

Short Story 128*: How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 26 Apr 2015

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6740>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Marc Aramini — 26 Apr 2015, 19:11

#HOW THE BISHOP SAILED TO INNISKEEN

"How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen" was first published in **Spirits of Christmas** in 1989 and is collected in **Innocents Aboard**.

##Summary:

The story begins with a verse from T.H. White's "The Godstone and the Blackymore", concerning a King who once ruled over the Inniskeas chosen on the basis of his strength, and how the only festival held at that time was the sick call of a Priest coming to visit. In many ways, the entire story is a rewriting of White's memoir and his own visit to the Inniskeas.

On the first day of winter (and almost certainly on the solstice), the unnamed first person narrator, a writer of novels concerning Xerxes and "King" Pausanius, by inference Gene Wolfe (whose *Latro* served under Xerxes and came to befriend Pausanius), is exploring the westernmost islands of Ireland.

The narrator speaks with his guide, Pat Hogan, in the unroofed remains of a chapel on the island of Inniskeen. They discuss that the empty niche above the door once held a stone, which served as Saint Cian's pillow, which was rough when he got it but smooth when he died, for he had slept on it every day for 60 years. Hogan claims that the stone had worn away to reveal an image of the Virgin Mary.

The narrator asks why he would want a stone pillow, and Hogan responds, "Not for his own sins, sure, for he'd none. But for yours, sir, an" mine. There was others, too, that come to live on this island.

Besides the hermits and eremites Hogan mentions here, fisherfolk came to the island after them, and eventually the chapel was built and the stone set above the door. To quell storms, they would anoint the stone with water, but in the case of an extreme storm, they would carry the entire stone into the water and submerge it. Hogan says the stone was sunk in the bay in his grandfather's time. "Some say it was the pirates and some the Protestants. They told that to a woman that come from Dublin, an" she believed them.

Our narrator already knows that this woman was the one who had fenced the cromlech at the summit of the island [in White's memoir, a cromlech composed of stones, shells, and the bones of men, though Wolfe does not mention this]. The narrator asks what happened to the stone, and he responds that a Bishop took it on Christmas Even in the time of his grandfather (or great-grandfather).

Hogan claims there was never a priest assigned to the chapel, just a man named O'Dea appointed to take care of the stone. When the men were away, Pat says that it was the women

who wetted the stone. He claims the stone is in Dublin, dry as a bone, since the woman dove for it and took it to the museum there, bringing it up in two pieces: "Some say she broke it under the water to make the bringing up easier."

The narrator asks if the bishop threw it into the bay [see the story of the Godstone and Father O'Reilly below in Literary and Cultural Allusions for the source of this question].

Hogan tells that the bishop who preceded the titular one always stayed close to the cathedral, and when the new bishop was appointed, he vowed, "The devil take me — if ever I say mass Christmas Eve twice in the same church", and traveled throughout the area finding the most remote and needy communities. [Hogan mentions the sorry state of the roads in those days, enough to make one, "thank the Lord for General Wade" — an early 18th century officer who was responsible for many of the roads and bridges in Scotland.]

When the Bishop hears of Inniskeen, he wants word sent to the O'Dea to have a boat waiting for him at Erris. A fight determined who would have the honor of picking up the Bishop, and Pat's great-grandfather won. The grandfather of Hogan, named Sean, is not permitted to go with his father, for there was rough weather. Sean fell asleep. He awakens to see the Bishop there, but very few of the people actually come to attend the ceremony: "But Lord, sir, there wasn't half there that should've been!"

The Bishop was friendly and blessed everyone, and, "When they sang, there was angels singing with them. — It was like cryin' for happiness, and it was forever. At the end of the mass, the bishop gave O'Dea a letter, and says that he must take the stone with him. The bishop left with Hogan's great-grandfather. His son sneaks away to watch them leave, and as the sun rises, his father, the boat, and the bishop all vanish.

The body of his great grandfather washed up, but the bishop's was never found. "He'd wanted the holy stone, do you see, to weight him. Or some say to sleep on, there on the bottom. 'Tis the same thing, maybe."

Hogan continues, "They're all dead now — But they do say the ghosts of them that missed midnight mass can be seen comin' over the bay Christmas Eve, for they was buried on the mainland, sir, most of 'em, or died at sea like the bishop."

The narrator says he does not want to come back to the island for Christmas Eve, for he must go to Bangor [probably the small city in Wales].

Hogan reveals that O'Dea would let no one see the letter until after New Year's. It said that the bishop had drowned on his way to Inniskeen, and was written by the priest at Erris two days after Christmas.

The narrator says that he had come to Inniskeen in search of the remote past: "For I am, among various other things, a writer of novels about that past. — And yet it seemed to me that night that I had not found the past, but the future; for they were all gone" In the Inniskeas our race is already extinct. We stayed a hundred centuries, and are gone. When he arrives at Bangor on December 22nd, he finds himself stranded there and decides to hire Hogan to take him to the island on Christmas Eve from Erris.

Heading there, they face a huge storm, and Hogan says that they will never actually arrive. He looks for the North Island, and glimpses something to the left which "might have been Duvillaun or Innisglora, or even Achill, or all three. Black Rock Light was visible only occasionally, which was somewhat reassuring." [See Literary and Cultural Allusions below]

The boat is lifted in a comber, and lightning reveals a sight which causes the narrator to point back towards Erris. They sit in Hogan's parlor and the narrator looks at the small crèche set with its as-yet empty manger, cracked, ethereal Mary, an devoted Joseph, [which] had more to say about Christmas than any tree I have ever seen. He does not want to try again next year, and is silent when Hogan's wife asks him what he saw out there.

It was no ghost, or at least there was nothing of sheet or skull or ectoplasm, none of the conventional claptrap of movies and Halloween. In appearance it was no more than the floating corpse of a rather small man with longish white hair. He was dressed in dark clothes, and his eyes - I saw them plainly as he rolled in the wave - were open. No doubt it was the motion of the water; but as I stared at him for half a second or so in the lightning's glare, it appeared to me that he raised his arm and gestured, invitingly and with the utmost good will, in the direction of Inniskeen.

I have never returned to Ireland, and never will. And yet I have no doubt at all that the time will soon come when I, too, shall attend his midnight mass in the ruined chapel. What will follow that service, I cannot guess.

In Christ's name, I implore mercy for my soul.

##Commentary:

Of this story, Wolfe says in his introduction to *Innocents Aboard*, "There really are islands like the one in 'How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen' off the coast of Ireland, islands with ruined monasteries on them. It's hard for us to understand how happy monks are, for the most part. Yet they are, and pity us, and pray for us." The majority of the text of Wolfe's story is actually culled from one of T.H. White's memoirs, in which White searches for rumors and facts of a stone known as the Godstone, historically from the same islands that our narrator is visiting. The strange blending of pagan powers and Catholic reverence combined in the stone are discussed at length below under Literary and Cultural Allusions, but the subtext of Wolfe's story is that of more overtly Christian salvation and damnation — Wolfe's does not seem to dwell on any pagan origin for the stone. Is the risen Bishop, floating in the stormy waters, a figure of benevolence or damnation? It seems that he perished before he ever said mass, and took the stone pillow of Saint Cian to give him rest in the sea. In many ways, this is a simple Christmas ghost story, in which a holy man dies in seeking to bring the message of Christmas salvation to remote places, and still manages to do so even long after he is gone. Those who missed his mass are definitely implied to be the worse for it. The most confusing aspect of the story is of course the letter telling of the Bishop's death at sea, written two days after Christmas, and delivered by the Bishop himself before it was ever written. Of course, as a spiritual fantasy, this is not truly a problem: the bishop and Hogan's great-grandfather perish at sea before they ever arrive, and their spirits come to ultimately take the hermit's stone after performing the Christmas Eve mass, designed to celebrate the good news of the birth of Jesus. Once again, Wolfe has set his started his story on the winter solstice, as with so many of his other "modern" but religious works.

One of the themes of the story is the desolate abandonment of the Inniskeas and the mortal nature of man, that endured for so long but is now gone. Yet something lingers after the death of man, and it is a personification of Catholic spirituality, though it disturbs the narrator greatly. In White's memoir, the woman from Dublin who fences the mounds on the North Island excavated them up, to find that they were made up of stones, shells, and the bones of men. She finds a cognate of the stone in one of the mounds rather than at sea, for in White's memoir, he speculates that the stone might have been switched before it ever fell into the priest's hands, and avoided a watery fate. [See Literary and Cultural Allusions below for a much more thorough explanation in White's own words]. In Wolfe's story, it seems that this woman from Dublin and

her undersea excavation may have disturbed the sleep of the Bishop (though there was no indication that his work ever truly ceased). Wolfe's narrative has in some way transported the mounds of shells and bones fenced off by the woman from Dublin (identified as Mlle. Henry in White's memoir) into an excavation of the sea. The bishop is still inviting people to the Christmas mass on the North Island, even though he is dead, for in Wolfe's cosmology, even if there are sinister implications for "sinners", this particular spirit has not ceased the work that it began in life.

##Literary and cultural allusions:

Much of the back story can actually be found in the rather obscure travel memoir of T.H. White, **The Godstone and the Blackymore**, including the concept of a stone which a holy hermit used as a pillow. [In the book, the long digressions on falconry and training goshawks and peregrines, one of White's amateur passions, with his mentor and patron Bunny, really resonate with some of the scenes of Musk and Blood in **The Book of the Long Sun** - especially given White's classification by Sylvia Warner as a homosexual with sado-masochistic tendencies - though other sources tend to contradict this, merely stating that at times White was confused about his sexuality. Towards the end of White's memoir, one Irishman tells the story of a man forced to stay the night in a haunted room to win the hand of the owner's daughter — which strongly echoes the story of the Banshee in **Peace**.]

In his memoir, White actually stays alone on the Inniskea Islands for some time, seeking refuge in broken houses and hunting. Alone in midwinter, he contemplates the history of the island and its blend of pagan influence with Catholic reverence, and even composes the poem below, a stanza of which begins Wolfe's story:

The Inniskeas are islands off the west coast, once inhabited by men. But ten were drowned in 1927, in what was called the Inniskea Disaster, and the land being too exhausted by a thousand years of 'sea-manure' (sea-weed) to grow potatoes any longer they had been abandoned. The little village stood quite silent beside its anchorage, the roofs fallen, the stones of the walls in the street. In twelve years it seemed to have lost all human origin. No people were expected by its broken doors. A few black bullocks sheltered there at night, the seals came into the harbour, two small black birds visited it in the mornings, two ravens cronked higher up, and all the time you heard the eternal geese, which, driven away during man's thousand years of residence, had now returned.

The people in the currach had been afraid to leave me, because it was a bad coast. There was a chance that they might not be able to come back in six weeks, as sometimes happened on the next-door neighbour, the Black Rock Light. Also they feared the dead of the disaster and perhaps a certain old god of the island, venerated until the last generation, of whom I was to hear more.

On Inniskea, long before Patrick came,
Stood the stone idol of the secret name:
The magic people made him. No surprise,
No threat, no question lit his two round eyes,
Nor had he other features. Consciousness
Was all his feeling, all his creed 'I wis.'
He watched the wild geese twenty centuries.
Inniskea is an island. Ten years gone
The human race lived here, the windows shone

With candles over the water, and men
Fished currachs, women wellwards went from ben.
There was a King to rule the island then,
Chosen for might, who had his admiral
Of all the Inniskeas. The priest's sick call
Was this cold pasture's only festival.
Mass was so far off, with such storms between,
And in the dark nights moved so much unseen
On the wild waters, that Man's beating heart
Still sometimes turned towards the old God's art.
Much magic was made with the dew. The wells
Secretly stirred with strange internal spells.
To keep the Agent off, or the Excise,
Fires were lit before the God of Eyes
And dances made around his stone, sunwise.
Their old cold Godstone they, for comfort, dressed
In one new suit each year: his Sunday best.
Then the remorseless sea, the all-beleaguring,
The crafty, long-combed sea, the stark and whistling,
The savage, ancient sea, master at waiting,
Struck once.
Two hours later the mainland
Received one man, a saucepan in his hand,
Astride an upturned currach. At the Inn
They gave him clothes without, whisky within,
Such as they could: but he nor left nor right
Altered his eyes. Only, with all his might,
This man bailed with his saucepan all that night.
In half one hour of squall, from calm to calm, the Main
Holding his ten mates drowned had fallen on sleep again.
Nobody painted the houses after.
The islanders lost all heart for laughter.
Work was a weariness, dances were done,
On the island whose pride of Man was gone.
Now I am all alone on Inniskea,
All alone with the wind and with the sea.
The corrugated iron, rusted brown,
Gives a burnt look to the abandoned town.
The roofs are ruins and the walls are down.

The Land Commission took the people ashore.
King Phillip Lavell is here no more.
They have even taken away the God Who Saw,
To stand in Dublin Museum. From ten till four
He eyes the opposite wall.
Oh God of Eyes,
Bound there in darkness and deprived of skies,
Know that your Geese are back. Know that their cries
Lag on the loud wind as, by candlelight,
At Inniskea's one fire, I, your last subject, write:
Lulled by their laughter, cradled in their night.
fire bright.

The explicit mention of the stone as a kind of panopticon that now stares at the same wall daily, imprisoned in a museum rather than working amongst the people — a people now gone or dead - must have appealed to Wolfe. While on the island, White furthermore recollects a strange encounter with a bull after his door flies open by itself:

Now, stepping out, I found myself face to face with the Devil.
He was black, motionless, a darkness silhouetted against the darkness,
considering me with ears and horns. I stopped also, and considered him. The
horns took shape against the night.
When the door had opened itself, I had stood for two heartbeats, then
firmly shut it. When the lights had dimmed, I had sat for two heart-beats,
waiting for them to burn again. To the cries of otters I had turned a
defiant ear. Now, face to face with Satan, I stood as quietly as himself,
for many heart-beats.
We watched each other with curiosity, in the calm of aidless spirits. You
can only be afraid when you are clothed with civilization, when you have
liens of succour. You can only be frightened when you have a chance of
escape. Now that I had no human ties, no roof over my head, no means of
escape, I had no fears. The Devil, with the same dignity as I felt myself,
moved off quietly in the shape of one of the few black bullocks which were
left all winter on the island. I had not frightened him he did not gallop
away with the sudden panic of half-wild cattle and he had not frightened me.

Wolfe employs some of these details, mentioning how “a few shaggy black cattle are humanity’s sole contribution; I cannot call them wild, because they do not know human beings well enough for fear. In the Inniskeas our race is already extinct. We stayed a hundred centuries, and are gone.” In Wolfe’s story, this bull is the only sign that human beings once lived there — save, of course, for the eternal presence of the bishop himself.

Besides depicting this abandoned desolation, White soon becomes obsessed with stories of The Godstone, which, in the memoir, is given new clothes every year, though White recounts many different versions of its tale:

The South Island, once growing jealous of the North's holy possession,
stole him [the Godstone] away to the South in a currach on a dark night. At
about this time a barrel of paraffin was washed ashore, and the King of the
South had it brought into the house where the Godstone stood, hidden away
behind a curtain at the hinder end. They were experimenting with the
paraffin? a novelty to them in the hope that it would be something to drink,

when a child set fire to it, and the house was consumed. One man was burned to death in the flames. But the fire halted at the curtain of the Godstone, and he was untouched. ?

The Godstone had begun to fascinate me. It had become a wild goose chase of its own. ?

[The Catholic Islanders] did not want to be investigated as idolaters by an infidel. It had happened before, in the case of some interfering Protestant missionaries from Achill, and the search had resulted in calamity. They were partly ashamed of the stone and partly anxious to defend it. My heavy mind too blunt, direct and Saxon was bejangled with ideas about paganism and phallic pillars and the claptrap of a half-baked archaeologist. Their reaction therefore, unless carefully stalked, was to maintain that the image never had been worshipped, and was in fact an ordinary Catholic statue before which Creeds, Our Fathers and Hail Marys might be recited. In this, they were not being quite frank.

The thing was called in English the Godstone. In Gaelic, so far as I could catch it by ear, it was called the Naomh?g?that not very secret name, mentioned in the verses which I had written on the island before starting the quest in earnest. Now 'naomh?g' could mean a canoe or a cot. But 'naomh' meant 'saint or holy one' and '?g' was the adjective for 'young'.

The Little Holy One. ?. They pronounced it 'nee-vogue'. Scrabbling about in a dictionary, I found that 'neamh' meant 'heaven' and 'n?am' 'brightness'; but also that 'neamh' was a negative prefix, so that 'neamh?g', unless I had gone astray in the grammar, might mean the reverse of young: the Old One. .

White spent five months investigating the stone and the stories surrounding it.

It was said in one of the country legends that St Patrick failed to bless Erris when he blessed all Ireland from the top of the Reek. ?. [People] had abandoned the two narrow, rocky islands of Inniskea, which covered a stretch of about four miles, three miles out to sea, because of the 'disaster' in 1927 and because life on them was said to be 'slavery'. All commodities, including religion and fuel, had had to be imported by boat, for there was no priest. Two other islands, Innisglora and Duvillaun (the Black Island), were also deserted. All had been inhabited by 'saints'?that is to say, by monks in the seventh century, and long before that by other races, stretching back to people perhaps like Esquimaux, who lived on shellfish. Vikings had raided their waters, as the French lobster-fishermen still did. The islands bristled with prehistory with shell-mounds and beehive huts and stone circles and the graves of saints. Within living memory they had had their own admirals and kings. It was by no means improbable that they should have had their demi-gods, particularly since the nearest priest was over the sea. If a man died on the islands, he was left untouched where he lay, even in the turf ashes for many days if the weather kept the priest from coming because to touch him before the Church did so was dangerous.

The Godstone was attributed with several properties: it could stimulate the growth of potatoes (the ostensible reason the South Island stole it from the North), making White believe it must have originated as some kind of fertility god. Some of his witnesses claimed the Catholic Father O'Reilly had thrown the Godstone into the sea, which no doubt inspired the question our narrator asks in the Wolfe story, if the bishop cast the stone into the sea. White also gathered the following facts:

(1) the Godstone was destroyed fifty years ago; (2) it had been stolen and kept by the South Island before the old man's time, but he confirmed the

story of the fire; (3) it was given three suits of clothes every year; (4)

it was in the likeness of a man; (5) it was sunk by the priest in the home harbour?Portavally on Ordnance Survey, i.e. Abhaile, the Village Haven.

He includes several descriptions of the stone, which are the source for the mention of both pirates and Protestants in Wolfe's story:

The naomh?g, he said, was a small stone, weighing two or three pounds. It was about as long as your hand. It was shaped like 'an iron' (? smoothing iron). It was of greenish stone. It had originally been 'broken by a pirate'. (An author called Knight, writing in 1834, stated that ?20,000 worth of smuggled goods were annually landed on the shores of Erris. But pirates could be anything on the peninsula?could be Vikings or Elizabethan privateers or Spaniards from the Armada or French fishermen or raiders from another island or anybody not understood. History and prehistory and the present existed in these parts on the same plane.) The pirate, who was to us a new character in the story and we were to hear more of pirates as it unfolded?broke the image very long ago, not within family memories, at the foot of the photygraph stone on the South Island. The photygraph stone, probably a grave-stone cut for himself by one of the anchorites in the seventh century, was called the Grave of Taidhg. The naomh?g was brought originally from Columkille's church on the North Island. Because it had been broken, it had to be kept together with something, and hence the 'suits of clothes'. They were of red flannel. It was stolen by the South Island from the North, but there was no fight about this. On the South Island it was lodged high in the gable of a house the one I had slept in in a sort of niche. It was taken out of the house if the weather was required to be fine. It caused potatoes to multiply. There was a prayer which could be said to it in case of sickness.

An informant claims that he was in the house which caught fire, and that the stone was not burned, also claiming that the priest who cast it into the harbor was dead within the year.

I wanted him [the stone] to be pre-Christian, druidical, limitlessly old and powerful, if possible even priapic. Of course our informants had detected this tendency of mine at once, and reacted in the opposite direction. S?an was trying to put me on a middle course.

Wolf chooses to make Sean the grandfather (or great-grandfather) of Pat Hogan, the same name as one of White's acquaintances and helpers as he explores the Inniskeas. Much as one might imagine Wolfe doing from a love of names and meanings, White also takes great pains to explore the meaning of the names in the Inniskea region:

What was Inniskea? Was it the island of St Kay or Cay or Gedh, as some said, and how was it really spelt? If it was Inis-sgeithe, could it mean the Island of Fear; or, if it was Inis-c?, could it mean the Island World, like Atlantis? And Inis-sg?the might mean the Island of Rest. ?

With the Island of Rest, I was off at full tilt. Why could it not be Tir-na-n-?g, the Island of Youth, where the mythological hero Ois?n?the Ossian of the eighteenth century was taken by the golden-haired, immortal beauty whose name was Niamh? Niamh! And the '?g' in Tir-na-n-?g!

Niamh-?ighe! Was it possible, could it be possible, let it be possible, that Inniskea was the veritable Land of Youth which coloured so much of Irish legend, and let my naomh?g be none other than the girl Niamh?ighe, Young Neave, who took Ois?n on his wanderings! So far as I could remember the wonderful rendering of this legend by W. B. Yeats, she took him to three islands. They went to the Island of Youth, where everybody danced and was eternally young; to the Island of Battle, where he fought the demon of the cave; and to the Island of Sleep or

Forgetfulness, where the giants rested.

There were exactly three main island-groups off the coast of Erris! There was Innisglora, where the soil had the property of preserving bodies from decay and what could correspond better with the legendary island of immortality, the Land of Youth? There was Duvillaun, the Black Island and surely a black island suited well with the Island of Battle? Finally there was Inniskea, which might mean the Isle of Rest and what more extraordinary than that there should be a real naomh?g on it, which pronounced itself so much like Naimh-?ighe, the conductress of Ois?n?

What were Yeats's sources? Presumably they derived through Michael Comyn from the Fenian cycle and the voyage of Bran. What was the date of the Fenian cycle, what of Bran?for St Brendan really was connected with the neighbour isle of Innisglora?and with what parts of Ireland were they hitched up?

Wolfe mentions all of these isles as well as that of Achill in his text, and one imagines that the close relationship of the names to mythic origins would also interest him. It seems that the sleep of the Bishop has been disturbed, and the ending of our story, couched in orthodox Christian imagery, is still somewhat haunting — and, for a Christmas story, a festival designed to spread the good news of Christ's coming to redeem humanity, the concluding imagery of a long dead man floating in a tempest and gesturing to an abandoned isle devoid of human life seems particularly sinister.

Despite the possibility of older and crueller pagan stories lurking behind the stone, most of White's witnesses deny that the Godstone was ever pagan at all, and despite his desires to prove it to be a remnant of an older belief system, he eventually comes to the conclusion that it is probably not pagan in origin. In at least one account of the stone, a Canon O'Reilly (a different man who came after the Father O'Reilly who cast it into the sea) is said to have described it as a terracotta statuette of the Infant Jesus which would not burn during a pirate attack, though the pirates succeeded in breaking it. When Protestants saw the reverence the stone was still held in on the island, they wrote to the paper in Dublin, which prompted a priest named "Big Father Pat O'Reilly" to come and cast the stone into the sea. In this version of the story, a pedestal which was once a part of a statuette of the Blessed Infant Jesus was recovered from the water and supposedly placed in a Dublin Museum, though the teller of that particular story could not find it there on her visit. In Wolfe's story, the woman from Dublin is the one who was rumored to have broken the stone underwater.

White's witness account from a woman identified as Mrs. Padden says of the stone:

?There was a stone in Inniskea shaped like a pillow, and the natives treasured it, as the relic of a saint who lived one time on the island, they said it was the saint's pillow worn in the middle like the shape or mark of a head. Some tourists went in to visit the island, and after they left this place they published in foreign journals that the Islanders of Inniskea were pagans and worshipped idols. The Catholic Church ordered the parish priest to go in and destroy that relic and cast it into the sea. The islanders recovered it and the priests were told of it and they went in again and found the relic or neevogue as it was called dressed in a robe of flannel made from the first fleece of the year. They took the robe off it and burned it in the house of a man named Keane, and broke up the neevogue and cast it into the depth of the sea. The curate died some time after, and the parish priest contracted a cold in his head (coming from the island) as he thought, which turned out to be a serious disease called "Polypus". He had an operation and never recovered consciousness. The man named Keane was called the King of the island, and himself and all his family died except two girls, their mother brought them into the nearest town Belmullet and

they also died.

All of the people White interviewed concurred that the stone was gray-green in color with red inside, though they do not agree on its size or weight — but the string of fatalities which follow in the wake of its disturbance is notable. White's argument with an orthodox Catholic really shows the etymological link between pagan and Catholic worship which he was trying to establish, and the slippery nature of these Gaelic names:

“Even if it was a Christian relic, don't you see that rumours about it, on the mainland, might have given rise to a garbled story about Niamh?”

Crampton does say that the enchanted land was between Inniskea and Innisglora, ?. Besides, what about the island being called Inis-sgáthe, the Island of Repose, just like in the Niamh legend??

“It could just as well be Inis-keáthe, the island of St Kay. She was a real saint.

“And besides, added Miss Cronin, “the Island of Repose could be meant in a religious sense, like a Retreat. It could be the island where hermits went to repose.”

Everything on the Inniskeas was a cairn. Everything was a monument.

The monument to death and a lost people is mirrored in the image of the floating Bishop, who while alive travelled ceaselessly on his Christmas journey to bring a message of salvation, but in death seems condemned to repeat the mass at Inniskeen over and over, with no stone to quell the storm and no pillow to rest upon. The final images in White's chapter on the Godstone really resonate with this:

Standing on top of it in the drifting sand, among the etiolated, clean relics of a monastery which had perhaps been founded by a disciple of St Columba, we gazed upon crucifixion slabs — cut thirteen or fourteen centuries ago upon the skull, rolled carelessly on the golden, salty, aseptic ground, of him who perhaps cut it on bits of bone and ashes on the white quartz stones which, except for clay pipes, are all the ornaments still afforded for the dead by western graveyards? on ruined igloos? on Columba's roofless church to the westward, hardly five paces long, with its holy-water stoup cut from the living stone, and its fitting lid from the same rock on the modern village with its skeleton roof-beams, inhabited till 1927, now abandoned like everything else. It was a soul-satisfying abandonment, not a desolate one. The peace and cleanness of desertion had been replenished, had been filled to the brim with calm. It was still the isle of hermits. ..

Looking down ruefully [at the fallen, open cairns]?rueful for this century, not for theirs on that holy, desiccated, pleasant skull, I began to understand Miss Cronin [the orthodox Catholic with whom White argued earlier]. I picked up a rib of a sheep or a saint it did not seem to matter which for a keepsake, and, on the way back to the motor-boat, extracted two sharp teeth from the entire skeleton of a basking shark. Then, with teeth and bones, which really symbolized the islet, and with a tranquillity about saints who to me no longer seemed to need to be connected with fertility gods or phallic symbols, we spluttered home, sleepy and hungry, to the real world.

A hermit of the sixth or seventh century may have dwelt in one of the igloos, using a stone for a pillow. ? His head might have worn a depression or shape in this stone, or he might have chosen it because it had such a depression, or it might have had a cross cut on it. The original pirates might have been those very Vikings who came from the north with

their long swords of iron, round about the tenth century, to shatter the early Christian monastic settlements of learned Ireland. During the sack of the Island of Retreat, fire had been used. The third of the baileys was still called the burnt one. Perhaps the fire had stopped at the hermit's pillow? Reverence being now attached to his relic, and the Scandinavians settling down with their victims, perhaps it had begun to be venerated for its properties against fire. Storm would have followed naturally, on these ferocious seas, and after that the fertility of potatoes. Food, fire and storm had always been the main measures of life for the islanders. Could a new form of pirate, centuries later, Taidhg or Se in?n, privateer or revenue man or raider from Achill, have been the one who smashed it up with a sledge-hammer, to stop its influence on the weather? Then came the thongs and flannel to keep it together: then the derogatory clergymen Otway and Nangle to mock it, and the priest O'Reilly to scotch the cause of scandal in the sea. When Canon O'Reilly caused them to fish it out again, a few yards from Carraigin dubh, the Black Rock and a black day it must have been when they were made to throw it thence he had found only pedestal. If this 'pedestal' was really the little saint's pillow, more than a millennium old, I doubt whether the well-meaning canon was really allowed to impound it or to take it to the Dublin Museum. If the islanders of the 1870s resembled their descendants in simplicity, subtlety and natural piety: and if they knew, as they did know, and as Miss Cronin knew, that their naomh?g was a genuine object of Christian veneration: and if they had already retrieved and repaired it twice or three times: then surely, if that canon did go away with a stone, it was any stone, to keep his reverence happy, and their [Gaelic: naomh?g]; itself is probably back again today?I hope so in its proper niche behind the lobster pots of Padden's cottage.

Incidentally, it has kept the cottage roofed and habitable.

In 1945, some years after the end of this story, Mlle Henry, the excavator of Inniskea, published her findings. She made no mention of the Godstone and did not seem to have heard of it, but she quoted from Adamnan's Life to the effect that a certain Cormac, grandson of Lethan and disciple of St Columba, once sailed from the region called Eirros Domno to seek a "solitude in the ocean".

Of her own finds she wrote: "Both in Houses A and C there were, lying on both sides of the ?bed-posts", at the head of the sleeping space, two pebbles of red stone about 10 ins. to 1 ft. long, egg-shaped and polished, most probably by the action of the sea. Their presence is certainly not accidental, but what was their function? Two possible explanations occur to me. They may have been primitive foot-warmers ... but ... such a sybaritical notion is hardly consistent with the atmosphere of early Irish monasteries ... Another solution lies in the suggestion that these stones were ascetics' pillows. There is for that hypothesis a very interesting analogy, that of a stone of about the same shape as the Inishkea ones, also a sea-pebble but about twice as big, which is at present preserved in the Cathedral of Iona. It was found lying on the ground within twenty yards of the large granite boulder beneath which, according to tradition, St Columba was buried. Commenting upon it, Joseph Anderson called attention to the passage of Adamnan's Life of St Columba where the death of the saint is described: "... he returns to his cell, and sits up throughout the night on his bed, where he had the bare rock for pallet, and a stone for pillow which to this day stands by his grave as his monumental pillar. The stone has a cross carved on it, and the identification seems quite plausible.

There is another stone of the same type but of unknown origin in the Cathedral of Iona; it is nearly as big as the first one and has a cross with expanded arms carved on it. St Ciaran,

apparently, had a similar stone pillow. It is mentioned in his Irish Life, but the reference to it is much more elaborate in the Latin Life:

?St Kiaranus used greatly to crucify his body, and we write here an example of this. He even had a stone pillow beneath his head, which, till today, remains in the monastery of St Kiaranus, and is revered by every one. Moreover, when he was growing weak he would not have the stone removed from him, but commanded it to be placed to his shoulders, that he should have affliction to the end for the sake of an everlasting reward in heaven.?

The conclusion of this chapter in White's memoir is almost exactly matches the final image of the Bishop in Wolfe's story, pointing at the northern island:

Bathing on summer days in the lace-work of the Atlantic rollers, frothy like milk just spurted in the pail, or stretched among the snail-shells on the sand dunes of Drumreagh, I often thought kindly of St Cormac or whoever he may have been, with his solitude and holy head-rest. His islands of repose stood lonely in the distance, their hazy silhouette topped by the sea-mark of the south one a finger pointing to the heaven he had longed for. I never went to the islands again. For all I know, his skull still rolls in the golden sand, rewarded with his own kind of peace which passed all understanding, and as contented to be pillowed there, as it was with its Godstone when living.

There is one other bizarre claim that White makes of the island chain which is worth examining, though it does not seem to be directly invoked in Wolfe's story [though he does make mention of St. Brendan in the novel

***Peace*]:**

In the sea which Erris looks across, there is to be seen an island called Inisgloria. In it, they say that grandfathers and great-grandfathers, once they are dead and buried, preserve their forms and remain quick, with growing hair and nails. No human flesh putrifies.

Well — everybody knows and always has known that corpses do not corrupt on Innisglora. Why do you suppose that St Brendan was still there and his wooden statue in the beehive cell?

##Names:

-*Pat Hogan*- Patrick means "nobleman" and is obviously popular in Ireland due to the chosen name of St. Patrick. Hogan is descended from the Gaelic word for "young" but can also imply a "young warrior."

-*Sean*- Sean can imply that "God is gracious" or "a gift from God."

-*O'Dea* - The name O'Dea is derived from the name Deaghaidh, a tenth century chieftan. At least one Bishop of Limerick was named O'Dea.

-*Saint Cian*- It seems that Wolfe chose his own saint's name here, neither using Cormac nor Kiaranus. Cian means "ancient".

##Unanswered questions

It seems that our narrator is Wolfe, here doing research for his historical novels. Why is there so little mention of the pagan religions of the island, given their importance to White's speculations? Was Wolfe's intent to present a purely Catholic world view, with the Bishop ceaselessly working to spread his Christmas message, or are the pagan implications meant to

be lurking in the background?

##Connection with other works:

Certainly the strain of the religious in Wolfe's writing is obvious and strong. Often, his contemporary religious stories are conceivably narrated by a stand in for the author who is sometimes named Gene (as in "Slow Children at Play"). One gets the sense that a man named Gene Wolfe might be the first person narrator of stories such as "A Fish Story", "The Card", the previously mentioned Arismaspian duet of which "Slow Children at Play" is the second part, and even this story. These are contemporary vignettes dealing with either a reality "next door" to ours slipping in or with overtly spiritual themes. While "Procreation" and "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" might fit in here, those stories are more playful and metafictional (especially since the Gene in "Procreation" has a sister, though she might be very far from ordinary). An overtly religious Christmas ghost story, there is still a kind of dread that is perhaps descended from the pagan, eldritch mystery surrounding the desolate and abandoned isles of Ireland, where so many mystical and religious sentiments, myths, and fairy stories were culled.

##Resources

Warner, Syliva Townsend. *T.H. White: A Biography*. New York City: Viking, 1967.

White, T.H. *The Godstone and the Blackymor*. Project Guttenberg. 26

February 2015. Web. 25 April 2015.

<http://www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/whiteth-godstoneandtheblackymor/whiteth-godstoneandtheblackymor-00-h.html#chap06>

Gerry Quinn — 26 Apr 2015, 19:53 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 26/04/2015 20:11, Marc Aramini wrote:

The narrator says he does not want to come back to the island for Christmas Eve, for he must go to Bangor [probably the small city in Wales].

There is also a Bangor in Northern Ireland which was a major centre of early Christianity.

- Gerry Quinn

marcaramini — 26 Apr 2015, 20:01 · follows Gerry Quinn

Then definitely that one. "Thanks !"

Sent via the Samsung Galaxy Alpha?, an AT&T 4G LTE smartphone

----- Original message -----

From: Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com>

Date: 04/26/2015 12:53 PM (GMT-07:00)

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Subject: Re: (urth) Short Story 128*: How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen

On 26/04/2015 20:11, Marc Aramini wrote:

The
narrator says he does not want to come back to the
island for Christmas Eve, for he must go to Bangor
[probably the small city in
Wales].

There is also a Bangor in Northern Ireland which was a major centre
of early Christianity.

- Gerry Quinn