

MIZEN

**RESCUED FOLKLORE, HISTORIES
AND SONGS FROM IRELAND'S
SOUTH-WEST**

Edited by Dr Mike Baldwin

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<https://www.duchas.ie/en>

This volume is dedicated to the children of the
Mizen Peninsula's schools who so diligently
rescued and preserved these stories.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This book is a direct transcription of volumes in the collection of the National Folklore Commission, University College Dublin. Every effort has been made to preserve the text as originally written. Spellings, both in English and Irish, have been maintained, as has grammatical form other than where the lack of (or excess) punctuation makes reading difficult or alters meaning. Where possible, Irish phrases have been translated and the editor accepts responsibility for errors incurred in doing so. In order to protect privacy, addresses have been removed from references – in many instances, descendants continue to live in the area. Stories that may cause upset to descendants or denigrate the memory of a deceased person have been anonymised or omitted. The editor requests that readers respect the privacy of those who live in the Mizen area today by not trespassing on private land. Please seek permission from land owners before attempting to visit any of the locations mentioned in this book. Unless otherwise stated, photographs are by the editor.

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Go raibh míle maith agaibh

Mike Baldwin, London, July 2019

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Here moss-grown trees expand the smallest leaf,
Here half an acre's corn, is half a sheaf,
Here hills with naked heads the tempest meet,
Rocks at their sides, and torrents at their feet,
Or lazy lakes, unconscious of a flood,
Whose dull brown naiads ever sleep in mud.
Yet here content can dwell.

Thomas Parnell (1679-1718)

FOREWORD

The tradition of storytelling or “scoraichting”, as it is known from the Gaelic, has had a long history in Ireland. The first records date from the stories of the legendary hero, Fionn Mac Cool and his mythical warriors, the Fianna, beginning in the seventh century, the so called Fenian Cycle. The tradition continues up to the present day, for instance in the Cape Clear Island Summer Story Telling Festival and other similar celebrations. Stories are also told in the much-loved Radio Eireann program “Sunday Miscellany” which has been running for very many years.

The praiseworthy initiative by the Irish Folklore Commission in the late thirties of the last century, in requesting the pupils and teachers of the National Schools of the State (including my father, Bat O’Meara, Principal Teacher of Goleen National School) to seek out the stories and practices of earlier times from the lips of the older people of their districts, has resulted in a priceless hoard of information. We now have access to this material on line and Doctor Mike Baldwin has made excellent use of it.

He has strong family links with this district and has gained, over the years, a deep understanding of the life of this place. He has been tireless in seeking out hitherto unknown sources of information and the outcome is that we have been presented with a fascinating account of life as it was here many years ago.

Jim O’Meara, July 2019

INTRODUCTION

IN 1937, the Irish Folklore Commission issued guidance to National Schools countrywide for the collection of stories, folklore, songs, and histories; the pupils of Ireland's schools were charged with the collection, curation, and transcription of the nation's oral history. The author of this guidance, distributed by the Department of Education, put it thus. "The task is an urgent one, for in our time most of this important national oral heritage will have passed away forever."¹ "Passed away" was an apt turn of phrase. Many of these stories had lived and evolved for centuries, passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. Their continuing decline risked the loss of an invaluable and irreplaceable treasure, a quintessentially Irish strand of local and national identity.

Centuries of oppression, occupation, famine, war, and emigration saw the Irish people and their folklore scattered to the corners of the earth. The world's gain (for it was certainly a gain) was Ireland's loss. Displaced, ties to their origins and communities broken, many stories became just that – stories – amorphous and disincarnate with a diminished sense of the people or places they left behind. The nation's very history became the most significant contributing factor in the demise of national narrative and prose. It is no coincidence then that the Fastnet Rock, symbolic and remote, immovable and immutable, the final sight of land for hundreds of thousands of emigrants, acquired the epithet 'the teardrop of Ireland'.

History is a peculiarly biased thing. All too often it is the narrative of the wealthy, the famous, infamous, and the notorious. History is rarely the story of you or me. Us common people are reduced to bit parts or are largely forgotten. If history books are to be believed, we're people of apparently little significance. The National Folklore Commission's subversion of historical convention then, just 15 years after the birth of the Irish free state, was bold. Unconcerned and disinterested with those who might wish to dictate their own histories, whether through action or oratory, it raised its common folk high, rendering their tales important, and thus, a priceless tradition was saved from annihilation.

In their saving, some unexpected things happened. The students' writing preserved local dialect and aspects of regional Irish. One book in particular, that written by Bart Ó Meara, master of Goleen school, records the stories precisely as told. Albeit mostly written in English, dialect and grammatical form owes a lot to the Irish language. Irish spellings are non-standard, varying from story to story, book to book, and from school to school – the range and breadth of which is preserved in this volume. In reading the stories, one can hear the lyrical sing-song lilt of the Mizen villages preserved in the text.

Stories were often repeated and frequently differed in their retelling, the variations perhaps reflecting the interests and concerns of the tellers. The Irish Folklore Commission emphasized that all tales mattered, no matter how short or long – everything should be written down. Each city, town, village, and townland could contribute. Subjects for

composition were proposed: hidden treasure; old or funny stories; old Irish tales, riddles and proverbs; stories of giants, warriors, leprechauns and mermaids; songs, poetry and local poets; weather lore and recollections of severe weather; local heroes and happenings; old schools; marriage and festival customs; hurling, football, home-made toys, and games played; place and road names, home districts and landlords; local fairs; care of farm animals, strange animals, and bird lore; food in olden times, the potato crop, churning; local cures, herbs, and care of the feet; the lore of certain days and historical traditions; travelling folk, fairy forts, holy wells, local monuments and ruins; famine times; the local forge; locally made clothes; buying and selling; religious stories, stories of the holy family, local patron saints, prayers and graveyards; emblems and objects of value. Nothing was to be left out. And the children of the Mizen's schools, 'the collectors', took up their pens and wrote. Contributors, often family members and neighbours, ranged from 36 years (Mr W. Goggin of Enaughter, Goleen) to 97 years (Jeremiah Donovan of Gunpoint, Schull) the latter's year of birth, 1840, predating the famine. Storytelling was a collective community act.

I've been a visitor to the Mizen since a young child, my grandparents being from Goleen and Durrus respectively. I remember stories being told, such as one about a priest caught during penal times at a mass rock in the townland Castlemehigan. In his rush to escape a chalice was thrown into a lough which now serves as a local reservoir adjacent to the mass rock. It is said that should the chalice be recovered the reservoir will run dry – impressive if true, the

area being awash in rainfall. For the most part, I have only vague recollections and wish I had listened more attentively. However, it is clear that the landscape of the area preserves its own narrative, with its farms, lanes, derelict émigré houses, churches, field boundaries, ancient monuments, and its windswept and wild sea-carved coastline, redolent of long departed people and their stories. But the landscape tells an older story still, one of the very shaping of the rock. Long before the erection of the area's megalithic standing stones and tombs, its medieval castles, and churches, glaciation scribed its indelible signature large across the Mizen. Deep striations on hill and mountain side, the drumlins and erratics that litter the landscape, and the dendritic like ria-coast speak of glacial retreat of millennia past.

Irish place names, often descriptive, tell us something of localities and sometimes take their names from people of the past. Although spellings varied over time, and whilst most have been reduced to their phonetic form, it is possible to take them back to their original Irish, and to extract meaning. Crookhaven becomes An Cruachán – the round-topped hill; Lissigriffin become Lios Uí Ghrífin – Griffin's fort; Goleen becomes An Góilín – the little inlet; Lowertown becomes Lúghortán – the herb garden or place where herbs grow; Schull become Scoil Mhuire – School of Mary; and Ballydehob becomes Beal an da chab – town on the mouth of two rivers. Townland names are richer still; Cloghanacullen (Chlochán an Choillín) means the causeway through or by the little wood; Knockagallane (Cnoc an Ghalláin) translates as hill of the standing stone; and Gortnamona (Gort na Móna) means field of the bog.

Considered now to be remote by some, the villages of the Mizen were originally well connected. Crookhaven welcomed ships from across the globe. This peninsula, a collection of maritime communities, was perhaps more accessible by ocean than by land. Movement by sea, until the building of metaled roads and the coming of the now lost railway, was quicker than travelling over land, particularly over long distances. Early tourism, however, wasn't uncommon. In 1783, Philip Luckombe, having undertaken a somewhat windswept variant of the grand tour, published his book, *A Tour Through Ireland*. His journey from Bantry, via Dunmanus Bay, to Kilcoe and Schull, and eventually to Crookhaven, is described. Little has changed. His description, which follows, is still recognisable today, and thanks to the children of the local schools, the folklore is as well preserved as the landscape of the Mizen peninsula.

From Bantry we proceeded south with the river Four-mile-water close on our left, to where it empties itself into the head of Dunmanus bay, which forms another peninsula, called Minterbarry [sic], a most barbarous country, washed on the east by Dunmanus bay, and by Bantry bay on the west. At the north end of Dunmanus bay, near Four-mile-water river, is Coollong, a good seat, but the country round it is rocky, boggy, and mountainous.

From there we crossed Four-mile-water to Dunbeacon castle, which stands at the bottom of the bay, about a mile south of Coollong, and three to Kilcoe, the head of

Roaring-water, where also stands Ballydehob village. This whole peninsula is called Ivaugh. We passed down the side of the peninsula to Rosbrin castle, a stately ruin, erected boldly on a rock, which hangs over the ocean. The proprietor of this castle, in Queen Elizabeth's time, turned pirate, which occasioned its demolition, and the west side is battered to the ground. Two miles more south west are the ruins of Ardintenant castle, seated near the east point of Skull [sic] harbour. Skull, one mile west from thence, is but a small insignificant village, having few buildings besides the church and parsonage house. To the north of it stand a high conical hill, called Mount Gabriel; on the top of it is a remarkably deep lough, which is but a few yards over; it has been sounded from the north-east with a hundred fathom line; although the lead stopped, yet the hole was deeper. The water oozes out of the mountain to the north-east; and this cone is above three hundred yards higher than the level of the sea; from it is a noble prospect of vast extent, over a rude uncultivated country, from the Mizen-head to Ross, with an infinite number of islands, bays, creeks, and harbours.

On returning from this mountain, justly reckoned the steepest of its length in Ireland, towards the coast, and passing by Skull, we proceed west to Leamcon, a pretty seat near a good harbour, between Long Island and the peninsula. Near it are two castles in ruins, one of which is called Black castle, built on an island; to which is a very narrow passage easily defended; and more west, is the castle of Bally Desmond, now called Bally Divilin [sic], boldly erected on a rock projecting over the sea. More westerly stands Crookhaven, an inconsiderable fishing town, near an excellent harbour, and one of the best outlets in Europe for vessels to sail to any place

whatever. The lands about are exceedingly rocky and barren. Near it are the ruins of Castle Meghan. The extreme point of this tract is Bally-Vogy-head, between which and the opposite cape, called Mizen-head, is a great bay, and another between that and Three-Castle head, so called from three square towers built on it. From thence we travelled up the western side of this peninsula to Dunmanus castle, from whence the bay on the western side has its name, which castle was formerly fortified with walls and flankers, now in ruins.

Philip Luckombe, *A Tour Through Ireland*
(London: Lowndes, 1783), pp.211-222

What of the Mizen villages now? Today the villages of Crookhaven, Goleen, Toormore, Lowertown, Schull, and Ballydehob are undeniably smaller than in former years, their populations having never recovered from famine and emigration. Most of the schools that contributed to the collection of the stories in this book are gone. Those in Crookhaven, Toormore and Lowertown have been converted to homes, their original use marked only by the inaugural stone plaques above their entrances. Lissagriffin school moved a short distance in 1958 but closed its doors for the final time in 2018 when the headteacher retired, the remaining pupils moving to nearby Goleen. Smaller does not, however, mean diminished. The villages continue to thrive. Whilst much of the local income is still made from farming, tourism now plays a very large part in the sustenance of the community. And the community continues to be at the heart of it all. There's a strong sense of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial spirit; a friendly welcome and hospitality for all.

CROOKHAVEN

Co. Chorcaighe

Bar: Cairbre Thiar

Par: Kilmoe

Scoil: An Cruachán

Oide: Saidhbhín ní Bhoidhbléin

11.1937 – 23.12.1938



Figure 1. Rock Island, Crookhaven, 26 July 1837. Brocas sketchbook (PD 1962 TX).
Image Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

CROOKHAVEN
Local Folklore and
Stories

The Glavin Mermaid

The following story is told in my district, Arduslough, Crookhaven, Co Cork about a family named Glavin who resided in the neighbourhood. One of the Glavin men was fishing one day. He saw a girl combing her hair on the rock near the strand. She was a mermaid. He took her home with him and he married her. But she told him three special things he should never do: not to kill a seal; not to eat off a sheriff's table; not to kill a black sheep.

Everything went on well for years till one Sunday when the wife was at mass, the man went with a party of men to the sea, and he killed a seal, skinned it, and brought home the skin. When the woman returned, she said to the man, "you have broken your promise and killed a seal, and I can stay here no longer." She then went towards the beach and shook a bridle. A saddled horse from the sea came to here. She said that seven men of the name Glavin would never be see together again. She then mounted the horse and disappeared out to sea and was never heard of again. But the prophecy seems to have been fulfilled as seven men of that name have never been since together.²

Collected by Mary Sullivan, Crookhaven, Co. Cork
From Mr Denis O'Sullivan (aged 50), Crookhaven, Co. Cork