

# CELTIC MYTHS

A COMPILATION OF TALES



ILLUSTRATED  
BY SANDRA BRAND



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# The Land of Tír Na nÓg

By Leon O'Cathasaigh

Once upon a time, many years ago, there lived a great warrior named Oisín, son of legendary Fionn Mac Cumhaill, or Finn MacCool in its English form. MacCool was the leader of Fianna – a group of great protectors who guarded the High King of Ireland – and each day Oisín and Fianna explored the beautiful green hills of Ireland as they hunted the land.

One day, Oisín and Fianna saw a beautiful white horse in distance, and on its back was the most beautiful young woman they had ever seen. Her hair was the color of the sun and fell to her waist, and she wore a dress of palest blue studded with stars. She was surrounded by a golden light.

As the beautiful woman and her horse drew nearer, all men stopped in their tracks, waiting to hear what she had to say. “My name is Niamh,” said the golden-haired maiden, “my father is King of the mystical land of Tír Na nÓg, a land that knows no sorrow and where nobody ever ages. I have heard wonderful things of a great warrior named Oisín, and I have come to take him with me back to Land of Eternal Youth.”

Oisín immediately fell in love with Niamh, and although he was sad to be leaving his father and Fianna, he agreed to join



Niamh on horseback to go and live in Tír Na nÓg, promising Finn MacCool that he would return to Ireland to see him again soon.

The fine white horse galloped across silver seas into the magical land of Tír Na nÓg. As Niamh had promised, this was a land where nobody knew of sadness, and where nobody ever aged, everyone there lived forever.

Together, Niamh and Oisín spent many happy times together, although there was a small part of Oisín's heart that was lonely. He missed his homeland of Ireland and longed to see his father and Fianna again.

Oisín begged Niamh to let him return to Ireland, but she was reluctant. Although Oisín thought that only a few years had passed, it had in fact been 300 years back in Ireland, since, in the land of Tír Na nÓg, time slowed down.

Eventually, Niamh saw how much Oisín missed his family. She agreed to let him return to Ireland to see them again. "Take my magical white horse," she told him. "Do not get off this horse, and do not let your feet touch the ground, or else you will never be able to return to Tír Na nÓg again."

Oisín set off across seas on Niamh's white horse and arrived in Ireland. When he got there, he could see that things had changed. The Fianna no longer hunted green hills, and the grand castle that once housed his family was crumbling and covered in ivy.

As he was searching for someone familiar in the green hills, Oisín came across some old men, who were having difficulty trying to move a huge rock. He leaned down from his horse to help them, but in doing so he lost his balance and fell from the horse. The moment Oisín touched Irish soil, he immediately aged the 300 years that he had missed in Ireland.

An old, frail man, he asked the men he had stopped to help about his father Finn MacCool, and they told him that Finn had died many years before. Broken-hearted and many hundred years old, Oisín died soon after, but not before he shared legends and stories of Fianna, his father great Finn MacCool, and the magical land of eternal youth that is Tír Na nÓg. And even today in Ireland, these legends live on.



# The Tale of Branwen

By Claudia Merrill

Branwen's story begins with a betrothal. In order to bring peace between Britain and Ireland, Matholwch, the King of Ireland, journeys to Britain to ask for Branwen's hand in marriage. He asks Bran the Blessed, her brother, if this can be arranged, so he agrees to ask Branwen. Both Bran and Branwen come from a high lineage and so the marriage of Branwen is highly sought after.

Branwen agrees to the marriage, seeing the benefits of harmony between the two Celtic nations, and they hold a celebratory feast that evening. During the feast, Branwen's half-brother catches wind of the engagement and flies into a rage that no one consulted him before arranging his sister's marriage. He mutilates the Irish horses before disappearing into the night.

Matholwch is deeply offended, and as compensation, Bran gifts him one of the treasures of Wales, a cauldron that has the power to bring men back to life after death, with the catch that they can no longer hear or speak. Branwen and Matholwch return to Ireland and the pair seem to be happy.

However, due to Matholwch's bruised ego, Branwen is then treated unfairly. After suffering at the hands of her new

husband, she does give birth to an heir, Gwern, but even this is not enough to save her from her unhappy marriage.

Peering out her window she speaks to a starling, tames it, and convinces it to deliver a message to her brother. Rolling the parchment under the bird's wing, it flies to send Bran details of her unhappiness and how she wishes to come home to Britain.

Bran receives the message and gathers an army to rescue her from Matholwch. Upon meeting his army in Ireland, the King doesn't want to resort to war, and so agrees to give his kingdom to Branwen's son, Gwern, in an attempt to pacify Bran.

This angers the Irish nobles who then hide in flour bags near the Welsh camp to attack. Branwen's half-brother in the Welsh camp discovers the hidden nobles and kills them by crushing their heads one by one.

Later at the feast to celebrate Gwern inheriting the Irish lands, the half-brother flies into a fit of unprovoked rage and throws Gwern into the fire. This creates a chain reaction where a war between Ireland and Wales ensues, whereby the Irish use the magic cauldron to resurrect their men and thus win the war.

Branwen's half-brother sees what he has done towards the end of the battle and instantly regrets his actions. Disguising himself as an Irish warrior, thinking him one of their dead men, throw him into the cauldron, whereby he pushes it from four corners on the inside and destroys it, perishing in the attempt. Only Branwen, Bran, and seven Welsh warriors survive, and they set sail for Wales.

On the shores of Wales, Bran discovers a poison arrow lodged in his leg and passes there and then. Branwen, so distraught from the bloodshed and pain of her people, son, and brothers, dies of a broken heart.

Branwen is said to be buried in Angelsey under a stone circle that bears her name. Bran's head is said to be buried in White Mount, London.



# The Mermaid of Zennor

By The Cornwall Heritage Trust

One fine Sunday morning in Zennor church, perched on the cliffs of Penwith, the choir and congregation were ready for service when through the church door came a strange lady of unearthly beauty. Her green eyes looked back calmly at the villagers, who were staring, for newcomers were rare in that far-flung parish; her tawny-gold hair flowed down over her back, wild and untrained; the long dress she wore swept the ground like a bride's train, and was made of some material that no one there had ever seen, for it shimmered like the sea on a sunny day. She sat near the door in a pew on her own, away from other people.

In the choir were some fine singers, but none finer than Mathy Trehwella, a handsome young man who sang a clear high tenor: his voice could be heard all over Zennor Churchtown when he wished. As the choristers sang their hymns and psalms Mathy became aware of the stranger staring at him with those emerald-green mysterious eyes; when he looked at her it seemed to him that a queer faint smile hovered on her face. After the service she was the first to leave the church, and those who went out after her thought it strange how rapidly she had disappeared, as they could not see her anywhere outside.



Five or six times this unknown lady came to Zennor church, always on a fine day, and always she sat far apart from the congregation, watching Mathy and listening to every note he sang. Her eyes seemed to look right through him, and her gaze somehow reminded him of the dim light in caves under sea. He determined that somehow he would find out who she was.

The next time she appeared in church he was ready. Before the end of the service, as the parson gave the benediction, Mathy slipped from the choir stalls and let himself out of the little side door of the church. And so, as soon as the lady emerged, first as usual from the main door, he was at her side. She smiled as if she had been expected him, and took his arm; and thus they left the churchyard together. People coming after them saw them take the winding path that led down the valley towards the sea.

That was the last Zennor saw of Mathy Trehwella. His old mother was heartbroken for a long time, but at least she had other grown children to comfort her. The story of how Mathy disappeared with the stranger was a great mystery, often talked about, and unsolved for many years; in fact two generations had been born and grew up in the village, and old Mrs Trehwella was in her grave before news came of him.

A ship bound for Penzance, and captained by a man who knew Zennor well, came by one day and anchored off Pendower Cove; she put out a boat to get some water from the shore. Soon a woman's voice was heard calling urgently, "Ship! Ship ahoy!" and the watch, looking overboard, saw a mermaid with green eyes and tawny-gold hair swimming beside them. "Tell your captain to haul up your anchor," she cried. "For 'tis

lodged against the door of my home on the sea-bed, and I can't get in to my Mathy and children."

At this the captain came to the side and questioned her. "Excuse me, ma'am, but did you say your Mathy? Mathy who, may I ask?" Sailors are always very respectful to mermaids, who have powers to cause shipwrecks and disaster, and often use them if they are annoyed.

"Mathy Trehwella, my husband, of course," she said. "Now haul away, if you please." The captain did not stay to argue, but brought up the anchor immediately. And with a swish from her long gleaming tail she was gone, diving down to the sea-bed and her family.

So Zennor heard the news, and learned Mathy's fate. Neither he nor the mermaid has ever been since, but in Zennor church now is a bench end carved to show what she looked like: long flowing hair, a sea-siren's face, and a curved scaly tail. And for all we know, Mathy is still down there on the ocean floor, singing sweetly to his mermaid wife and their children.

Her eyes seemed to look right through him, and her gaze somehow reminded him of the dim light in caves under the sea.

Celtic mythology, Arthurian romance, and an intriguing interpretation of British history--these are just some of the themes embraced by the authors of the eleven tales that make up this compilation of stories from the six Celtic Nations.

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