



THE MERMAID
OF NEWHALL AS
RECALLED IN
TALES
GATHERED
OVER THE
CENTURIES, A
POEM AND
NOW IN SONG.

THE MERMAID OF NEWHALL

The Mermaid of Newhall

A compilation of the story from various sources

By Eric Shaw

The Augustinian Houses of the County Clare: Clare, Killone, and Inchicronan

Thomas Johnson Westropp
Clare County Library

The situation of the convent is extremely picturesque, lying on the hillside at the northern end of a lake. This water is itself a centre of curious folk-lore: it was, legends say, the abode of a mermaid, who, in the O'Briens' time, used to swim up a brook and steal wine in the cellars of Newhall. Better for her had she kept to her own element, for the butler lay in wait and stabbed her; her blood stained all the lake, and as she floated away faint and weak, she prophesied that in like manner would the O'Briens pass away from Newhall. The lake still becomes a rusty red, from iron mud in the shale; this happens at long intervals, usually after a dry summer, and is believed to forebode a change of occupants to the neighbouring house. It last happened (it is said) when the present owner leased the place to one of the O'Briens.



Waterfall on the stream that flows in to Newhall Lake.

A Folklore Survey of County Clare - Water Spirits and Mer-folk

Thomas Johnson Westropp
Clare County Library

A water spirit, or mermaid, is remembered at Killone Lake and Newhall. The legend is preserved in several variants. In 1839 it was told how O'Brien of Killone saw a lovely girl in the lake, and caught her. Bringing her home, he found to his great disgust and disappointment that she had a fish's tail. He ordered her to be kept in a 'crib,' and fed and well-treated. As she never spoke, a local fool threw scalding water on her to make her say something. He was only too successful, for, after a wild, blood-curdling shriek, she cried:

*'As the return of the salmon from the stream,
A return without blood or flesh,
May such be the departure of the O'Briens
Like ears of wild corn from Killone.'*

The legend recorded, almost at the same time (1840), by Crofton Croker was told to me by the old peasantry, about 1876, as follows:—A mermaid used to swim up a stream that flowed under the cellars of Newhall, in

order to steal wine. The ‘master’ (an O’Brien), or the butler, hid and stabbed her, (or threw her into a tub of scalding water where she became a big lump of jelly), and her blood ran down the stream and reddened all the lake. As the wounded [were] being floated away she wailed:—

*‘As the water maid floats weak and bloodless down the stream
So the O’Briens shall go from Killone.’*

Prof. Brian O’Looney heard in his youth, and told me, a tale nearly identical:—

*‘As the mermaid goes on the sea,
So shall the race of O’Briens pass away
Till they leave Killone in wild weeds.’*

The lake, turns red at times from iron scum and red clay after a dry summer. This is supposed to be caused by the local Undine’s blood, and to foretell a change of occupants in Newhall. Strange to say, I saw it happen last when the place was let by the MacDonnells to the O’Briens. The cellar at Newhall has its outer section roofed with large slabs, and the inner consists of long, low, cross vaults. In the end of the innermost recess is a built-up square patch, which sounds hollow, and is said to show the opening closed to keep out the thievish mermaid. There seems no evidence of any stream running underneath the cellar, but local tradition tells of a vaulted passage down to the lake.

THE NEWHALL MERMAID’S CURSE

Clare Folk Tales, Ruth Marshall, the History Press Ireland, 2013.

A wealthy man named O’Brien lived in Newhall House. Nearby was a lake, at the foot of a long tree-covered hill, where O’Brien spent much of his time fishing. The local peasants told O’Brien that a mermaid lived in that lake. They had seen her Wearing a green cloak, sitting on a rock at the lake’s edge, combing her long black hair. O’Brien laughed at their foolish stories. He was very rich and cared little for the poor people who lived around him. All that concerned him was sport and making money, His house was very grand. There were marble pillars by the heavy carved wooden doors, and tall windows that let in plenty of light to his drawing room. And the furniture, Well there were chairs there with legs painted gold and covered in brocade cushions. He kept a number of servants, none of whom



he treated well. He was known as a cruel master, and no one would want to cross him. Underneath his grand mansion there was a cellar, where he kept his store of fine wines. When he had company he wished to impress, he would send a servant down to bring up a bottle or two of some particularly fine vintage. At other times he would go down to the cellar himself to admire his store. It was not particularly pleasant in the cellar, being cold and damp and with a constant sound of running water - some said an underground stream ran beneath it. One day, O’Brien noticed that some of his wine was missing. He presumed that his servant had stolen it, and made up his mind to prosecute the man. As he would need evidence, O’Brien decided to stay up that night to catch the thief red-handed.

He dressed warmly and made himself as comfortable as he could, using an old wine cask as a chair, and he waited. Just after midnight he heard movement at the far end of the cellar. He was greatly surprised when he saw the thief it was a woman, of sorts, above the waist, but with scales and a tail like a fish below. The mermaid came from Newhall Lake, along the narrow covered stream that ran from under the cellar to the lake.

O'Brien had never seen such a creature before; he had thought the tales of mermaids in the nearby lake to be just the foolishness and superstition of the peasantry. O'Brien, who had his pistol ready to confront the thief, fired at the mermaid and his shot wounded her badly. She gave an ear-shattering shriek that echoed all around the cellar. Before she disappeared, bleeding, along the channel to the lake, the mermaid cursed the O'Briens that they would never have an heir.

'Fish without flesh, meat without bones, hear the mermaid's curse on the plains of Killone. As the mermaid floats bloodless down the stream, so shall the O'Briens pass away from Killone. The mermaid's curse proved to be true, and this was how it worked out. O'Brien had seven daughters and no sons. One of the daughters married a man called McDonnell and they had seven daughters too.

The wounded mermaid floated back to the lake, which turned red with her blood for a day and a night. It is said that it still turns red once every seven years. And it will turn red if an O'Brien should be in residence at Newhall House. Cattle will not drink from the lake when it is red with the mermaid's blood.

The mermaid also said that a crow would never build its nest or live in the wood near Newhall House after that day and this also came to pass.

McDonnell of Newhall

At Killone Abbey, over the entrance to the crypt where members of the McDonnell family are buried, the family coat-of-arms is carved in stone. It's a shield divided into four panels. One depicts a rampant lion, the second a human arm holding a cross, the third shows a ship, the fourth shows something that looks like a mermaid. The motto is "Toujours Pret", French for "Ever Ready".

Mary Carroll (1848-1942) of Abbeyview, Ballybeg, said that there was an unseen mermaid's drop to be heard in the crypt. This is said to be the blood of the mermaid from her wounds. It can still be heard dropping today!



McDonnell Coat-of-Arms



Crypt of Killone Abbey



Panoramic view of Newhall Lake by Christy Leyden

THE SCHOOLS' FOLKLORE COLLECTION

Dating from 1937-39, this remarkable collection is the outcome of an innovative project supervised by the Irish Folklore Commission.

In conjunction with the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, senior Primary School children recorded in excess of 750,000 pages of local history and oral tradition from across the 26 counties of the Irish Free State. This includes some 18,000 of the children's original school exercise books. This collection has been digitized and is now available at www.duchas.ie.

In the Clare Schools Section of the Collection, there are ninety-two references to Mermaids in the stories. Many relate to sea-mermaids but there are about 26 of the stories relating to the Mermaid of Killone. Apparently, the Killone Mermaid was widely known all over Clare in the 1930s. The children gave various versions of the tale, sometimes naming Ballybeg Lake as the home of the mermaid. As expected, the tale is told by the pupils of Ballyea and Clarecastle Girls and Boys schools. Samples of the stories are given hereunder, in the wonderful handwriting of the pupils using nib-pens and ink.

Story
—+—

There is a story attached to New Hall house where Mrs Joyce now lives. A gentleman named Mr M^{rs} McDonnell lived there about forty years ago. He was a protestant, and was very greedy and cruel to the poor. He kept his wine in a cellar, and one day he missed some of it. He thought the servants, or neighbours might be stealing it. He remained up one night to watch. To his great surprise, the thief was a mermaid from the lake near by. She came from the lake to the cellar through an under ground channel or cave. He stabbed her, and she went back bleeding to the lake. It is said that the water turned red for a day and a night, and that this occurs every seven years to the present day. The mermaid cursed Mr Mc McDonnell. She said he would never have a son to take his place in New Hall which was a fact as he had several daughters but no son. She also said that a crow would never build its nest or live in

4

the wood near his house and this is
said to be true also.

Brendan Walle.
17th November, 1937.
Teller: Lot Malone. 86
Barnageeha.
Darragh.
Co. Clare.

Ref: CBES_0607_CBES_0607_003 – Brendan Walle, Ballyea School

Written by Brendan Walle on 17 November 1937 as told to him by Lot Malone of Barnageeha, Darragh then aged 86. The story must date back to the 1850s.



Killone Abbey

Mermaid.

It is said that a mermaid lived in New Hall lake but she was killed by a man named O'Donnell for stealing his wine. He had never any luck after and he had to sell his farm. Her head was like that of a woman and her head's body like a fish. A man named O'Loughlin stood on the chimney of her house. The house was not found since. Some people say it was captain Browe that shot her. It is said that she cursed captain Browe and all the crows. She also said that the crows or their descendants would never have ease while they would live there. The crows never perch there now. It is said that the lake turns red every seven years on account of her death.

Michael Slattery

The Mermaid

There is a story told by the old inhabitants of Clarecastle about a mermaid who once lived in a lake about a half a mile from the village. The lake is called Newhall lake and is situated at the foot of a long hill which is covered by trees. The story runs that the mermaid lived peacefully in this lake and was seen at various times by the local people. The mermaid was half-fish and half-woman and had long black hair, and at times she used to leave the water and go to an adjacent cave.

At that time there was a rich family living in Newhall house which is a fine country Residence and in a cellar beneath the house there were wines and liquors. This action was condemned by the local people because they believed that it would bring bad luck on the people and on the locality. According to the local people it

did bring bad luck on the Mac Donnell family and thenceforth they had bad luck in all their affairs.

Another story concerning the lake that it turns red every seven years, because the mermaid is alleged to have gone back into the lake when she was wounded, and therefore the water was crimson with her blood.

There was a mermaid down in low Island, near Kilypert, and every day she appeared on a rock combing her hair. A man saw her this day and he said to himself "Please God if you will live until to-morrow I will have you in my house."

Next day she appeared on the rock again combing her hair, he took her into his house when she went into the house she gave him a cap and she said to him that if he lost this cap that she would have to go out on the rock again. After some time he foolishly lost the cap and she had to go out on the rock again.

brissie Russell b. l. n. s.

Ref: CBES_0607_CBES_0607_439 Cissie Russell, Clarecastle School



Carved Face from Killone Abbey by Eric Shaw

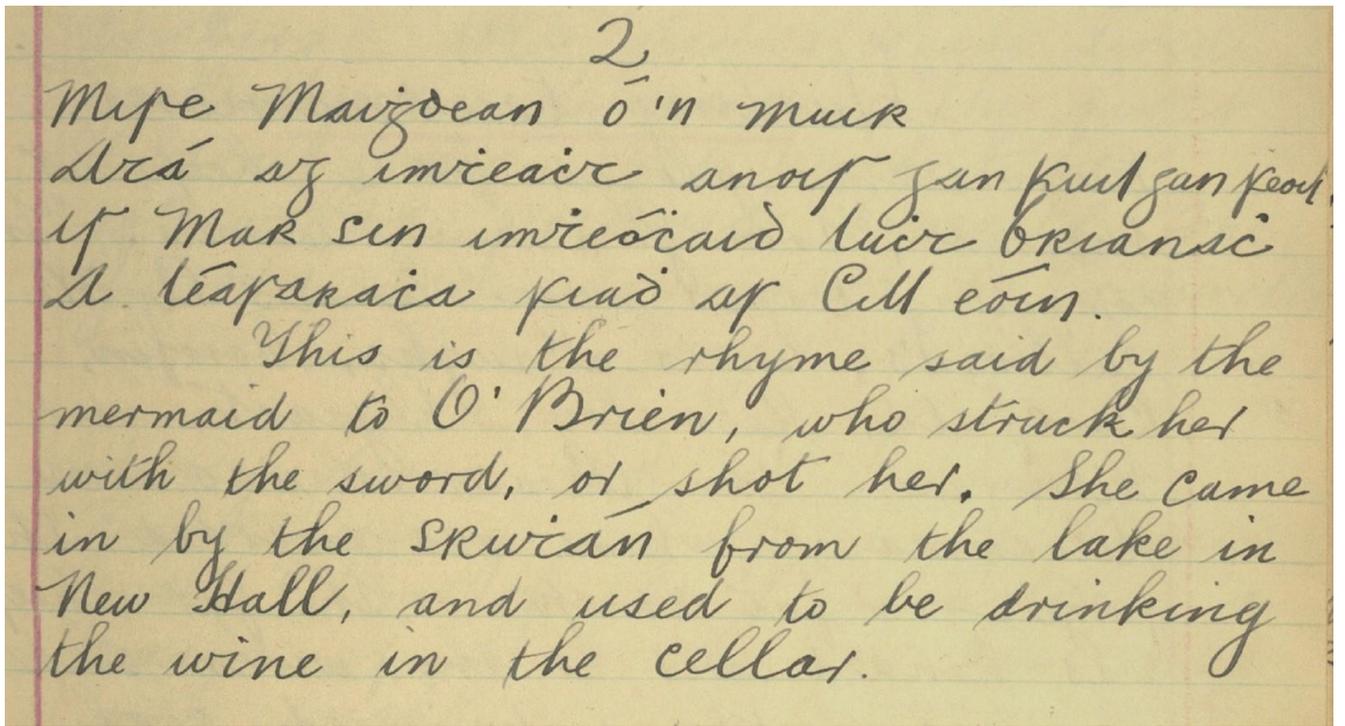
Mermaid at New Hall.

When the O'Briens were living at New Hall, the wine was disappearing out of the cellars. One of the O'Briens with a gun remained up at night to see who was taking it, and shot the mermaid.

She cursed the seed of the O'Briens, and predicted an O'Brien would never live there. Whenever, any of the O'Briens lived there the lake turned red. While Robert Vere O'Brien (Ballyalla, Tennis) lived there the lake was red. The O'Briens have no heirs now. Old people say New Hall Lake turns to blood every seven years. There is a drop in the old Abbey still which is heard but cannot be seen.

Others say it was a Colonel McC. Donnell shot the mermaid. The McC. Donnells lived there after the O'Briens. A Mrs Joyce lives there presently.

Sílead na Ré Choinle



Mise Maighdean ó'n muir

Atá ag imtheacht anois gan fuil gan feoil

is mar sin a imtheóchaid lucht brianach

A léasanacha fiadh as Cill Eóin.

Ref: CBES_0608_CBES_0608_295, Kilmaley School

‘When the Nuns lived in the Abbey they would retire to bed early in the evening so as to arise early for morning prayers. They put a curse of crows cawing in the neighbourhood in the evenings and to this day, no crow has ever made its nest in the vicinity of the Abbey.’

John Enright – St. John’s Eve, 2010.

Curses of the McInerney family of Co. Clare:

Luke McInerney

N.M.A. J. vol.50, 2010

Extract

Folktales of Killone

Connor Ryan's folktale has resonance in a tale recorded by John O'Donovan in 1839 for the parish of Killone. According to O'Donovan the Killone Lough opposite the Augustinian convent was believed to be enchanted and that a town existed below the waters to be seen every seven years. O'Donovan recites another tale that an O'Brien fishing at the lough caught a mermaid and stole her home. A fool in O'Brien's house scolded the mermaid with boiling water, to which she screamed and headed for the lough, not without cursing:

Filedhan bhradráin on sruith,

File gan fuil gan feoil,

Gur ba mar sin imtheochas siol mBriain,

Na ndeasacha fiadh as Chilleóin.

[As the return of the salmon from the stream,

A return without blood or flesh,

May such be the departure of the O'Briens,

Like ears of wild corn from Killeoin].

The above folktale, also from the first half of the nineteenth century, has two important themes. First, the analogy of a salmon returning to water heralding the departure of the O'Brien family is also present in the folktale copied by Connor Ryan. Second, the reference to Killone as an O'Brien possession occurs in both folktales. It is possible that both folktales derive from the same source. According to Westropp several variations exist in a similar tale told in 1876 that a mermaid used to swim up a stream that flowed under the cellars of Newhall at Killone in order to steal wine. An O'Brien threw boiling water over her and her blood ran down the stream and reddened the lough and she wailed:

As the mermaid goes on the sea,

So shall the race of O'Briens pass away

Till they leave Killone in wild weeds.

The similarity between these tales and the folktale copied by Connor Ryan in 1825 suggests a shared origin given their focus on the O'Brien gentry of Killone. Indeed the last passage in Connor Ryan's transcribed folktale alludes to this connection, suggesting CURSES ON THE McINERNEY FAMILY O'Donovan & Curry, Antiquities of County Clare, Killone parish 88 Ibid. 89 Westropp, Folklore of Clare, chapter 6. 16 that 'St Catherine [was] transformed into a mermaid recited and credited by some'. This passage probably refers to corrupt versions of the folktale recited in popular memory in the nineteenth century.

The folktale is unique and probably originated from a historical dispute over land between the McInerheney family and the nuns at Killone. Caitlín, a holy-women or nun, was likely to have been an O'Brien and it is conceivable that the tale has a basis in historical fact in pre-reformation Co. Clare. That a Tomás Mac an Oirchinnigh can be identified as a sept-head of the Mac an Oirchinnigh in the fifteenth century adds further weight to the contention that the folktale comprises some historical fact, albeit confused in its historiography.

The Legend of the Baron of Killone*

Who was stealing the Baron's wine;
Burgundy and Port of old-
Precious I ween as drops of gold!
Lone tonight he came to dine.
Flung himself on his oaken chair,
Kicked the hound that whined for bread;
Heard a step upon the stair-
"God! - the thief shall swing" he said.
Baron of Killone kept running down the vaulted way,
to the cellar dark by day,
Took the ten steps at a leap.
Then he listened with the throng
of frightened servants at the door.
Heard the wine drips on the floor
and seamews laughter- loud and long.
Of bolt and bar and double chain,
They freed the door and crowded through,
their eyes a horror claimed to scan,
no ghost or devil met their view.
They searched behind the hogsheads where
The watchful spider spied and span
They sighed to see the wine that ran
a crimson torrent wasting there,
They even searched the gloomy well
That legend said rose from the lake,
And saw bright bubbles rise and break,
but nothing stronger here befell

The Baron cursed the Baron said;
"Now all begone alone I'll stay-

There shall not rise another day,
Without this thief alive or dead"
But still he stood - no sound was there,
save just the wine go drop and drip
Save that the silence seemed to slip,
its threatening fingers thro' his hair
When then at last an echo flew
The splash of water thrown apart-
He cursed the beating of his heart
Because the foe was listening too
The slipping scrape of scales he hears
And seamews laughs loud and sweet
He dare not move his frightened feet
His pulse beats with a thousand fears
At that strange monster in the gloom,
He points his pistol quick and fires
Before the powder spark expires
He hears a seabirds scream of doom
He had one glimpse of snow white arms,
Of sea green eyes and sloak brown hair
He had a chance to find her fair
when he had slain her thousand charms.
The Baron of Killone Keep slew
A sea maiden young and fair
And all the folks in Co. Clare
Will tell you that this tale is true
And when the Baron came to dine
His guests could never understand
Why he would say with glass in hand
I would the thief were at my wine

*This version of the legend was collected by R. Lucas of the Irish Tourist Association while surveying the Parish in 1943, in the form of the poem above. He does not state from whom he got the poem.

In 2020, Clarecastle & Ballyea Heritage & Wildlife Group gave a copy of this poem to Seán Lyons, a young musician living in Clarecastle. He wrote a song based on the poem, entitled *The Ballad of Killone*. Seán is a singer, songwriter and multi-instrumentalist from Clare. Growing up in a musical family, he played the tin whistle and uilleann pipes from a young age, regularly competing and performing around Ireland and overseas. At age 15, he began singing, playing the guitar and writing songs. He is influenced by jazz and the broader folk genre but his music is deeply rooted in Irish traditional music. He released his first single "Lady Winter" in November 2020 and is currently working on a solo album. Seán performs his song, *The Ballad of Killone* on this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3s4LBeWRtqs>

The Ballad of Killone

Written by Sean Lyons © 2019

The Baron's wine was in decline as any servant could see
Port of old like drops of gold from far off Burgundy
And although he had a heavy hand when pouring out a glass
He knew a thief has sought relief in the cellar of Newhall house

"Who would steal the Baron's wine?" the aged man did roar
Wondering how the thief got into his well-guarded store
He heard a howl and kicked his loyal hound who whined for bread
He said "as I live, I'll make sure that the thief will lose his head"

Late one night a starry light engulfed all County Clare
The Baron was awoken by a step upon the stair
And as he hoped to find the thief behind the cellar door
All he found were drips of red wine dotted on the floor

With his dog and gun, the Baron did run across the moonlit fields
Determined that by morning light the thief's fate would be sealed
But when he reached the Killone banks, no trace he yet had found
As seamews' laughter, loud and long, around him did resound

The Baron was demented, vengeance foremost in his mind
But with no culprit in his grasp, one evening he reclined
He entered a deep slumber from which nothing could him wake
Not even the sweet song sung by the lady of the lake

In Killone lake there lived a lady, a sea maiden fair
Her eyes were turquoise like the lake and dark brown was her hair
Every night she'd plunder one of the Baron's wine kegs
But it's easy to get legless when you don't have any legs

One such night the sea maiden swam up from Killone Lake
And under cover of the night her journey she did make
When she reached the cellar, the wine she began to consume
Not seeing a grim shadow in the corner of the room

The Baron drew his pistol and without haste he did fire
And the sea maiden scarcely heard the power spark expire
A canopy of misery descended on the room
The Baron was alarmed to hear a seamew's scream of doom

He caught of glimpse of snow-white arms plunging into the stream
And that's the last of the sea maiden that ever was seen
The Baron bragged of slaying a sea maiden, young and fair
And if you don't believe me, ask the folks of County Clare