Aspects of the Marine Otherworld of Rathlin Island

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The coastal areas of Ireland and Scotland and their offshore islands are rich in maritime folklore and, not surprisingly, many legends in the form of memorates, fabulates and belief statements reflect this impressive heritage.[1] A memorate is a short, loose narrative concerning a supernormal or out-of-the-ordinary occurrence, it is local in nature, and it is related as a memory by the person who experienced it. A fabulate, by contrast, is a migratory legend which, while also of supernatural character, tends to be a more elaborate narrative with a stock plot, and is told of someone other than the narrator, who stands at a greater remove from the encounter. Belief is at the core of the legend, and stories of first- or second-hand encounters, and to a slightly lesser extent of third-hand encounters, have a particularly high degree of credibility and strongly reflect the beliefs and values of the people.[2]

Located between the north-east coast of Ireland and Scotland, about six miles from Ballycastle, Co. Antrim and approximately thirteen miles from the Mull of Kintyre, Rathlin Island occupies a special place amongst Irish islands. Over many centuries, it has been a pivotal intermediate point of contact between Ireland and Scotland, assimilating cultural elements from both countries whilst simultaneously generating its own distinctive heritage. Just as its Gaelic language dialect shares a range of linguistic isoglosses with Scottish Gaelic, it also shares many maritime customs, stories and beliefs with both Scotland and Ireland. Seals, mermaids, sea monsters, supernatural boats, shipwrecks, fishing taboos, enchanted islands and other phenomena characterised the island's marine otherworld, and stories about them were central to the culture and supernatural folk beliefs of Rathlin's people. Stories of seals and mermaids, in particular, have been discussed by various collectors and folklorists over the years, versions of the same stories sometimes appearing in the works of different collectors. The present essay draws on these works, and will mainly concern itself with material relating to seals, water-horses and mermaids.

Supernatural beliefs in seals, water-horses and mermaids have been recorded throughout the world, and were an important part of the belief system of people who lived along the coasts and offshore islands of the North Atlantic generally. Although such beliefs are not as strong as they once were, maritime communities have preserved many stories and legends concerning them up until the present time, the memory of individuals serving to authenticate the former, and sometimes current, robustness of the beliefs. In seafaring communities such as Rathlin these stories had important functions for the everyday life and well-being of the people, some of which we will touch upon in what follows.

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[1] This essay is based on various sources containing stories of the sea from Rathlin Island, including Maxim Fomin, Séamus Mac Mathúna, John Shaw, and Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, *Stories of the Sea: Maritime Memorates of Ireland and Scotland* (Berlin: Curach Bhán, 2016); and Maxim Fomin and Séamus Mac Mathúna, *Stories of the Sea – A Typological Study of Maritime Memorates in Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic Folklore*, 2010–, https://cid.ulster.ac.uk/storiesofthesea/memorates.

[2] For discussion of these terms, first coined by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow in 1934, see his *Selected Papers on Folklore* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1948), 60–85. See also Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, 'The Memorate and the Proto-Memorate', *The Journal of American Folklore* 87/345 (Jul.–Sep. 1974), 225–239. Dégh disputes the existence of a category called 'belief legend' on the grounds that 'folk belief' is a part of any legend; see Linda Dégh, 'What is a belief legend?', *Folklore* 107/1-2 (1996), 33–46.

Seals

Seals are part of everyday life along the coasts and offshore islands of the North Atlantic. In 2018, an aerial survey detected some 1012 harbour or common seals and 505 grey seals around the coast of Northern Ireland; around Rathlin specifically there were 123 of the former and 46 of the latter. At Rathlin, common and harbour seals enjoy the sheltered habitats of Church Bay and Rue Point where they rest, breed, and rear their young within view of the islanders and visitors.[3] Grey seals, somewhat harder to detect, prefer to come ashore in sea caves.[4]

Seals were considered to have similar characteristics to people, and in both Irish and Scottish tradition were given Christian names – Tadhg, Donncha and Diarmaid being common ones in Ireland. Some seals could talk, with stories about talking seals often told in connection with the hunting and culling of seals, when the creatures would beg the hunters for mercy. One fabulate, 'The Seal who Speaks', was recorded in English in the 1950s by folklore collector Michael J. Murphy from a Rathlin Islander named Paddy Anderson.[5] Paddy said that old men did not like people to meddle with seals, and recalled that his grandfather told a story about a time when seals were plentiful and men were culling them. One fisherman went out with his gun and came upon a seal which he was about to kill, whereupon the seal put its paw up and said: 'Donal, Donal, don't fire at me'.[6]

Although Paddy remarked that the seal had spoken in Irish – undoubtedly the original language of transmission of most of the Rathlin stories – many of these accounts were collected when English had become the island's dominant language. Paddy's story reflects the sociological phenomenon of language change. According to the 1911 census, Irish was spoken by the majority of people over sixty years of age on Rathlin; but by the 1930s, when Swedish linguist and dialectologist Nils Holmer carried out research for his book *The Irish Language in Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim*, only about ten percent of the population knew Irish, and they were scattered throughout the island.[7]

A similar story about culling seals was collected in 1936 by folklore collector Seán Ó hEochaidh from Séamus Mac Fhionnlaoich, 68, of Saobh, Meenasillagh, Glencolmcille (An tSaobh, Mín na Saileach,

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[3] Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland, DAERA Marine and Fisheries Division, *The Wild Seals of Rathlin Island*, DMS 19.20.100.

[4] In the seal stories discussed here, as in Irish oral tradition generally, the species of the seal is not given; see Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha and Some of their Relations: Seals in Irish Oral Tradition', in *Islanders and Water-Dwellers*: *Proceedings of The Celtic-Nordic-Baltic Folklore Symposium held at University College Dublin, 16–19 June, 1996*, ed. Patricia Lysaght, Séamas Ó Catháin and Daithí Ó hÓgáin (Dublin: DBA Publications, Ltd., 1999), 224, n. 2.

[5] Michael J. Murphy, *Rathlin: Island of Blood and Enchantment* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1987), 58.

[6] For further comment on talking seals, see Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha', 223–45.

[7] Nils M. Holmer, *The Irish Language in Rathlin Island*, *Co. Antrim*. Todd Lecture Series 18, Royal Irish Academy (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1942), 1. When conducting his own research in Rathlin in 1952, Professor Heinrich Wagner reported that 'a few fairly good speakers can still be found'; see Wagner, *Linguistic Atlas and Survey of Irish Dialects* (*LASID*), Vol. I (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1958), Introduction, p. XIV, Section VII (East Ulster), Pt 67 (Rathlin). The last native speaker, Bella McKenna (née McCurdy), was recorded by Liam Mac Carráin of Belfast in 1979; see Ciarán Dunbar, 'Some Phrases of Rathlin Irish', *The Glynns*: *Journal of the Glens of Antrim Historical Society* 35 (2007), 65–74. Bella died in 1985. Alex Morrison (1915–2012), a relative of Bella's, was considered to be a semi-speaker of Irish, and was an active tradition-bearer with a great knowledge of the traditions and customs of the island; see his book *Rathlin Island – As I knew it,* ed. John A. I. McCurdy (Northern Ireland: Help the Aged, 2003). In the 1980s and 1990s, Morrison contributed place-names to Brian Mac Lochlainn of Glenarm; see Mac Lochlainn's *Minor Placenames of Rathlin*, https://meitheal.logainm.ie/rathlin-island/; Morrison was also an informant for Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig of the Placenames Office, Ordnance Survey of Ireland, Dublin, who made a scientific study of some 450 of these names; see 'The Place-Names of Rathlin Island', *Ainm. A Journal of Name Studies* 4 (1989), 3–89.

Gleann Cholm Cille), Co. Donegal.[8] In this case, the story was told in Irish and the request not to shoot was given in English. Séamus tells of a certain Hughdie Ó Maonaigh in Mín na Saileach who had the job of culling seals in his area. He used go along the shore, employing a mallet to club them. Arriving at a cave called *Fochair/Fothrach an Tuir Bhriste* ('The ruin of the broken great steep rock') which seals frequented, Hughdie found three big ones lying asleep at the upper end of the shore – but when he raised his mallet to strike one of them, it rose up and said, 'Stop your blow'. He did not strike it, and the three seals escaped to sea. Séamus adds that Hughdie never killed a seal after that until the day he died.

Like the Rathlin story, this Donegal account reflects the dilemma felt by people who kill seals for economic purposes – for improvement of fish stocks, seal-oil, sealskins – while nevertheless feeling an affinity with them as creatures with human qualities. It, too, ends with the seal speaking and requesting mercy; and the narrator's final observation – that the hunter never killed a seal again – is in keeping with similar stories in which the hunter promises not to cull seals in the future.[9]

When Ó hEochaidh recorded this story, most communities in Donegal were Irish-speaking. English, however, was the language of political and economic power throughout Ireland at the time, so the seal's use of English in a story told in Irish probably endows its words with an extra degree of authority. In the Rathlin story, however, the seal speaks in Irish. Perhaps its words would have been reported in English when the story itself was told in Irish; but its use of Irish in an English-language narrative now functions not to invoke authority, but rather to lend credibility to its words by evoking memories of a time when Irish was the island's dominant language.

The playful character and human-like naughtiness of seals is revealed in a Scottish story, collected by Donald MacDonald, a young Glasgow University student, on a visit to Eriskay in 1933.[10] In a story told in Gaelic entitled *Na Ròin a bha ag tilgeadh nan Clach* ('The seals throwing stones') Archibald MacInnes relates how seals were observed firing stones at some fishermen and laughing at their handywork, forcing the fishermen to retreat in their boat so that the stones would not reach them. One of them, Iain, said that the seals must be people under a spell, they were so clever.

There was a strong belief that seals were enchanted people, such as reincarnated drowned fishermen or wise women, or fallen angels who had been trapped in the sea in the form of seals. Certain families, such as the Coneeleys, O'Kanes, O'Dowds, O'Sheas and Gallaghers, were reputed to have a particularly close connection with seals, often tracing their origin to the union between a seal and a mortal. The Rathlin corpus reflects this widespread belief in enchanted seal people, and also has examples of the mermaid legend, which in some versions from Ireland, and particularly in versions from north-east Scotland, Orkney, Shetland and the Nordic world, depicts the supernatural woman as a seal-maiden.[11]

In the story of 'The Wounded Seal', mostly found in Donegal and Shetland, and also in the well-documented supernatural legend of 'The Knife against the Wave' (*An Scian in Aghaidh na Toinne*), the seals share the same ability of speech. Seán Ó hEochaidh recorded a version of 'The Wounded Seal' in

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[8] National Folklore Collection [hereafter NFC] vol. 179: 451–3. See also Gregory R. Darwin, 'Mar gur dream Sí iad atá ag mairiúint fén bhfarraige: ML 4080 The Seal Woman in its Irish and International Context' (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2019), 89–90. https://dash.harvard.edu/entities/publication/00967b7d-67e8-4eb3-b159-f08ee295a2b7.

[9] Darwin, 'Mar gur dream Sí iad', 92.

[10] NFC 1246: Donald MacDonald Collection from Eriskay, Vol. 2, 217–19, archived at Tasglann nan Eilean Siar, Stornoway (http://ica-atom.tasglann.org.uk/index.php/folklore-notebooks-of-donald-macdonald;isad). See also Fomin, Mac Mathúna et al., *Maritime Memorates of Ireland and Scotland*, 55, 74; and Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha', 226–7 for seals behaving like people.

[11] Darwin, 'Mar gur dream Sí iad', 35–38; see further discussion in the section headed **Seals and Mermaids** below.

1941 from Séamus Mac Aodha in Cloich Cheannfhaolaidh, County Donegal.[12] Séamus tells of a time when fish were plentiful off the Irish coast and there were no fish off the coast of Scotland. Some Scottish wise women turned themselves into seals and swam to Ireland to drive away the fish. They encountered two men who were out with forks gathering sea wrack, and one of the forks got lodged in the eye of a seal in the submerged rocks. Some years later, one of those men was among a group of fishermen who were taking a break from fishing in Scotland. Passing a house, they noticed a fork outside the door – a fork very like the one the fisherman had lost years before. When they went in, they found an old lady with a cloth bandage over one eye. The fisherman asked her where she had got the fork, remarking that it looked like one of his that got stuck in a seal. 'Oh', she said, 'it was you stuck the fork in me', and took a pot of steaming water to go after him. He took to his heels as fast as he could.

A Rathlin version of the migratory legend 'The Knife against the Wave' tells of a man called Johnny who was fishing one day at the other side of the island with his son and a friend. A great storm arose and they were almost overwhelmed, but he saved them by throwing his knife into the centre of a large wave. A woman appeared at the back of the wave with a knife lodged in her breast and asked him to remove it. He refused and returned to shore. He realised that he would have to forfeit something on account of what he had done, that he would have to give up fishing as his boat would capsize if he went to sea again, or that the sea would take him back.[13]

Other versions of this story tell how a messenger or relative from the lady of the sea or lake visits the fisherman and brings him to a land, often at the bottom of the sea, to remove the object from the woman's breast or forehead, because he is the only one who has the power to do so. She has fallen in love with the fisherman and wants him for herself, and that is the reason she tried to drown him and the others. In some versions, the fisherman, despite his promise not to return to the sea, does so and is reunited with the sea-maiden whom he can never leave.[14]

The belief that a person who has caused harm to the sea or to one of *uaisle na farraige* ('the sea gentry') must compensate for his action is reflected here and in the proverb *caithfidh an fharraige a cuid féin a fháil* 'the sea must get its own'. The abduction of the fisherman by the sea-people is also partly covered by this proverb. The common idea that those who have drowned at sea have been taken away by the sea-fairies, or that seals are reincarnated drowned fishermen, reflects the notion that these supernatural beings sometimes covet human folk for different reasons, and that the sea has the power to transform human folk into sea creatures with human characteristics.

Seals and Water-horses

The belief in enchanted seals goes back to the Middle Ages at least. In some folklore versions of the early tale concerning Lugh and Balar, Lugh's father Cian was required to release his infant children (other than Lugh) into the sea, where they became seals. In a Donegal version of the story, Lugh's

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[12] NFC vol. 799: 238–42; Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha', 228–9; for another version, see the NFC Schools Collection (NFCS) vol. 104: 63.

[13] See Linda-May Ballard, 'Seal stories and belief on Rathlin Island', *Ulster Folklife* 29 (1983), 40; Colin Urwin, *The Man Who Talked to the Wind: And Other Rathlin Folk Tales from the Tommy Cecil Archive* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2024), 111–12.

[14] See M. Ross, 'The Knife Against the Wave: A Uniquely Irish Legend of the Supernatural?', *Folklore* 105 (1994), 83–8; Kate Chadbourne, 'The Knife Against the Wave: Fairies, Fishermen, and the Sea', *Béaloideas* 80 (2012), 70–85.

father was called Ceannfhaolaidh (Conneeley), Cloch Cheannfhaolaidh being the area from which the story of 'The Wounded Seal' above was recorded.[15]

Other early legends tell how supernatural seals are transformed into horses/water-horses. In *Stair ar Aed Baclámh* ('A story of Aed Baclámh'), Saint Brendan transforms fifty seals into horses which he gives to High King Diarmait mac Cerbaill in exchange for the freedom of Guaire Aidne, king of Uí Maine, who had slain Áed, Diarmait's retainer. Sometime later, when the horse-riders of the High King are whipping the horses to make them go faster, the animals become agitated and plunge into the sea, both horses and their riders being transformed into seals.[16] One part of this story is reminiscent of the oral fabulate 'The Water-Horse as Race-Horse', in which a magical water-horse (*each uisge*) that someone acquires wins a horse-race. When struck by the owner, or the owner being unable to control it, the horse plunges into water along with its rider.[17]

The associated legend of the water-horse as work-horse was popular in western Ireland and Scotland. A version from South Uist collected in 1954 from South Uist storyteller Duncan MacDonald by his son Donald John MacDonald tells of a water-horse that would come up from the edge of the lake, equipped with reins and a saddle, and would graze alongside the cattle there. Deciding to catch the horse, a local man went into the herd of cattle disguised in a cowskin. He managed to catch the reins of the horse and captured it. It was an excellent working horse and the man became rich. However, the horse having, like the seals, the power of speech, it told the man that he would only have him until a maiden returned his saddle and reins. One day when the man was away, his young daughter found the reins and saddle. She mounted the horse which sped off to the lake and jumped in, and they were never seen again.[18]

Seals and Mermaids

We mentioned above that in a handful of versions of the mermaid legend in Ireland, the lady is a seal in human form who marries a mortal man.[19] While the supernatural maiden in the two Rathlin Island

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[15] Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha', 235–237.

[16] This tale is also found in Mícheál Ó Cléirigh's 1639 compilatory version of the *Life of Brendan of Clonfert*, which Mícheál states in a colophon that he got from a manuscript written by Sioghraidh Ó Maolchonaire in 1636; see Standish Hayes O'Grady, ed., *Silva Gadelica. A Collection of Tales in Irish with Extracts Illustrating Persons and Places* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892), vol. I: 67–8, vol. II: 72; Charles Plummer, ed. *Bethada Náem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish Saints* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922); vol. I, 88–89, vol. II, 85–86. See also Séamus Mac Mathúna, 'The Irish Life of Saint Brendan', in *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions,* ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 124–125, 154, n. 100. The anecdote is not in the *First Irish Life of Saint Brendan* contained in the Book of Lismore and other manuscripts.

[17] Darwin, 'Mar gur dream Sí iad', 141. Legends about magical water-horses have also been known in Rathlin, where a song was recorded in which seals and water-horses figure prominently; see Sorcha Nic Lochlainn, 'Long forgotten Gaelic songs of Rathlin and the Glens', *The Glynns: Journal of the Glens of Antrim Historical Society* 37 (2009). Republished online (2018) at https://antrimhistory.net/long-forgotten-gaelic-songs-of-rathlin-and-the-glens-by-sorcha-nic-lochlainn/.

[18] [Sgeulachd an eich-uisge], Duncan MacDonald (contributor), Donald John MacDonald (collector), 24 March 1954. Donald J. MacDonald Notebook 13: 1205–1210, MS 39, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh. Compare the Icelandic tale discussed in the conclusion to the present article.

[19] This is a migratory legend; see ML 4080 'The Seal Woman' in Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Migratory Legends: A Proposed List of Types with a Systematic Catalogue of the Norwegian Variants* (Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications, no. 175, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1958). See also Bo Almqvist, 'Of mermaids and marriages', *Béaloideas*, 58 (1990): 1–74; Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee. The Irish supernatural death messenger* (Dublin, 1996), 159–163, 172, 180–181; Ní Fhloinn, 'Tadhg, Donncha', 234 ff.; and Darwin, 'Mar gur Dream Sí iad', *passim*. In versions of the legend from Orkney, Shetland and northeastern Scotland, the supernatural woman

versions below is not said to have the form of a seal, some other versions from Rathlin claim that she did have such a form.[20] These versions are interesting because they represent different variants of the legend, one sharing features found in other Irish versions, the other those found in some Scottish versions. As elsewhere, the legend is presented as a fabulate, with both versions sharing the basic plot of an unnamed mortal man who marries a mermaid and has a family with her, until one day she discovers where he has hidden her cloak and returns to the sea.

In the first story, the man encounters her among some rocks close to the shore when she has taken her cloak off. He takes her cloak and brings her home with him, hiding the cloak in the scraghs of the thatch. One day a strong wind lifts the thatch, revealing the hiding place. She takes a ladder, retrieves the cloak, and goes back to the sea. He follows her, but does not reach her in time, and she is never heard of again. Michael J. Murphy tells us that he collected this version in 1954 from Rosie McCurdy, aged 83, from Ballinanard:[21]

> I heard Donal n' Ruagha tell of the Raghery mermaid. He would know, for it was to a house in The Upper End she come, to a house in North Claggan.[22] He never named the man who took her - Oh, glory be to Moses, I heard him tell that surely. This man seen her at the rocks, and she had her cloak off her, what sort it was I don't mind. But he got the cloak and took it and took her home, and he hid the cloak in the scraghs of the thatch, and she didn't know where it was. Donal wouldn't say his name, but he said she was happy, very happy, in North Claggan and never wanted to go back to the sea or ever spoke of it at all. She had a family to the man, and was married – whether she was married now I'm not sure, but he was living with her and they had this family sure enough, she had, the mermaid. Till one wild day come and the wind was that bad it was lifting the thatch, and she was out doing something. Her man was there too, trying to hold down the thatch, and this [s]quall lifted the thatch where he hid the cloak. And before he could stop her, or reach her, she lifted this ladder and put it to the roof and was up and got the cloak and away. He followed her but he couldn't reach her and she got away in the sea and was never seen no more. The children lived and he reared them. They said you would never know the difference between them and other children only they had very flat feet.

The second version, shorter and less detailed, was collected in Irish (or Rathlin Gaelic) by Nils M. Holmer in 1937/38 from Mrs Mary McCurdy, Gortconny near Ballycastle, Co. Antrim. Mrs McCurdy, who left Rathlin around 1925, was originally from the townland of Kilpatrick, which is also in the western part of the island, but further east than Cleggan:

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is a seal-woman. This is also the case in versions from most Scandinavian countries. In Gaelic-speaking communities of the Highlands and Western Isles, she is a mermaid; see Darwin, 'Mar gur Dream Sí iad', 77.

[20] Darwin argues that 'an older normal form of The Mermaid Legend in the Gaelic world involved a seal-woman, and that she was transformed into her [mermaid] form under the influence of strong and widespread belief in mermaids'; see Darwin, 'Mar gur Dream Sí iad', 133. In respect of the differing forms of the supernatural woman, mermaid/seal-woman, Sam Henry has the interesting note that a mermaid was accidentally shot on the island of Benbecula in 1815, having been mistaken for a seal – she was given a funeral at the public expense of the island! See Sam Henry, *A Hank of Yarns,* The Coleraine Chronicle, 1940, 78.

[21] Michael J. Murphy, 'Folklore Collector on Rathlin', *Sinsear: The Folklore Journal* 2 (1980), 23. The spelling 'Ballinanard' occurs in Murphy's introduction; the usual spelling is Ballynagard (*Baile na gCeard*).

[22] Murphy's spelling 'North Claggan' reflects local pronunciation; see Wagner, *LASID,* reference in n. 7 above. The official name of this townland is normally 'Cleggan'.

Bhá bachlach ann. Thug e aon na bhaile, agus phós e í, agus bhá trí de chlann aca. Agus (chuaidh) an fear go h-Eirinn. Agus thainigh h-aon de na páistean isteach: "A mháthair, an bhfaca thu an rud deas a tá amuigh is' t-shabhal?" — "Coisigh, a ghrádh, isteach agus taiseain domh-sa." Chuaidh ise leis an pháiste, agus a'ir a chuaidh i amach fhuair i an clóca (an cochala) bhíodh uirthe. Agus air a fhuair i e, fhuair i ar shiubhal agus dh'fhág i éad.[23]

There was a young man. He took one home and he married her and they had three children. And the man went to Ireland. And one of the children came in and said: "Mother, did you see the nice thing that is outside in the stable?" "Go on, love, and show me." She went with the child, and when she went out she found the cloak (the *cochala*) that she used to wear. And when she found it, she went off and she left them.[24]

The interesting difference between this version and the first one is that, while the stolen object is the same in both, the man in the second story hides it in the stable, where the children help their mother in recovering it when her husband is away from home. This feature is typical of versions collected in Scotland as well as some from the northern half of Ireland, situating the tale within a partly northern Irish/Rathlin/Scottish isogloss.[25] In the first version, the concealment of the stolen object within the thatch reflects another isogloss represented by versions from southern and western Ireland, including Donegal.

It is worth noting that just as the mermaid's property is hidden in a secret place by the man, so also are the reins and saddle of the water-horse in Duncan MacDonald's story from South Uist. Although the storyteller says it was not known where the man had secreted them, it appears later that the young girl found them in the stable or the barn.

Conclusion

The foregoing has examined some stories about seals, water-horses and mermaids from Rathlin Island, which are mostly told here in the form of memorates and fabulates. They reflect the central importance of the sea in the folk beliefs and customs of the islanders. Many of them are concerned not only with the culling of seals, but also with the almost sacred nature of the relationship between the people and the sea. The fact that sea-oil and seal skins would have been known through the oral tradition to have helped the people survive the harsh economic conditions of island life should also be borne in mind. Avoidance strategies are articulated to ensure that sea creatures in general should not be unnecessarily harmed but integrated, if possible, into the cultural traditions and social life of the community.

Stories about mermaids and water-horses emphasise certain precautions meant to ensure that they do not to return to their natural habitat. Men attracted to mermaids, for example, are warned to be wary of the exotic and not marry too far from home. As for water-horses, the moral might be that not only should one not 'look a gift horse in the mouth', one should also treat horses well and not abuse them.

In some of our examples, we have seen how differences in their telling reflect sociological change. In the stories about seals, the animal's use of English may reflect the authority of English in an Irish-speaking community, whereas a story told in English may specify that the seal spoke in Irish,

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[23] Holmer, *The Irish Language in Rathlin Island*, 152–153.
[24] Note that both the words 'cloak' and *cochala* are used here for the stolen object. For the distribution of the different words used for the stolen object, see figures in Darwin, Mar gur Dream Sí iad, 308, 310.
[25] See also, Linda-May Ballard, 'Seal stories and belief on Rathlin Island', *Ulster Folklife* 29, pp. 35-6, Belfast 1983.

evoking the past to lend credibility to its words. Although Rathlin shares many sea stories and beliefs with Ireland and Scotland, it is worth noting that in the second mermaid story above, the island is viewed as a land in its own right: the husband of the mermaid goes 'to Ireland' (*go h-Eirinn*), not 'to the mainland' (*tír mór*), as Irish offshore islanders would normally refer to going to Ireland.

As many of these stories are also migratory legends (fabulates), it is unsurprising that versions of them have been also recorded in the Nordic countries. For example, the story of the 'Water-Horse as Work-Horse' is recorded in *Landnámabók,* the Icelandic 'Book of Settlements' (S83/H71). In it, a stallion emerges from Lake Hjarðarvatn close to the farm of a man called Auðun *stuti* ('Auðun the Stutterer'), a Hebridean. His wife Mýrun is claimed to be the daughter of the King of the Irish, Maddaðr (Bjaðmakr H).[26] Auðun catches the horse, yokes it to a sledge, and it carts home all the hay from his infarm. In the afternoon, however, it breaks free, runs to the lake, and is never seen again. While the story has analogues in both the Nordic and Gaelic traditions, the names and ethnicity of some of the participants point to diffusion from Ireland and Scotland.[27]

Dedication

It gives me great pleasure to offer this short contribution to our distinguished honorand, Dr John Shaw, who, over many years, has collected, documented and published important work on various aspects of legendary material and folklife in the Gaelic and Nordic worlds. *Guím fad saoil agus sláinte dó!*

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[26] Jakob Benediktsson, ed. *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, Íslenzk fornrit I (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968). S and H refer to different versions of the text, namely, Sturlubók which dates to the thirteenth century, and Hauksbók to the early fourteenth century. The numbers after the letters refer to the paragraphs in the text.

[27] See Bo Almqvist, 'Waterhorse Legends (MLSIT 408 & 408B): The Case for and against a Connection between Irish and Nordic Tradition', *Béaloideas* 54 (1991): 107–120; also Bo Almqvist, 'Crossing the Border: A Sampler of Irish Migratory Legends about the Supernatural', *Béaloideas* 59 (1999): 212–278. 'MLSIT' stands for 'Migratory Legend, Suggested Irish Type'.

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