

Tales and Traditions of Ireland's Forgotten Folklore



The Faerie Isle

Síne Quinn

Illustrated by
Dermot Flynn



To Martin with
love and thanks
SQ

For XXX
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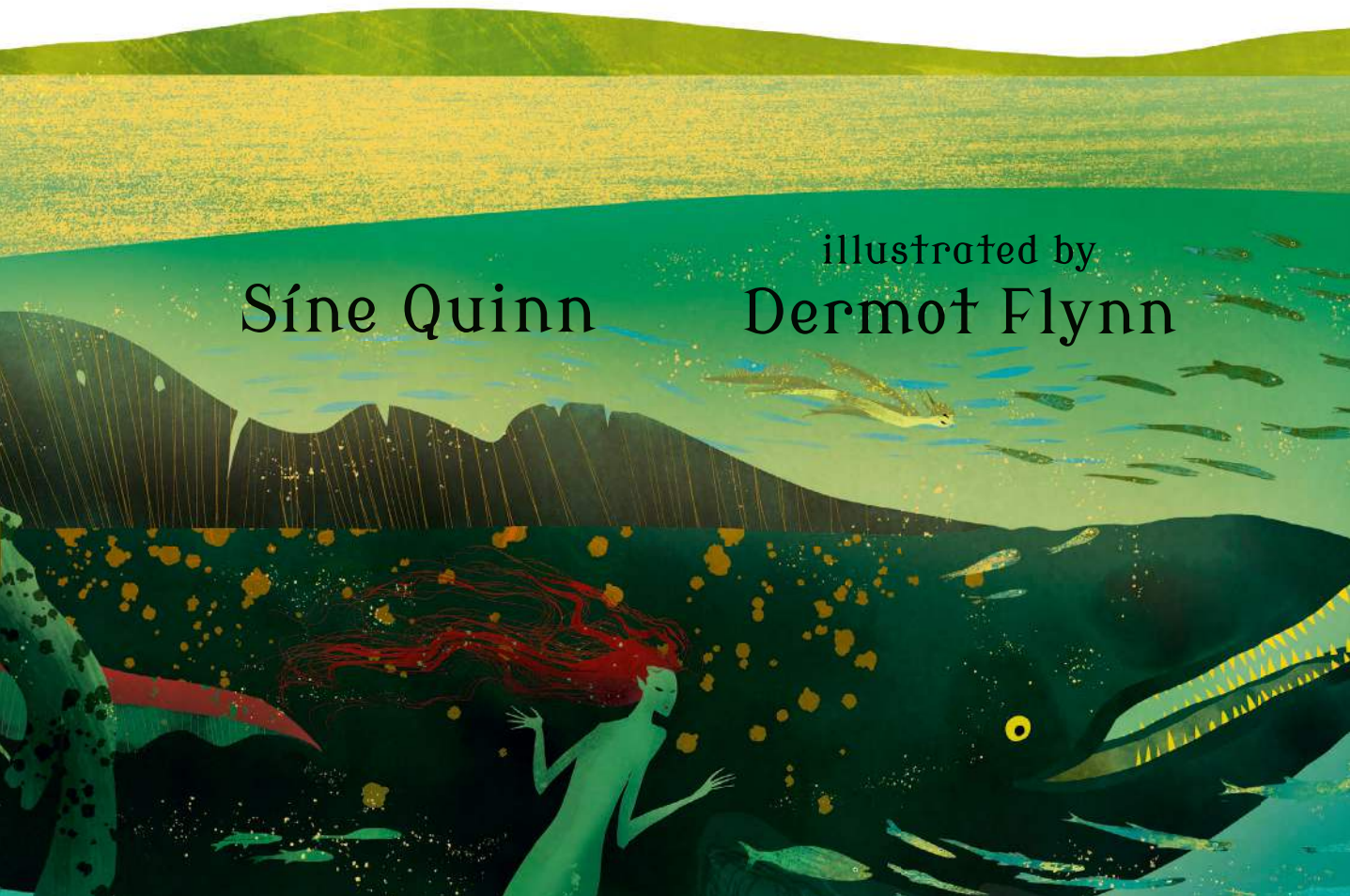


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FOREWORD








DON'T MESS WITH THE FAERIES

The magical, mysterious, and supernatural creatures of Ireland have long been celebrated in Ireland and around the world. These creatures—often called “faeries,” the “good people,” or the “little people”—are the inspiration for a treasure trove of myths and fairy tales. Stories of their mischief, their gifts, and their threats are commonplace among Irish people, and while much of it is no longer outwardly believed to be truth, many people will still not speak badly of the faerie folk or do anything to cross them—just in case. In all parts of Ireland, these supernatural creatures continue to be acknowledged and respected in local customs and rituals.

Primarily passed down through oral history, tales of the mysterious “good people” can also be found recorded in ancient manuscripts at the National Folklore Collection, especially in the Irish schools’ folklore collections. Many of these stories and accounts were the primary resource for the text and stories in this book. This extraordinary, often dark folklore has traveled to many far-flung places and influenced many international stories, from “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving (1820) to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

There are a number of theories about the origins of Irish faeries. People at different times and in different places viewed them as fallen angels, spirits of the dead, or ancient gods and goddesses descended from the *Fir Bolgs*—the supernatural creatures who were said to be the first



inhabitants of Ireland. Another theory is that when the Celts invaded Ireland in 500 BCE, the native people, who were much smaller than the invaders, retreated to woodlands, caves, and safe underground places. Sightings of these slight, hidden people might have sparked faerie lore.

Folk customs around faeries are still very common in Ireland today. Offerings for faeries are visible at local wells, and rags or ribbons are seen tied to hawthorn trees as offerings to the tree faeries in exchange for granting wishes or healing. Iron horseshoes are often hung above doors to block faerie activity, and building permits applications have been denied on many occasions to avoid cutting down a faerie tree! Most customs and rituals around the faerie folk began in the hope of bringing luck, health, and protection. Although we are often lighthearted about it, the significance of Irish fae and the stories that surround them is a deep-rooted part of our culture, regardless of religion, politics, or social standing. Communities are often united in their respect for maintaining traditions, including caring for faerie mounds, trees, and sacred wells.

Some faeries offer protection, have the gift of healing, and can grant wishes. But others enjoy causing mischief and mayhem. As you'll learn over the course of this book, the best way to protect yourself from faerie mischief is to be kind, generous, and good to animals and those around you. Faeries despise miserly people and can't abide cruelty to animals or other humans, especially those less fortunate. You might be able to use salt, horseshoes, running water, and hazel or rowan branches to ward against them—but if you've crossed a faerie, you will know all about it. Thankfully, you are holding this book in your hands, and so you'll soon know all about the faerie folk of Ireland—and how to stay on their good side!




MERMAID

• • MAIGHDEANA MHARA • •

Mermaids have been depicted in art and literature for many hundreds of years. The first known image of a merman was found in a Phoenician carving from 700 BCE. Irish medieval manuscripts contain legends of these beautiful creatures, often spotted along the coast or in the waters of Lough Neagh.

Mermaids are regarded as messengers, sometimes of good tidings but also of doom and death, and it is thought to be very unlucky to see one. In County Kerry, fishermen will turn back to port if they see a mermaid sitting upon a rock. There are also reports of a particular

mermaid who sits combing her long hair on a rocky island in the middle of the River Shannon.



Those who see her will apparently die within one year. Despite their beauty, you should be wary of encountering these marine faeries!

In some parts of Ireland, mermaids are called merrows (*muiróigh*), a word derived from the Irish *muir* (sea) and *óigh* (maid). Merrows are a little different from other mermaids around the world. They can have many forms, varying from the well-known mermaid (human from the waist up with a fish tail) to rarer forms, such as ones covered from head to toe in green scales. In most accounts, merrows look just like humans with flat feet and webbed fingers. You'd have to look very closely to spot them, but remember to watch out for flat-footed friends wearing gloves!

As with classic mermaids, female merrows are believed to be captivating and very beautiful. In contrast, male merrows are described as very ugly, with porcine (pig-like) features—a little easier to spot!

Lí Ban is the most famous Irish mermaid because she became a saint.

Stories about mermaid marriages are common in coastal counties. The O'Flabhertys, O'Sullivan's and MacNamaras are believed to be descendants of a marriage between a human and a mermaid.

In some tales, mermaids are children who survived an accident at sea and were rescued by mermaids and raised in Tir fo Thuinn, the land beneath the waves.

There are carvings of mermaids in many Irish abbeys and churches, including Kílcooley Abbey and Clonfert Cathedral.



The Northern Lights

Everyone had gathered by the pier in great excitement—it was the best place to see the green and dark pink lights in the sky. It was a crisp evening, and people huddled close together as darkness fell around them. The northern lights were rare, but in the northwest, when the winter days were clear and bright, the shimmering waves of light could be seen for miles.

John looked up and clutched his sister's hand. There was silence around them as they all gazed at the colors that lit up the sky. It was magical, like something out of a dream.

Then John heard a gentle splash. He looked down at the sea; everyone else continued to stare up in awe. John crouched down and peered into the water . . .

The most beautiful woman he had ever seen was swimming in the icy water. Her skin glistened. Her long hair shone. The lights reflecting on the water made her large eyes glow.

The woman swam gracefully to the edge of the pier to look at the sky. John moved toward her. *Is she real?* he wondered.

John leaned over farther to look closer. Suddenly, he lost his footing and felt the ground go from underneath him, and he fell into the freezing water!

Down, down, down he went.

The ice-cold water filled up his boots; his overcoat was heavy, and the weight brought him down even faster. He spluttered and coughed before shutting his mouth



and holding what was left of his breath. John could hear his sister's voice crying out, calling his name.

He opened his eyes and looked up. Through the gloom, he could still see the dancing lights above the water. *I must keep moving; I must kick my feet*, he thought. He pushed his arms above his head.

Suddenly, a soft hand grasped his left hand and pulled. He felt a gentle tug and he was rising swiftly, up through the icy water.

It was the beautiful woman. Up close, he could see her flowing hair was golden. Her arms were long and pale, shimmering strangely in the light. And her legs . . . She had none! From the waist down, magnificent green scales glimmered on a graceful tail. They were the same color as the lights.

She looked back at him and smiled. John was cold and his limbs were losing all feeling, but instantly he felt safe. In seconds she had

brought him to the side of the pier, where they shot up to the water's edge with a great splash.

A man called out and a rope was thrown into the water—just in front of them. The mermaid tied the rope around John's waist and tugged on it firmly. He felt his body begin to rise out of the freezing water.

John looked back as they pulled him onto the pier and saw the mermaid looking up at him. She smiled, and her teeth shone like pearls in the colored light. She was gone—the tip of her tail was the last thing he saw before he fainted.

Every year on the same evening, John and his sister visit the spot where he met the mermaid. As John looks out across the water, he knows that the mermaid is somewhere, watching them. He feels the same as he did when she brought him to the pier.

He feels safe.

