

A Door into the  
Mythological Landscape  
of the GLENS of ANTRIM



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# The Otherworld:

## A glimpse into the mythological landscape of the Glens of Antrim.

The Glens of Antrim once possessed an outstandingly rich oral tradition, but sadly since the demise of the Gaelic language as the everyday vernacular of the community, much has been lost. Other factors such as the introduction of the National Schools system in the 1830s, and more recently the advent of multiple forms of media have contributed to its decline. Thankfully important fragments of this rich oral legacy have survived to be recorded and it is likely that many more are still held within local families, waiting to be rediscovered. In recent times there has been a revival in the use of Gaelic language, a renaissance in traditional music and dance and a renewal in interest in native history. It was only going to be a short time before the mythology of our forebears would begin to reemerge.

Traditional stories centred on heroic tales of warriors, tragic romances, fabulous epic adventures of giants and the fairy folk or 'good people'. The folklore is grounded in the ancient literature of Gaelic Ireland and Scotland and it is fascinating to observe how the great Gaelic stories have been woven into this unique landscape.

The purposes of indigenous stories are manifold. On one level, these tales provided entertainment on long winter evenings, but on another they were used to make sense of unexplainable happenings, to teach cultural value, morality, and respect of place. Local people and visitors alike are rediscovering the rich cultural legacy of The Glens of Antrim, which is part of the great folklore of Gaelic Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man. This modest publication offers a tiny glimpse

into the traditional folklore of the Glens and its landscape. Many of the places you can visit, but not all. These magical places in the landscape of The Glens of Antrim are steps into 'another world'.

Early Gaelic literature is extensive and has been divided into various genres based on casts of characters that occur together in various tales. The two greatest and most popular of these are the Fionn Tradition and those that are known as the Ulster Cycle. The Fionn Tradition centres on the heroic events of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, his Fianna (hunting bands), and his son Oisín, while the Ulster Cycle focuses on the King of Ulster, Conchobhar Mac Neasa, and the warriors at his court at Eamhain Mhacha (Navan Fort near Armagh). These narratives and the characters they portray are embedded in the landscape of The Glens.

The Fionn tradition is prominently represented in The Glens. Fionn and his Fianna hunted along valleys, woods and mountain tops. He had forts in Glenshesk and in Glenariff, while his son Oisín was buried in Glenaar. Fionn's wife, the ill-fated Gráinne, took refuge with her lover Diarmuid near Torr Head. His arch-enemy, the one eyed Goll Mac Morna and his family, are associated with Lurigethan mountain near Cushendall.

The tales of the Ulster Cycle are also woven into the landscape. Conchobhar Mac Neasa had a summer palace in Carey just outside Ballycastle. His intended bride Deirdre, who ran off with the sons of Uisneach, landed at the Pans Rock on Carey/Ballycastle Strand when returning from exile in Scotland. Long before salt panning was carried out there, the

Pans Rocks had the older name of Carraig Uisnigh (rock of Uisneach's children). When they landed a trap was sprung by a warrior called Barrach who had a fort at Torr Head.

Other great characters from early Gaelic literature and folklore also make their appearance in local mythology. These include Gobán Saor and his daughter, the Grey Man and others. Perhaps most evocatively of all, the hauntingly tragic story of the Children of Lir, is intimately associated with the Sea of Moyle and the Glens coastline.

Most of the characters in these tales have deep ancestry. Some like Fionn originated from pre-Christian gods and were transmuted in literature into warriors and poets. Later still these gods often reached a final form in popular folklore as giants.

Early Gaelic literature and folklore paint a picture of a landscape where the otherworld of the fairies, the Sí, (pronounced in English as 'she') was never far from the surface. The Sí dwelt in magical mounds and hills. The location of these places in the local landscape were well known and treated with great reverence and respect. In The Glens of Antrim the Sí were often referred to as 'the good people' or 'the gentry', as a sign of deep respect and sometimes fear.



## Site & Stories

1. Dún Finn (Doonfin) - Glenshesk
2. Grianán Mór - Torr
3. Oisín's Grave (Glennann)
4. Lorg Éadain (Lurigethan) - Cushendall/Glenariff
5. Cathaoir Rí an Ulaidh - (Carey)
6. Carraig Uisnigh - Pans Rock (Carey)
7. Dún Bharraigh - Doonvarry (Torr)
8. Dún Mór - Doonmore (Rathlin)
9. Dún Taise (Glentaisie)
10. Carraig na nEalaí - Swans Rock (Murlough)
11. Carraig na Fóla and Beann Bhán (Benvan) - Murlough
12. Cill Éanáin (Glenshesk)
13. An Fear Liath - The Grey Man (Fairhead)
14. Carn an Trúir - The Cairn of Three (KnockLayde)
15. Taobh an Ratha - Tiveragh (Cushendall)
16. Brúíon- Breen - Glenshesk
17. Loch a' Mhadhma - Loughareema - (Carey)
18. Cloch Fhionn Mhic Cumhaill - Fionn Mac Cumhaill's Stone ( Fairhead/Carey)
19. Mearóga - The Meirogs (Torr)

## Fionn Mac Cumhaill and the Fionn Tradition

Fionn was a great warrior, a hunter, a poet, and a seer. Few other figures in early Gaelic literature rival him in his dominance of the Irish and Scottish imaginative landscape. He was the leader of the warrior class, the Fianna. He and his Fianna were associated with mountains and wilderness, their hunting grounds where they stalked wild boar and stags. Glens of Antrim folklore claimed Fionn as one of their own, and folk tradition records that while Fionn and his Fianna hunted all over The Glens they were particularly associated with Glenshesk, Glenariff, and Glennaan.

# 1. Dún Finn

Dún Finn (*Fionn's fort*) is located in the townland of that name in Glenshesk. Folklore identifies it as the place from where Fionn hunted the glen with his beloved hound Bran and where, to his eternal regret, killed the dog with a spear throw.

One version of the story is that Fionn, in celebration of victory over a Scottish giant, invited the Fear Liath, the fabled Grey Man of Fair Head, to a feast. In preparation for the banquet he and Bran went hunting for deer, but none were caught. Fionn in a fit of anger threw a spear at Bran killing him. Subsequently the remorseful and heartbroken Fionn composed many poems in honour of the great hound. It is said that he cried only twice in his life; once when his grandson Osgar was killed in a battle in Leinster and the other in regret at the death of Bran.

Surrounding the fort are a circle of hawthorn trees called the Fianna, who stand guard awaiting their Chieftain's return (some of the ancient trees are still atop the dún), while a short distance down-slope is an underground chamber or souterrain, which, local folklore maintains, Fionn used as a shelter.

To the south of Doonfin in Ardagh townland is a hill called Slievenamannfinn (*the hill of the women of Fionn*), where two ancient standing stones (called Mrafin - *Fionn's women*) were each said to represent female contemporaries of Fionn who were placed under a spell by the Sí (fairy folk), as punishment for hunting local animals.

## Images

1a Dún Finn

1b Slievenamannfinn

**Accessibility:** Dún Finn is on private land off the Glenshesk Road, but it can be easily seen from a layby below Glenshesk Chapel at the bottom of the Glenbank Road.

**Accessibility:** Slievenamannfinn can be easily seen from the Glentop Road, however it is a narrow, windy, single-track road full of blind corners and crests, primarily used by heavy farm machinery.



1a



1b

## 2. The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne (Toraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne)

Along with the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows, that of Diarmaid and Gráinne is another of the great tragic love stories of early Gaelic literature. The widowed Fionn Mac Cumhaill in his old age decided to seek a young wife and heard that Cormac Mac Airt, the high-king of Ireland, had a beautiful daughter named Gráinne. He successfully secured her hand and a great marriage feast was held at her father's court at Teamhair (Tara) in modern day County Meath. At the feast Gráinne spied the handsome young Diarmuid, a member of Fionn's Fianna and instantly fell in love with him. She wasted no time and implored him to elope with her immediately. Out of loyalty to Fionn, Diarmuid refused where upon the determined Gráinne put a geis (a magical prohibition or a taboo) on him that he could not defy. They fled Tara and the spurned Fionn set off in hot pursuit. Fionn's son Oisín, a close friend of Diarmuid, sent the great hound Bran with a warrior after them to persuade the couple to return, but to no avail. From that time onward, they become hunted fugitives hiding in places all over Ireland and Scotland. A tradition in Glenshesk tells that when the lovers were going through woods on the slopes of Knocklayd, they were attacked by a wild boar. After a hard contest Diarmuid killed the boar but received a terrible arm wound. Gráinne tore off piece of her dress to bind the wound and fetched water from a magical well nearby which cured him.

The landscape has many places known as Leapacha Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne (*Diarmaid and Gráinne's Beds*) where they took shelter. Most of these romantic spots are either prehistoric megalithic graves or natural rock shelters and caves. Like many love stories the end for Diarmuid and Gráinne is not a kind one. Fionn did eventually pardon the couple, but secretly was still filled with hate for Diarmaid. Sometime after their pardon the Fianna were out hunting, when during the hunt Diarmaid was once again injured by a huge boar. Despite having the magic to cure the injured warrior, Fionn would not lend his help instead watching as Diarmaid's young life ebbed away.

When travelling on the Torr Road from Ballyvoy to Cushendun, rising out of the heathland is a green fertile hill called Grianán Mór (Greenanmore - *big eminent place*). This beautiful landscape feature, an outcrop of chalk, has on its south west side a small rock shelter or platform. Local folklore tells that this location is one of Diarmaid and Gráinne's beds, where the young lovers spent the night in each other's embrace, while fleeing from Fionn. There is a belief that if a couple who are without family spend a night together on one of these beds, that the magical fertility of these places will bless them with the conception of a child.



**Accessibility:** Grianán Mór can be easily seen from the junction between the Torr Road and the Farranmacallan Road (close to the former radar station) looking to the north-west.

### Images

2 Grianán Mór and the site of Leapacha Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne. The hill before Grianán Mór is called Grianán Beag (little eminent place)

### 3. The warrior Oisín

The Glens claim the burial place of the celebrated poet and warrior, Oisín, the son of Fionn Mac Cumhaill. His name translates as 'little fawn' from the tradition that his mother was a shapeshifter who took the form of a deer. The stories of Oisín and his Fianna troop of hunters dominate the folklore of Ireland and Scotland. His son Osgar (*friend of the deer*) also figures in many stories. Gaelic Scottish literature and folklore maintains that Oisín spent much of his life there. According to a local story, while on Rathlin Island Oisín encountered a beautiful enchantress called Niamh Chinn Óir (*Niamh of the golden hair*), the daughter of the king of the mystical land of Tír na hÓige (*land of eternal youth*). In pursuit of her he left Ireland for Scotland accompanied by Diarmuid and Gráinne, sailing from Torr Head. Diarmuid and Gráinne returned to Ireland but Oisín was lured by Niamh to Loch Obha (Loch Awe, in Argyll). From here she brought Oisín to Tír na hÓige where he lived with her in happiness for a few years. Eventually he became homesick for Éirinn (*Ireland*) and his friends of the Fianna but Niamh warned him that if he returned he must never set foot on the ground. On his return he found, to his great sorrow, that his father and all the Fianna were long dead. Time in Tír Na hÓige moved slowly compared to his homeland, for what was but a few years in that magical realm was 300 years in this world. Oisín was heartbroken for the loss of the Fianna and dismayed by the condition of the men of Ireland. Gone were the great specimens of his youth and in their stead were smaller and weaker men, pale shadows of the heroes of old. One day while visiting Glennaan, he stooped from his horse to help a group of men struggling to move, which for them, was a huge boulder, but what was a mere stone to Oisín. On reaching down to toss the rock aside, the strap on the horse's saddle broke and his foot touched the ground. Instantly his strength ebbed away and he aged three hundred years. It was there that he died in the arms of the men he had stopped to help, that last breath of the glory of the Fianna. He was buried by the local people nearby at a beautiful place in Glennaan in Lubitavish townland. The monument which bears the name Oisín's Grave is a megalithic tomb classified by archaeologists as a court tomb dating to Neolithic period of the third millennium BC. This very fine megalith is composed of a forecourt defined by a stone façade behind which are two chambers.



**Accessibility:** Oisín's Grave is accessible to the public on foot via a laneway just off the Glenann Road half a mile past Glenann Primary School. The laneway isn't open to public vehicles.

#### Images

3 Oisín's Grave, Glenann

## 4. Lurigethan, Dún Chlann na Morna and Lag na Féinne

The north side of Glenariff is formed by a high ridge, the face of which is called Lorg Éadain (Lurigethan - *ridge of the face or brow*). The end of the ridge has been fortified by a sequence of banks and ditches to form an impressive promontory fort. The fort probably dates to the Late Bronze or Iron Age, being constructed sometime during the first millennium BC. Its ancient name was Dún Chlann na Morna (*Fortress of the Morna Clan*), believed to be the fortress of the warrior Goll Mac Morna who was the arch enemy of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his family. Goll lost one of his eyes in a battle in which he killed Fionn's father, hence his name Goll (*one-eyed*). On the slope just below the fort is a natural declivity named Lag na Féinne (*hollow of the Fianna*) believed to be a camping site of the warriors of the Fianna.



Images

4 Lurigethan

**Accessibility:** Lurigethan can be easily seen from Glenariff or Waterfoot village, while Dún Chlann na Morna and Lag na Féinne are on its northern face. For more information on accessing the site contact Cushendall Tourist Office on 028 2177 1180.



## 5. King Conchobhar Mac Neasa and the Ulster warriors

### The summer palace of King Conchobhar Mac Neasa

In Ballynaclogh townland, and to the right of the road going from Ballycastle to Ballyvoy opposite the Church of Ireland is a field formerly called Castle Park. Before its destruction in the 19th century there stood on top of a small hill the remains of a stone fort called Cathaoir Rí an Ulaidh (*Seat of the king of the Ulstermen*), which was believed to be the summer palace of the great King Conchobhar Mac Neasa. In local folklore, Conchobhar came north from Eamhain Mhacha, (Navan Fort near Armagh) to spend his summers here. However, it seems that his stay was not always peaceful as folklore tells a story of warfare associated with the fortress. Some 300 metres east is a small, now cut away bog where a great battle was fought between the King and a force attacking his fort. During turf digging in this bog some prehistoric weapons were found and from this it was called Móinín na Sléa (*little bog of the spear*). The discovery of the weapons may have been the genesis of the story. The discovery of prehistoric metal objects in a small bog 2 miles south in Losset townland was woven into the story where it is said the battle finally finished. The 1838 Ordnance Survey Memoirs declared that the name of this bog was Caha-na-Rio (*Cath na Ríthe - the combat of Kings*).

Local folklore also claims that a by-product of the battle in the bog of Móinín na Sléa was the discovery of peat as a fuel in ancient Ireland. During the fierce battle the clash of weapons from opposing sides, threw up lumps of turf and the discovery was made that when it dried during the ensuing summer, it could be burned.

The townland of Dún Mhac Cealtchair in Carey is thought to take its name from Cealtchair Mac Uitheachair, a great chief of the Craobh Ruadh (*Red Branch Knights*) who led a third of the men of Ulster. The link between Cealtchair and the townland was recorded in a late 16th Century version of Scéla mucce Meic Da Thó (*The Tale of Mac Da Thó's Pig*)

#### Images

5 the Standing Stone in Culfeightrin Church of Ireland, with Castle Park in the background



**Accessibility:** Cathaoir Rí an Ulaidh and Móinín na Sléa are situated on private ground adjacent to Culfeightrin Church of Ireland on the Cushendall Road between Ballycastle and Ballyvoy. However they are now no more than a rise in the ground, so it is recommended to visit the standing stones within the Church grounds. Also be aware of the traffic on the busy main road if stopping.



## 6. Clann Uisnigh or Deirdre of the Sorrows

The exile of the Sons of Uisneach is a tragic love story of exile and coming home, of treachery, death and civil war. It is about the beautiful Deirdre, who has been described as the Helen of Troy of early native literature. This tale belongs to the Ulster Cycle and the royal court of Conchobhar Mac Neasa at Eamhain Mhacha. While Deirdre was in her mother's womb, the druid Cathbad prophesied that the unborn girl would become an extraordinary beauty but would cause great strife to the Ulster warriors. In the Glens version of the tale it is another druid and warrior who made the prophesy, namely Barrach, whose fort, Dún Bharraigh, was at Torr Head. However, when Deirdre was born the undaunted King Conchobhar claimed her as his future bride and commanded that she be reared in strict isolation to ward off potential suitors. One day the handsome Naoise, while out hunting encountered Deirdre, who instantly fell in love with him. He knew she was intended for the king and initially resisted her advances, but she compelled him to yield to her.

Aware of the great offence they were causing, Deirdre, Naoise and his two brothers Ainle and Ardán, fled Eamhain Mhacha with a large band of 150 warriors and 150 women along with servants and dogs. They went to Alba (*Scotland*), beyond the reach of Conchobhar, where the King of Alba gave them protection. However, the Scottish king soon began to lust after Deirdre and tried to kill Naoise and his brothers, forcing them to seek refuge in a distant island. Conchobhar, hearing of their plight, falsely pretended that all was forgiven and that he desired their return. To lure them back Conchobhar put up four of his best warriors as sureties or guarantees of his sincerity. They were Conchobar's predecessor as the King of Ulster Fergus Mac Róig, his son Fíachu, Dubtach Dóeltenga and Cormac. Conchobhar imposed a *geis* (*taboo*) on Naoise and his brothers that they were to eat no food in Ireland until they reached Eamhain Mhacha. Cunningly Conchobhar also put a matching *geis* on Fergus and the other three protectors that they could not refuse any invitation they received to a feast. One story tells how Deirdre and the brother landed at the Pans Rock at the east end of Ballycastle strand. The older name of this prominent volcanic outcrop is Carraig Uisnigh (*Rock of the Sons of Uisneach*) to commemorate the brothers.

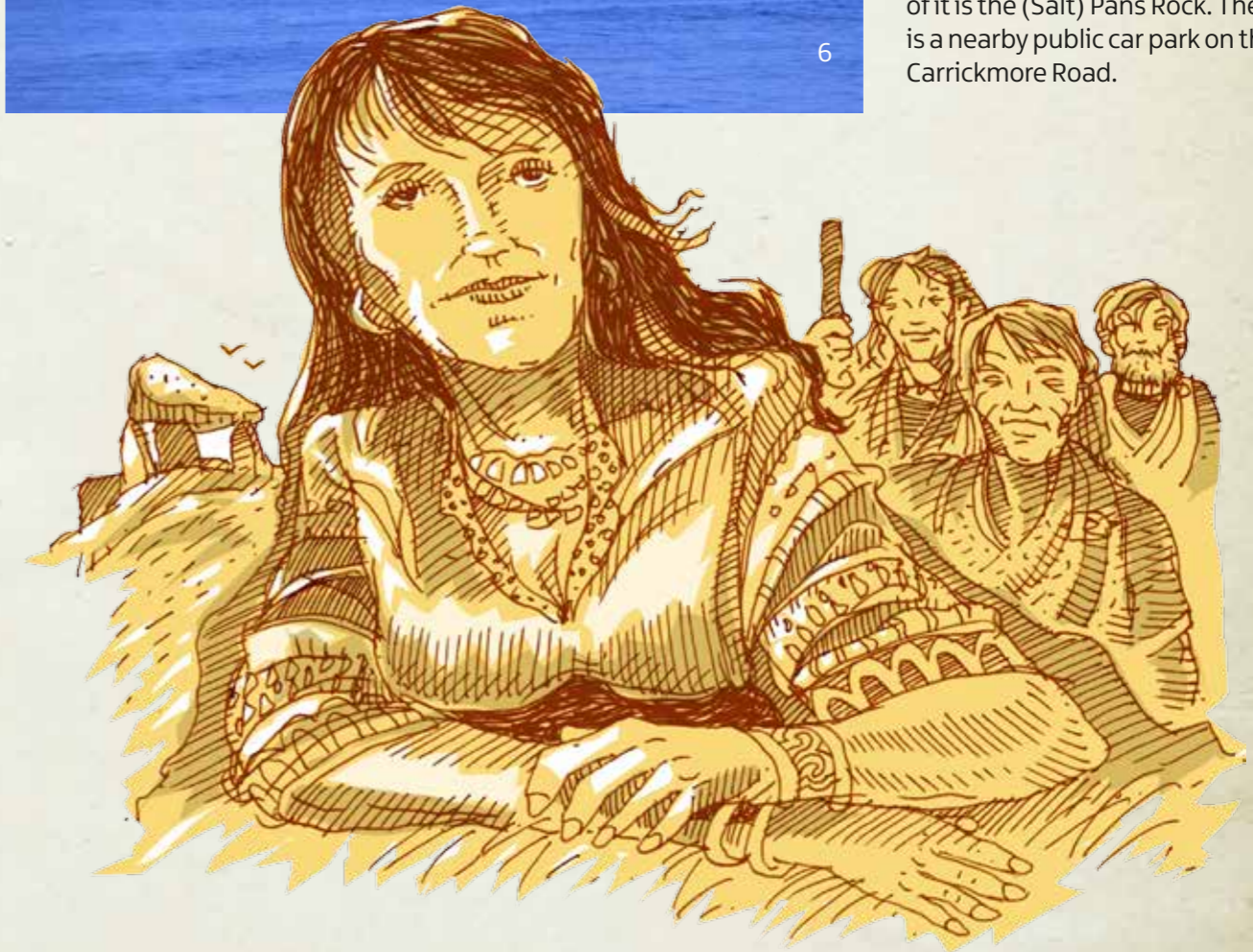
Barrach played a central role in the betrayal of the brothers. He invited Fergus, Dubtach and Cormac but not Fíachu, to a feast in his fort, which due to the *geis* they could not refuse. This left the brothers unprotected as they, because of the other *geis* performed on them, could not partake. Instead Deirdre, the three brothers and Fíachu proceeded to Eamhain Mhacha. The four men were then treacherously killed by Éoghan Mac Durthacht under the King's orders. Deirdre, broken hearted, was taken captive. Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac returned from Dún Bharraigh and were outraged that they had been deceived by Conchobhar. In their rage, the three warriors burn Eamhain Macha and a civil war ensues. Along with 3000 warriors they went into exile in the court of Ulster's great enemies, King Ailill Mac Máta and Queen Meadhbh of Connacht. Thus, the prophecy made by Cathbad, of the great calamity Deirdre would bring to the men of Ulster was fulfilled. The tragic Deirdre lived for a year in sorrow at Conchobhar's court suffering great abuse at the hands of the King. One day while being taken in Conchobhar's chariot she ended her suffering by throwing herself under its wheels. Thus, one of the great tragedies of Gaelic literature ends.



### Images

6 Carraig Uisnigh, the rock of the Sons of Uisneach

**Accessibility:** At the eastern end of the beach outside Ballycastle are several large outcrops. The first outcrop reached via the wooden bridge is Carraig Uisneach, while the southerly sloping rock east of it is the (Salt) Pans Rock. There is a nearby public car park on the Carrickmore Road.



## 7. Dún Bharraigh

Barrach's fort, on Torr Head remained impressively well preserved until 1818, when it was destroyed by the construction of the coastguard station. In its original form the stone fort or cashel consisted of a high and thick circular stone wall which crowned the top of the headland with associated outworks nearby. A short distance away there was another stone fort, now sadly also destroyed, called Tóigh na Saighdear (*Soldier's House*), which was believed to be a garrison for Barrach's soldiers. Barrach has also left his mark in the folklore landscape in at least two other places. Near Torr Head there is a now destroyed megalith called Sleacht Bharraigh Mhór (*Grave of the Great Barrach*), where he was reputed to have been buried. Near Ballycastle, to the east of Carraig Uisnigh along the Carrickmore Road there is a prominent volcanic dyke called the North Star. The original name for this dramatic geological feature was Casán Bharraigh (*Barrach's footpath*).



7a

**Accessibility:** Dún Bharraigh, known now as Torr Head, easily seen to anyone traversing the Torr Road from Ballyvoy to Cushendun (or vice-versa). The former Coastguard Station atop Dún Bharraigh is privately owned, so please respect the surroundings.



7b

Continuing east on the Carrickmore Road from Carraig Uisnigh you will see Casán Bharraigh amongst the rocks on the foreshore. Its jet black rock makes it easily distinguishable from the usual yellow-brown rocks on the shore. Bear in mind that the Carrickmore Road is also single-track, narrow and windy, so it is best to use the public car park at Tornaroan Coalyard (also called Marconi's Cottage) and walk back to see Casán Bharraigh.

### Images

7a Dún Bharraigh

7b Casán Bharraigh

## 8. Taise of Rathlin and Conghal Cláiringneach

Rathlin has a prominent part in the story *Caithréim Chonghail Chláiringhigh*. In this tale Conghal, a great warrior and later High King of Ireland, comes to the rescue of Donn, the King of Rathlin, and his beautiful daughter Taise.

Nabgodon, King of Uardha (thought to be Norway) is disconsolate after the death of his queen, so his warriors set sail to Ireland to find him a new wife and arrive at a place on Rathlin called *Inis na m-Bárc (Island of Ships)*, where they see the beautiful Taise. They ask Donn at his fort at Dún Mór, if they could have Taise's hand for their King but he refused as she was already betrothed to Conghal. The warriors return to Norway and Nabgodon assembles a fleet to invade Rathlin and carry off Taise by force. Anticipating the attack, King Donn sends word to Conghal, who arrives with his own army and after a bloody battle he kills Nabgodon.

Conghal marries Taise and tradition asserts that she is given a large territory on the mainland as her dowry, stretching as far west as Dunseverick. She builds her fort, Dún Taise at Brú Mór (big fort) townland in the glen called after her, Glentaise, on the west side of Knocklayd.



8a

**Accessibility:** Dún Mór is in the townland of Ballygill North on Rathlin Island, on the way from Church Bay to Bull Point. It is on private boggy ground, so ask on the Island about the best way to visit the site.



8b

Dún Taise can be seen towering over the Hillside Road at on private ground at Ballydurnian. It is best viewed travelling from Ballycastle to Armoyle as it will be clearly visible in front of you up to your left.

### Images

8a Dún Mór on Rathlin, the fort of King Donn

8b Dún Taise

## 9. Rathlin and Cúchulainn

Rathlin can also claim a brief link with another great Ulster champion, Cúchulainn. In the early tale *Tochmarc Emire* (*Wooing of Eimhear*), it is told that Cúchulainn while returning to Ireland from Scotland, landed in Rathlin and saw a beautiful maiden sitting alone on the shore. She told him a tragic story that her father, the King of Rathlin, was forced to give her to the Fomhóraigh (*Formorians*) as tribute and she was waiting for their boat to come and take her away. As she spoke the Fomhóraigh warriors landed to take her but Cúchulainn slew them. Her grateful father offered her in marriage to him, but alas he was already betrothed, and he made his way back to Eamhain Mhacha.



## 10. The Children of Lir (Clann Lir)

The story of the Children of Lir is one of the most tragic and poignant tales in early Irish literature. A major part of the tragedy takes place on the Sruth na Maoile (*Sea of Moyle*), the stretch of water between The Glens of Antrim and Kintyre in Scotland. Lir was a great warrior of the Tuatha Dé Danann (*People of the goddess Danú*), and the father of the sea god Manannán Mac Lir. After a series of battles with the invading Milesians from Spain, the Tuatha Dé Danann agreed to move to the Otherworld of Ireland, leaving the Milesians with the world that we see.

In the election for king, Lir was succeeded by a warrior called Bodhbh Dearg. As a gesture of peace Bodhbh Dearg gave his foster daughter Aoibh in marriage to him. Aoibh gave birth to two sets of twins during their happy marriage, a boy and a girl named Aodh and Fionnghuala, and two boys Fiachra and Conn. Sadly Aoibh died and Bodhbh Dearg gave her sister Aoife as a second wife to Lir. Aoife became a classic evil step-mother, and when unable to murder her stepchildren she cast a terrible spell, which turned them into swans. The spell compelled the children to spend 300 years on Lough Derravaragh in what is today County Westmeath, 300 years on the Sea of Moyle, and 300 years off the coast of Erris in County Mayo. The time spent in the rough waters of the Sea of Moyle was arduous and desolate for the four swans, and they often had to seek shelter from raging storms. One tradition is that Fiachra and Conn sheltered at the mouth of the Cushendall river, and some say from this event the river and village take their name (*Cois abhainn Dá Eala - river mouth of the two swans*). Another possible place of shelter from folklore is a small rock near the shore at Murlough simply called Carraig na n-Ealaí (*Swans' Rock*). When their 300 years on the Sea of Moyle expired they flew west. It was during their 300 years in Erris that Christianity reached the shores of Ireland. One day on landing on the little island of Inish Glora they encountered the Christian missionary St. Mochaomhóg, and were baptised by him. Shortly after this the spell of 900 years expired and the swans changed back to human form. All that was left was three withered old men and an old woman. The children of Lir quickly slipped away and all four were buried in one grave, together always. This tragic story is commemorated at the Ballycastle sea front with an evocative sculpture of four swans in flight.



10a

**Accessibility:** Carraig na n-Ealaí can be easily seen from the shoreline in Murlough, as it sits a few yards out to sea from the Boat Port and the Clarke Cottage. It is the small rock at sea between the Dún and Oileán Dubh.



10b

The Children of Lir sculpture sits in Ballycastle seafront opposite the Marine Hotel.

### Images

**10a** Dún, Carraig na nEalaí, Oileán Dubh

**10b** Children of Lir in Ballycastle

# 11. The Battle of Murlough

The Glens of Antrim feature in a battle of prehistory through the Battle of Murbholg (Murlough – *sea belly*), recorded in the ancient script the Annals of the Four Masters. This local battle was one of a series of four fought across the length and breadth of Ireland between the Muintir Neimhidh (*people of Neimhidh*) and the Fomhóraigh. Muintir Neimhidh were victorious but Neimheadh's son was killed by Conand of the Fomhóraigh. By folk tradition this conflict is believed to have taken place above Binn Bhán (Benven – *white cliff*) on the steep slope down to the bay. On the shoreline below is Carraig na Fóla (*the rock of the blood*), said locally to mark the spot where the two rival forces first met. It is located near the previously mentioned Carraig na n-Ealaí where the Children of Lir, who had been transformed into swans by their evil step-mother, sheltered when the sea was rough.



11a



11b

**Accessibility:** Carraig na Fóla is the rock with the cave opposite the Miners' Cabin (now a bothy) on the foreshore in Murlough. Beside it is the small Carraig na Fóla Port used by local farmers for pulling wrack brought in by the Spring tides.

## Images

11a Carraig na Fóla

11b Benven

## 12. Gobán Saor and his daughter

Gobán Saor was a celebrated craftsman in early Irish literature and folklore. In origin, he may have been a very skilled smith but in folklore he is celebrated as a great builder. Many impressive but enigmatic stone structures in the Irish landscape are attributed to him. His daughter also figures in the stories. Gobán Saor dearly wanted a son but his wife gave birth to a daughter, so she swapped the baby girl for a boy to fool him. However, when the son grew up Gobán Saor was perturbed that he did not inherit any of his skills. As a remedy Gobán decided that his son should marry a clever wife. He set stringent tests for the prospective bride. In a twist of fate the girl who passed all the tests and was chosen as the bride for his adopted son, was in fact Gobán Saor's own daughter who had been swapped as an infant. It soon became clear that the apple had not fallen far from the tree as she had inherited her real father's building skills. Folklore celebrates her work in Glenshesk. In the townland of Droim Fhinnigh (Drumeeny – *Finneach's Ridge*) on the west bank of the Glenshesk river there are ruins, a stone building which local tradition claimed was her residence. The structure appears to have been used as a religious building and probably associated with the nearby church of Cill Éanáin (*Éanáin's Church*). Éanáin is said to be a son of Muán, from whom the parish of Ramoan (*Ráth Muáin – Muán's Fort*) in Ballycastle gets its name. A short distance to the southeast was a souterrain. The Ordinance Survey have wrongly attributed the church to her father and designated it 'Gobban Saer's Castle'. The legendary Gobán Saor in his incarnation as Saint Gobban was believed to have been the founder of the church of Templastragh at Ballintoy.



12a

**Accessibility:** Clochán Ínion Ghobáin/Cill Éanáin are on private ground in the townland of Drumeeny in Glenshesk. It lies below the Drumavoley Road a mile and a half south of Ballycastle.

### Images

12a Clochán Ínion Ghobáin/Cill Éanáin in Glenshesk



## 13. An Fear Liath (The Grey Man)

One of the dramatic features of Fair Head is the Casán an Fhir Leith (*Grey Man's Path*), which descends steeply down the cliff face to the shore below. Sadly however, few stories associated with this shadowy figure of folklore have survived. In the fragments recorded he is seen in many guises, sometimes as an evil spirit, sometimes as the devil and sometimes in great contrast as a holy man. He is also spoken of as a sea creature, as a type of maritime spirit, or even an ancient sea god. Above all he seems to have belonged to the grey mists of the north coast.

One story is told about an old woman called Mary McAnulty who gathered seaweed on the shore below Fair Head. One evening upon returning from the shore up the Grey Man's Path she met a strange gentleman who walked with her to near Loch Dubh (*black lough*). He had green hair and cloven feet and told her he lived at the bottom of the little lake. He was then transformed into a horse and disappeared to the bottom of the lough from whence he came. Loch Dubh therefore may share the tradition with many other Irish loughs of having a spirit living below their waters.

Sight of the Grey Man was thought to herald some great impending calamity. An eyewitness described seeing a figure coming up the path from the sea and emerging from the fog and mists. He wore a long coat which trailed into the clouds. At the top of the path he turned to face the sea and raised his arms 'as if imploring either a blessing or a curse'. Later that night there was a tempestuous storm, with violent thunder and lightning which caused a large part of the cliff face to collapse forming the large rock boulder field on the foreshore below.

The Grey Man also makes an appearance between Cushendun and Cushendall, in the townland of Fál an Fhir Léith (*the Grey Man's Enclosure*), which takes its name from a small fort said to be the Grey Man's dwelling.



13a



13b

### Images

13a Casán an Fhir Leith

13b The Grey Man climbing Fair Head

**Accessibility:** Casán an Fhir Leith is part of the cliff top walk on Fair Head, however it is better described as a steep, narrow, slippery ravine than a path. It is not recommended to go down the path unless you know what you are doing, as the Coastguard and Mountain Rescue have to go rescue people stuck down it every summer. Park at McBrides' Farm to access the Fair Head paths.

## 14. Carn an Triúir on the summit of Knocklayd

The mound of stones called Carn an Triúir (*Cairn of the Three*) on the top of Cnoc Leithid (Knocklayd – *mountain of breadth*) has generated many traditions. One of the most interesting is the story of an encounter here between the High King Cormac Mac Airt and Fionn Mac Cuamhail's great friend Caoilte Mac Rónáin. The King and his warriors were hunting around the mountain and encountered Caoilte. Caoilte is regarded in Gaelic literature as a guardian of ancient knowledge and in this vein, Cormac asks him why the cairn on the mountain is named Carn an Triúir? Caoilte relates the following: a King of Scotland had three daughters, Muireoc, Aeife and Aillbhe. The sisters fell in love with three brothers, Ger, Glas and Gabha, members of Fionn's Fianna. They eloped to join them in Ireland and on their journey, fell asleep on top of the mountain. On awaking they are told by a messenger that the brothers have been killed in a battle in Leinster and in great grief and broken hearts they died on the spot and were buried there. A cairn of stones was raised over their graves and hence the name Carn an Triúir

Another story relates that Knocklayd was named after an unfortunate Scottish princess named Lade who fell pregnant by her lover and fled to Ireland to escape the wrath of her parents. She landed on the North Antrim shore at Layd near Cushendall (giving it its name) and travelled over to the slopes of Knocklayd but had to flee to the mountain top to escape from the wolves in the surrounding forest below. On the top of the mountain she gave birth to twins. Sadly, all three died and Carn an Triúir was raised over their bodies.

The cairn itself is a splendid archaeological example of a summit cairn dating back to the Neolithic period some 4,000 to 5,000 years ago and an evocative statement of the prehistoric imprint on the local landscape and of the ritual significance of Knocklayd.



14



**Accessibility:** The usual walking path to the top of Knocklayde is from Ballycastle Forest Car Park in Ballyveely townland on the Drumavoley Road in Glenshesk, approximately 2 miles south of Ballycastle. The climb to the summit is steep enough in places, and the ground will most likely be very wet. Carn an Triúir can't be missed on the mountain top.

### Images

14 Carn an Triúir on Knocklayd

## The Sí and the fairy landscape

In Ireland and Gaelic Scotland belief in the existence of the otherworld of the good people, fairy folk and other spirits was widespread until recent times. It is said that belief in this world receded with the electrification of the countryside in the 20th century. Every locality had a place where it was known the fairies resided. Often these were what we now recognise as archaeological monuments like raths (often called as fairy forts), prehistoric cairns, barrows, or sometimes unusual or dramatically shaped natural hills. These 'gentle' places were regarded with great reverence and any interference with them was followed by great misfortune including loss of life or limb. Happily, this widespread superstition was responsible for the survival of many monuments which otherwise would have been removed.

Dotted throughout the landscape there still stands many lone hawthorn bushes which are venerated as fairy trees. In some cases, these mark the location of the last vestiges of a largely destroyed archaeological site. There are many stories told in The Glens of the consequences of cutting down fairy trees; tools or saws snapping as they touch the branches, machinery breaking down for which no cause can be found, or bystanders being injured by flying splinters. Often it resulted in fatalities.

It was believed that Sí-dwellings were sealed off from the human world except on the occasions decided by the Sí. One exception to this, is during the ancient festival of Samhain (Halloween). Samhain was a time when there was great stirring in both the world of the afterlife and the world of the Sí. People dreaded this time of year when the fairies were emboldened. Children, especially boys, had to be protected from kidnapping by the fairies. In some localities, salt was put on the heads of children to protect them, or objects of iron like tongs were placed over babies' cribs. It is said that young boys in The Glens were dressed like little girls to fool the fairies. Fairies sometimes captured adults who were then lost for all time. One exception to this is the story of a woman in Cushendall who was captured, but managed to escape by getting word to her friends informing them of a journey the fairies were taking her on and instructing them to stroke her with the branch of a rowan tree and she would be free. This was successfully done.

It is important to stress that not all the fairy stories are of a fearful nature. Some of the fairies around Murlough were more often just mischievous. One such story is of an overconfident hunter, who after dismissing stories of fairies as superstition, goes home empty handed and demoralised after seeing the badgers and foxes spirited off by laughing fairies every time he pulled the trigger of his rifle.

The most famous of all Irish fairies is the Bean Sí (*fairy woman*). It is recorded that her wail heralded the death of anyone belonging to the old Gaelic families.

Fairies were often seen throughout The Glens. In Glendun at a spot near Tornamona Burn a little homespun hat was found which was believed to been left behind by a fairy man. It is reputed to be in the Dublin folklore museum.

In Scotland and Ulster, but especially in The Glens, there was the frequent appearance of the Gruagach. This was a hairy little fairy man who would suddenly appear out of nowhere, often helping with the harvest or other farm work. An amusing prank involving the Gruagach was carried out for some years by a few of the Carey hurlers on an elderly bachelor farmer. They got together secretly one night in the field where the farmer had cut hay earlier in the day but had not yet not yet stacked it. They worked hard for a few hours in darkness and put all the hay into stacks. The farmer rose in the morning and looked out the window and got a shock at all the work which had been carried out. His shock turned to great delight and the Gruagach was credited with a hard night's labour and no one ever told him the real story.



**Accessibility:** The usual walking path to the top of Knocklayde is from Ballycastle Forest Car Park, approximately 2 miles south of Ballycastle. The climb to the summit is steep enough in places, and the ground will most likely be very wet. Carn an Triúir can't be missed on the mountaintop, as it is marked with a large stone.

## 15. Tiveragh, the fairy hill

Taobh an Rátha (Tiveragh - *site of the fort*) is a prominent hill in Glencorp near Cushendall. This site is one of best known sí-dwelling places in Ireland and was regarded as a major fairy stronghold. Stories are legion about the sighting of the little folk on and around this dramatically shaped little hill. It is believed that the fairies of Tiveragh emerge in a procession on May Eve. The lights of their fires have been frequently seen at night on top of the hill. In the early 1900s it is reputed that a most unusual occurrence was witnessed, a hurling match on its lower slopes between two fairy teams. Among other fairy haunts in the Glens are the Fairies' Rath in Acravilla townland in Carey, and the Seánbhean (*old woman*) and Carnán na gCailleach (*cairn of the old women*) in the nearby townland of Ballyucan.

On Tiv-ra Hill near Cushendall,  
I heard a commotion behind a wall,  
I stopped and looked over, and boys-o-boys!  
Now what do you think was making the noise?

'Twas a Hurley match- and may I choke-  
It was two wee teams of the Fairy folk  
That was ripplin' and tearin' and weltn' away  
In the light of the moon as bright as day.

And their playing pitch was hardly as big  
As my Uncle Barney's potato rig;  
And me there watchin' them puck and clout-  
At the back o' the wall with my eyes stuck out.

When all at once, like the squeal of a hare,  
A wee voice shouted, "Who's that up there?"  
And a bit off a thing about nine-inch tall  
Came climbing up to the top of the wall.

And he stood there; he stood about pot-size  
With his two wee fingers up at my eyes,  
And it's God's own truth that I'm speakin' mind ye,  
"Get out o' that," says he, "or I'll blind ye!"

Aye that's just what he said, "I'll blind ye," says he  
And by Jing what he said was enough for me,  
Did I run? Aye surely; I didn't miss-  
And I haven't seen Tiv-ra from that to this.

*Written by: H. Browne*



Images

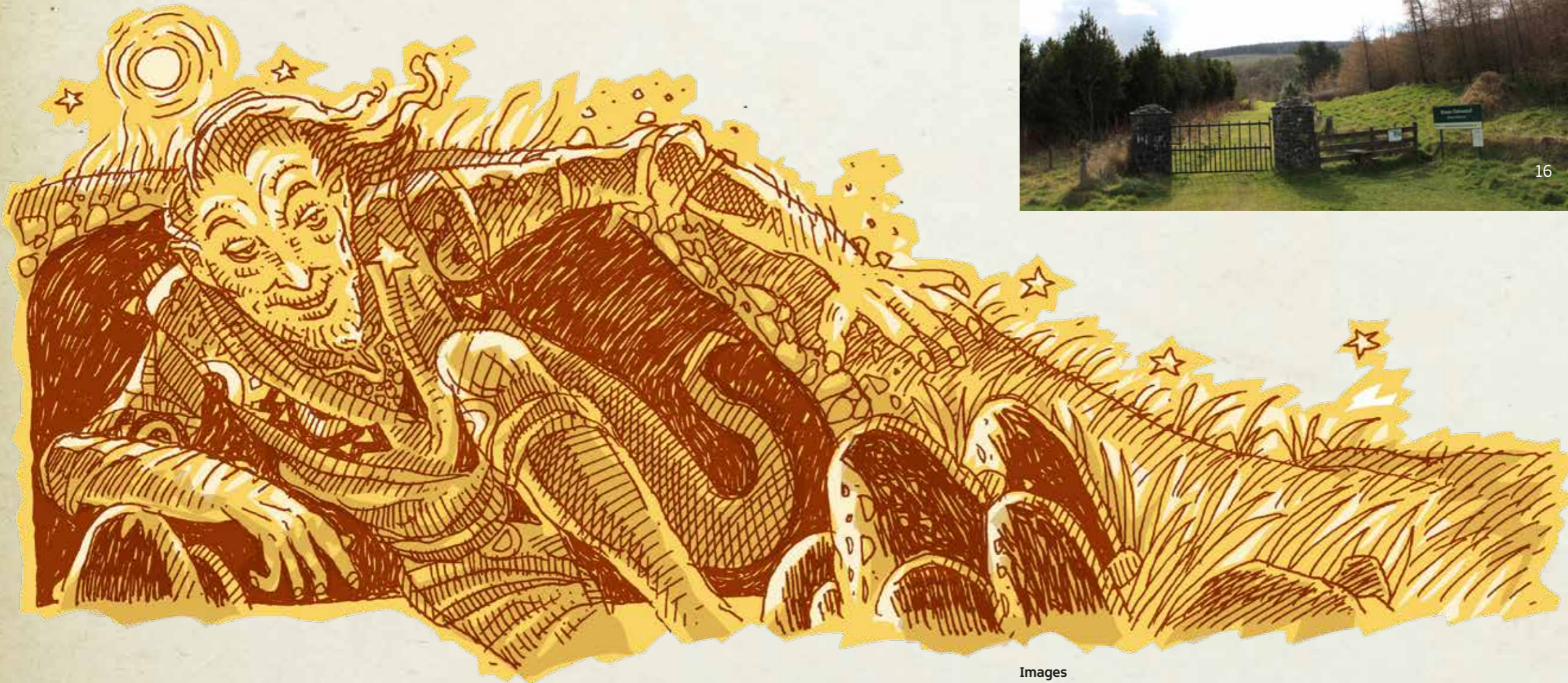
15 Taobh an Rátha

**Accessibility:** Tiveragh is half a mile north of Cushendall village in the townland of Tavnaghan, and is best seen from the Cairns Road.



## 16. Breen (Bruíon 'the fairy dwelling')

Breen townland at the top of Glenshesk derives its name from Bruíon, meaning a fairy dwelling or abode. The townland has one of the few remnant ancient oak woods in Ireland. Local tradition tells that it was out of the respect and fear of the fairies that the ancient oak woodland of Breen was saved from the industrial scale deforestation of the 17th century that reduced Ireland to one of the least wooded countries in the world.



**Accessibility:** Breen Forest can be accessed on the Glenshesk Road 2 1/2 miles east of Armoy village on the way to Ballycastle. Coming from Armoy, opposite the start of the Drumavoley Road you'll see a sign pointing left for Ballycastle Forest. This is the entrance to Breen, follow the gravelled lane up to your right.

Images

16 Entrance to Breen Forest

## 17. Loughareema, the Vanishing Lake or Fairy Lough

Loughareema, or the Vanishing Lake, whose waters appear and disappear as if by magic or enchantment is one of the most interesting and well-known sites in The Glens. The name Loughareema is a corruption of the Gaelic name Loch an Mhadhma (*lake that erupts or springs forth*). We now know that the phenomenon is caused by the underlying geology but in the past, it was a source of wonderment which led to its other name, the Fairy Lough. The lake has another claim to the supernatural. In the 19th century the road from Ballycastle to Cushendall was constructed across the lake bed. In 1889 local landlord Colonel John McNeill and his coachman were tragically drowned while attempting to cross over this part of the road when the lake waters were rising. Even to this day their ghosts are said to haunt the lough.



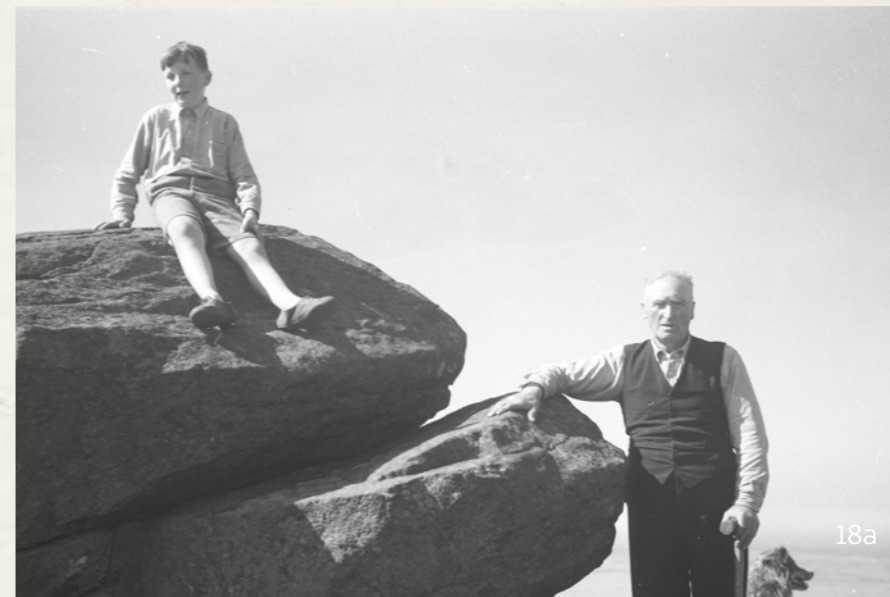
**Accessibility:** Loch an Mhadhma is part of Watertop Open Farm, and can be seen from the main coast road 4 miles south of Ballyvoy on the way to Cushendun. There is a layby on the Cushendun side of the loch that can be used for parking.

Images

17 Loch an Mhadhma

## 18. Giants in the landscape

In popular folklore giants stalked the landscape of The Glens, and tales of their doings were often recited at night around the family hearth. Evidence of their existence was seen in the numerous prehistoric megalithic tombs in the area which were believed to be giant's graves. Many prominent natural features were interpreted as work of giants and regarded as examples of their supernatural strength. Five giants were said to reside in Ballyucan above Murlough Bay and were at war with Barrach of Torr Head. This Ulster warrior in local folklore doubles as a giant. Barrach hurled many large boulders at the Ballyucan giants but only managed to throw them half way and they fell in West Torr. They are known as the Mearóga (*finger stones*). The grave of the Ballyucan giant is known as Uaigh Fhlatha Ghleis (*Green Champion's Grave*), while that of his rival in Torr is the aforementioned Sleacht Bharraigh Mhór (*Grave of the Great Barrach*).



18a

**Accessibility:** Fionn Mac Cumhaill's Stone is more commonly known as Cloch an Amhairc (lookout rock), and can be accessed via the clifftop path on Fair Head (park at McBrides' farm to access the paths).



18b

The Mearóga are in the grounds of the former Radar Station above Dún Bharraigh (Torr Head).

### Images

**18a** Fionn Mac Cumhaill's Stone, Fair Head. The late Francie Lamont (Coolanlough) with boy Darragh. © National Folklore Commission, University College Dublin

**18b** Mearóga

# “ Dig deeper, look harder and wonder more. This is another way to come home to The Glens of Antrim.

Ancient myths and legends are not just stories but are ancestral ways of knowing and understanding the landscape and are linked to religious beliefs and rituals. They imbue and enhance the landscape around us with an alternative otherworld dimension which at times and in places are almost tangible. While some stories are but fireside tales to entertain and ignite the imagination, other traditional lore is millennia old and is part of the spiritual essence of place and people. This rich imaginative heritage of The Glens adds an extra dimension to this beautiful landscape to be enjoyed by all. These tales will encourage you to delve deeper, look harder and wonder more. Our native mythology will not disappoint, it has nurtured countless generations of our ancestors. We hope you enjoy your imaginative journey in the otherworld in The Glens and whatever you do or do not believe, while here respect the belief and tradition of the other world... ó eagla na heagla (just in case).

**Go n-éirí an bóthar leat.**

**May your journey be a good one. ”**



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