atlas; Rome, privately owned. Kretsch., 217.

1554 *brazil*, Lopo Homem; Florence, Mus. di Storia della Scienza. Cortes., Pl. 27.

1554 [1] *Bresil insul*, Battista Agnese; Greenwich, Nat. Mar. Mus., P/24 (10).
Westr. I, 244.

1554 [1] *Brasil*, Gerardus Mercator, Map of Europe; www.flickr.com/photos/arselectronica/6672323519 (accessed 26 August 2012).

c. 1555 *brasil*, anon., attrib. to Sebastião Lopes; Greenwich, Nat. Mar. Mus., G230:1/12.
Cortes., Pl. 391.

1555 [1] *isola de braçil*, Angelo Freducci; Greenwich, Nat. Mar. Mus. P/36 (A-F).

1555 [1] *brazil* (?), Joan Riczo Oliva; New Haven, Yale Univ. Lib., Beinecke., 30cea/1555.

1556 *Brasil*, Ramusio.

Scaife (1890), 212; Winsor (1884-9), I, 50.

1558 [1] *obrassil*, Sebastien Lopez; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 27303.

Cortes., Pl. 390.

1558-84 *Brasil*, Donato Bertelli; Yale Univ. Map Dept. at Sterling Memorial Lib.

c. 1559 [1] *Brazil* (?), Andreas Homem; Paris, BnF, C+P, DD 2003. R&dJourd., fig. 52 + 55; Winsor (1894), 62-3.

1559 [1] *Isola de Brazil*, Matheus Prunes.

1559 [1 and 3] *illa de brazil*, Jaume Olives; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 21029 [captioned “Battista Agnese”].

c. 1560 *dobrazil*, Paris, BnF.

Cortes., Pl. 84.

c. 1560 *obrasill*, anon., *Livro de Marinnaria*; Lisbon, Arquivo Hist. do Minist. Finanças, pl. 88, chart 8 + 9.

Cortes., Pl. 92 A + B.

1560 *Brasill*, Matheus Prunes; Venice, Museo Civico.

Kretsch., 216.

1560 [3] *Brasil* (?), Nicolas de Nicolay; Brown Univ. Lib., JCB Map Cabinet B 554 NIN 560.

Babc., 61, 62, 121.

1560 [3] *Brasil*, map preserved by Nicollo del Dolfinatto; The John Carter Brown University, C-6909.

Scaife (1890), 212.

1560 [3] *Brasil*, Paolo Forlani, “Atlantic Ocean”; Chicago, Newberry Lib., Map 4F 414.
Scaife (1890), 212; Tooley (1939), no. 77.

1560 [1] *Brasil*, Paolo Forlani, world map; Chicago, Newberry Lib., Map. 4F6.

1561 *Brasil + Brazill*, Bart. Olives; Naples, Arch. Di Stat., fot. Cat., 20.
Cart. Mall., 125.

1561 *o brasill*, Bartolomeu Velho; Florence, Bib. Accad. di Belle Art. Cortes., Pl. 203.

1562 *Ia Brazil*, Bart. Olives; Rome, Bib. Vaticana, Cod. Urb. Lat. 283.
Cart. Mall., 126.

1562 [3] *Isola de brazil*, Diego Gutiérrez; Washington, Lib. of Congress.

1562 [1] *bracil (+ montorius)*, Georgio Sideri (Calapoda); London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS. 2856; ff. 8-9.

1562 [1] *illa brazile*, Vesconte Maggiolo; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 9810 (f.1).

1562 [1] *isle de brasil*, Pilote Pastoret; London, Brit. Lib., Egerton MS 513, f.79.

1563 [1] *brazil* (?), Georgio Sideri (Calapoda); Venice, Marciana It. IV.148 (5451).

1563 [1] *brazille*, Jacobo Maggiolo; Paris, BnF, S.G.Y. 1704.
R&dJourd., fig. 56.

1563 [1] *brazil* (?), Jaume Olives; New Haven, Yale Univ. Lib., Beinecke, 30cea/1563.

1563 [3] *obrasill*, Lázaro Luís, Lisbon, Academia das Ciencias. Cortes., Pl. 211.

1564 [1] *brazill*, Battista Agnese; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 25442.

c. 1565 [1] *brasil*, anon., attrib. to Sebastien Lopez, atlas, fols 13v-14r and 22v-23r; Chicago, The Newberry Lib. Cortes., Pl. 396.

1565 [1 and 3] *Isola dbrazil* and *Isola brazil*, Georgio Sideri (Calapoda); Paris, BnF, C+P, GeD 4497. R&dJourd., fig. 57.

1566 [3] *Brasil*, Antonio Lafreri. Westr. I, 244.

c. 1566 [3] *Brasil*, preserved by A. Forlani; Chicago, Newberry Lib., Map 2F246.

1566 [3] *Brasil*, Bolognino Zaltieri; Chicago, The Newberry Lib. Babc., 61, 121; Kretsch., Plate XIX, 3.; Scaife (1890), 212.

1566 [1] *Brasil* (?), Ramusio. Babcock (1920), 343;

1566 *lylla de brtzill* [typing error?], Joan Martinez; Turin, Arch. di Stato., J.b. II, 10. *Cart. Mall.*, 103.

1567 [1] *illa de brazill*, Joan Martines; London, Brit Lib., ADD. MS. 15714 (fl.8).

1568 [1] *brazill*, Fernão Vaz Dourado, atlas; Madrid, Bib. Duques de Alba. Cortes., 243.

1568 *Illa de brasill*, Domingo Olives; Helsinki, Helsingin yliop. Kirj., Nordens. Coll.
Babc., 60; Westr. I, 244.

1569 [3] *Brasil*, Gerard Mercator's world map 'Nova et Aucta Orbis Terrae Descriptio ad Usum Navigantium Emendata'; originals destroyed; copies exist in various places.

Cumming, *et al* (1971), 219; Westr. I, 244; Winsor (1884-9), I, 50.

c. 1570 [1] *obrasill*, anon., attrib. to Sebastien Lopez; Vila Viçosa, Bib. Do Pal. Ducal da Casa de Bragança.

Cortes., Pl., 407.

1570 [1 and 3] *Brasil*, Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Antwerp: Gilles Coppens de Diest); London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 19038.

On his map of "Europae" *Brasil* is located NW of Irl., almost at the height of Donegal. His "Typus Orbis Terrarum" shows the island as lying half-way between Ireland and the Azores, whereas his map of "Erynn" indicates no island of that name.

Babc., 77; Babc., (1920), 343; Westr. I, 245; Plate XXI.

1570 [1] *obrazill*, Fernão Vaz Dourado; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 41, f. 7.

and *bRazill*, HM 41, f. 5.

Cortes., Pl. 265.

1571 (?) *braxil*, Joan Martinez; Venice, Marciana.

Cart. Mall., 105; Kretsch., 217.

1571 [1] *obrazill*, Fernão Vaz Dourado; Lisbon, Arquivo Nac. da Torre do Tombo.

Cortes., Pl. 278, fol. 1 + 2.

1572 [1] *illa braxill*, Joan Martines; Greenwich, Nat. Mar. Mus., P/6 (6).

1574 (*mons orius*) *Brasil* (?), Aloysius (Alvise) Cesanis atlas; Parma, Bib. Palatina, cod. 1616.

Babcock, 56; Kretsch., 219; Westr. II, Plate XLIV.

c. 1575 [1] *brazil*, Bartolomeu Lasso; Philadelphia, The Rosenbach Foundation.

Cortes., Pl. 377.

1575 [1] *obrazill*, Fernão Vaz Dourado; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 31317 (f. 12).

1576 [1] *obrazill*, anon. attrib. to Fernão Vaz Dourado, atlas, fol. 8; Lisbon, Bib. Nac.,

Cortes., Pl. 333.

c. 1578 *illa de brasill*, Joan Martinez; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 33, f. 6.

1578 *Ia Brasil*, Joan Martinez; London, Brit. Mus., Harl. MS 3450. *Cart. Mall.*, 105-106.

1579 [1] *illa de brazill*, Joan Martinez; London, Brit. Lib., MS. 22018 (f. 5).

1579 *filia de brazil*, Joan Martinez; Milan, Bib. Braidaense, AG XI 61. *Cart. Mall.*, 108.

1580 [1] *obrazill*, Fernão Vaz Dourado, fol. 5; Munich, Bayr. Staatsbib., Cod.icon. 137.

Cortes., Pl. 318; Kretsch., Plate XVIII,1.

1582 [3] *Brasil*, Michael Lok.

Cumming, *et al* (1971), 222; Scaife (1890), 212.

1582 *Ysla di Brasil*, Joan Martinez; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 5019 (f.5).

Cart. Mall., 109.

1582 *brasil*, Joan Martinez; New York, Hisp. Soc., K31.

1583 *brasil*, Joan Martinez; Paris, Bib. Nat. de Fr., DD 682.

1584 [1] *Brazil*, Lucas Janszoon Waghenaeer, chart of Europe in *Spieghel der Zeevardt*.
Koeman (1965).

c. 1585 brasille, anon.; Paris, BnF, C+E, S.H. Archives, no. 38.
R&dJourd., 63.

c. 1585 I do brasil, anon., atlas, fols.11v-12r.; New York, The Hispanic Soc.,
Cortes., Pl. 353.

1586 *illa de brazill*, Joan Martinez; Turin, Bib. Reale, MS. varia 165.
Cart. Mall., 110-11.

1586 *illa de brazill*, Joan Martinez; Rome, Vatican, Bib., Borgia X.
Cart. Mall., 111.

1587 [1] *Brasil*, Gerard Mercator.
Nordenskjöld (1973), Pl. XLVII; Westr. I, 245.

1587 [1] *Brasil*, Abraham Ortelius

c. 1588 [1] *I do brazill*, Bartolomeu Lasso; Brussels, Bib. Roy. de Belgique.
Cortes., Pl. 379.

1589 [3] *Brasil*, Michael Lok.
Scaife (1890), 212.

1589/93 [3] *Brasil*, Cornelius de Jode (Judeus map).
Kretsch., Plate IX, 5; Scaife (1890), 212;

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Sider (1992), fig. 30.

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1602 [1] *illa de brazil*, Joan Oliva; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 40.

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R&dJourd., fig. 68.

1605 *Brasil* (?), Giovanni Bonero Bonesii, “Relatione Universali”,
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1606 [1] *Brasil*, anon., “America”, Amsterodami/Amsterdam;
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Johnson (1994), 74, fig. 17.

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1609 [1] *Brasil*, chart in *La Navigation l'Inde Orientale*, printed at Amsterdam in 1609.
Wood-Martin (1902), 214.

c. 1610 [1] *Brasijl*, Harmen & Marten Jansz; Paris, BnF, C+E., Ge B 1129.
R&dJourd., fig. 70.

1613 [1] *brasuil*, Pierre de Vaulx; Paris, BnF, C+P, S.H. Archives, no. 6.
R&dJourd., fig. 71.

c. 1615-22 [1] *brasil*, anon. attrib. to Manuel Godinho de Erédia, fol. 3r; Lisbon, Dr. C.M.C. Machacio Figueira.
Cortes., Pl. 414.

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1623 [1] *Brasil*, Antonio Sanches; London, Brit. Lib., ADD. MS. 22874.

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c. 1630 [1] *do brazil*, anon. world atlas; San Marino, Huntington Lib., HM 39, f. 49v-50.

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1631 [1] *Brazil*, Joh. Angelius von Werdenhagen, world map; Berlin, Staatsbib., sign. Sp 55; first publ. in Werdenhagen, *De Rebus publicis Hanseaticis* (Lugduni Batavorum, 1631).

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Westr. I, 245.

1665 [1] *Brazil*, João Teixeira Albernaz II; New Haven, Yale U. Cortes., Pl. 547.

1667 [1] *brazil*, João Teixeira Albernaz II; Paris BnF. Cortes., Pl. 548.

1675 [1] *Brasil*, João Teixeira Albernaz II; Rio de Janeiro, Mapoteca do Minist. das Relações Exteriores. Cortes., Pl. 549.

1680 *Brasil* (?), English atlas by Moses Pitt. Westr. I, 245.

1688 *brasil*, José da Costa Mirando; London, Brit. Lib. Cortes., Pl. 572.

1696 *Brazil* (?), chart by Boissaye du Bocage, Le Havre.

1702 (also 1714, 1720, 1724) *Roche (Rocher) de Bresil*, Guillaume Delisme. According to Westropp, Delisme had doubts about the existence of the island, saying, “I have difficulty in persuading myself that there are isles so short a distance from our coasts which have remained unknown to us up to this”.

Westr. I, 246.

1715 *Brasil* (?), Louis Renard, *Atlas de la Navigation et du Commerce* (later editions in 1739 and 1745 publ. by R & J. Ottens in Amsterdam). Renard purchased and revised original plates of Frederick de Wit. Westropp does not indicate which of the 28 charts shows Brasil Island.

Westr. I, 246.

1738 [1] *Brazil Rock*, map commissioned by Maurepas.

c. 1765 [1] *l'isle Brazil*, Jean-Charles de Borda.

1776 [3] *imaginary island of O'Brazil*, Jeffrey's American Atlas. Morison (1971), 100; Westr. I, 246; Winsor (1884-9), I, 51.

1807 [1] *Brasil*, Admiralty Chart no. 356, publ. by W. Fadden.
Stommel (1984), 79.

1812 (1830 and 1834) *Brasil Rock*, John Purdy's Chart of the Atlantic Ocean (and map of the world).
V. Humboldt, 1836-52, I, 403; Morison (1971), 100; Westr. I, 246.

1850 *Brasil Rock*, Admiralty Chart of the North Atlantic.
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1853 *Brasil Rock*, A.G. Findlay, "Map of the Ocean Currents", in *On the Currents of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans*.
Hennig (1956), IV, 332; Herrmann (1954), 293; Morison (1971), 100.

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