

## The Western Land

*The Fortunate Isles — Curious myths of the Middle ages*

Sabine Baring Gould

1874

In popular opinion, this distant isle was far more beautiful than paradise, and the rumours of its splendour so excited the mind of the medivals, that the western land became the subject of satyre and jest. It was nicknamed Cocaigne or Schlaraffenland.

An English poem, “ apparently written in the latter part of the thirteenth century,” says Mr. Wright (S. Patrick’s Purgatory), “ which was printed very inaccurately by Hickes, from a manuscript which is now in the British Museum,” describes Cocaigne as far away out to sea, west of Spain. Slightly modernized it runs thus :—

“ Though Paradise be merry and bright,  
Cokaygne is of fairer sight ;  
What is there in Paradise ?  
Both grass and flower and green ris (boughs).  
Though there be joy and great dute (pleasxure),  
There is not meat, but fruit.  
There is not hall, bower, nor bench,  
But water man’s thirst to quench.”

In Paradise are only two men, Enoch and Elias ; but Cocaigne is full of happy men and women.

There is no land like it under heaven ; it is there always day and never night ; there quarrelling and strife are unknown ; there no people die ; there falls neither hail, rain, or snow, neither is thunder heard there, nor blustering winds—

“ There is a well fair abbaye  
Of white monks and of grey ;  
There both bowers and halls,  
All of pasties be the walls,  
Of flesh, and fish, and rich meat.  
The like fullest that men may eat.  
Floweren cakes be the shingles all,  
Of church, cloister, bower, and hall.  
The pins be fat pudings,  
Rich meat to princes and kings.”

The cloister is built of gems and spices, and all about are birds merrily singing, ready roasted flying into the hungry mouths ; and there are twttered larks and “ garlek gret plenté.”

A French poem on this land describes it as a true cookery-land, as its nickname implies. All down the streets go roasted geese turning themselves ; there is a river of wine ; the ladies are all fair ; every month one has new clothes. There bubbles up the fountain of perpetual youth, which will restore to bloom and vigour all who bathe in it, be they ever so old and ugly.

However much the burlesque poets of the Middle Ages might laugh at this mysterious western region of blissful souls, it held its own in the belief of the people. Curiously enough, the same confusion between Britain and Avalon, which was made by Procopius, is still made by the German peasantry, who have their Engel-land which, through a similarity of name, they identify with England, to which they say, the souls of the dead are transported. In this land, according to Teutonic mythology, which in this point resembles the Keltic, is a glass mountain. In like manner the Slaves believe in a paradise for souls wherein is a large apple-orchard, in the midst of which rises a glass rock crowned with a golden palace ; and in olden times they buried bear's claws with the dead, to assist him in climbing the crystal mountain. [1]

The mysterious Western Land, in Irish, is called Thierna na oge, or the Country of Youth ; and it is identified with a city of palaces and minsters sunk beneath the Atlantic, or at the bottom of lakes.

“ The ancient Greek authors,” says M. de Latocnaye in his pleasant tour through Ireland, quoted by Crofton Croker, “ and Plato in particular, have recorded a tradition of an ancient world. They pretend that an immense island, or rather a vast continent, has been swallowed up by the sea to the west of Europe. It is more than probable that the inhabitants of Connemara have never heard of Plato or of the Greeks ; nevertheless they have also their ancient tradition. ‘ Our land will reappear some day,’ say the old men to the young folk, as they lead them on a certain day of the year to a mountain-top, and point out over the sea to them ; the fishers also on their coasts pretend that they see towns and villages at the bottom of the water. The descriptions which they give of this imaginary country are as emphatic and exaggerated as those of the promised land : milk flows in some of the rivulets, others gush with wine ; undoubtedly there are also streams of whisky and porter. [2]

The subject of cities beneath the water, which appear above the waves at dawn on Easter-day, or which can be seen by moonlight in the still depths of a lake, is too extensive to be considered here, opening up as it does questions of mythology which, to be fully discussed, would demand a separate paper. Each myth of antiquity touches other myths with either hand, and it is difficult to isolate one for consideration without being drawn into the discussion of other articles of belief on which it leans, and to which it is united. As in the sacred symbol of the Church each member predicates that which is to follow, and is a logical consequence of that which goes before, so that the excision of one article would destroy the completeness, and dissolve the unity of the faith—so, with the sacred beliefs of antiquity, one myth is linked to another, and cannot be detached without breaking into and destroying the harmony of the charmed circle.

But to confine ourselves to two points—the phantom western land, and the passage to it.

“ Those who have read the history of the Canaries,” writes Washington Irving, “ may remember the wonders told of this enigmatical island. Occasionally it would be visible from their shores, stretching away in the clear bright west, to all appearance substantial like themselves, and still more beautiful. Expeditions would launch forth from the Canaries to explore this land of promise. For a time its sun-gilt peaks and long shadowy promontories would remain distinctly visible ; but in proportion as the voyagers approached, peak and promontory would gradually fade away, until nothing would remain but blue sky above and deep blue water below.

“ Hence this mysterious isle was stigmatized by ancient cosmographers with the name of Aprositus, or the inaccessible [3].” The natives of the Canaries relate of this island, which

they name after S. Brandan, the following tale. In the early part of the fifteenth century, there arrived in Lisbon an old bewildered pilot of the seas, who had been driven by the tempests he knew not whither, and raved about an island in the far deep, upon which he had landed, and which he had found peopled with Christians and adorned with noble cities. The inhabitants told him they were descendants of a band of Christians who fled from Spain, when that country was conquered by the Moslems. They were curious about the state of their fatherland, and grieved to hear that the Moslem still held possession of the kingdom of Granada. The old man, on his return to his ship, was caught by a tempest, whirled out once more to sea, and saw no more of the unknown island. This strange story caused no little excitement in Portugal and Spain. These well versed in history remembered to have read that in the time of the conquest of Spain, in the eighth century, seven bishops, at the head of seven bands of exiles, had fled across the great ocean to some distant shores, where they might find seven Christian cities, and enjoy their faith unmolested. The fate of these wanderers had hitherto remained a mystery, and their story had faded from memory; but the report of the old pilot revived the long-forgotten theme, and it was determined, by the pious and enthusiastic, that this island thus accidentally discovered was the identical place of refuge, whither the wandering bishops had been guided with their flock by the hand of Providence. No one, however, entered into the matter with half the zeal of Don Fernando de Alma, a young cavalier of high standing in the Portuguese court, and of the meek, sanguine, and romantic temperament. The Island of the Seven Cities became now the constant subject of his thoughts by day and of his dreams by night ; and he determined to fit out an expedition, and set sail in quest of the sainted island. Don Ioacos II. furnished him with a commission, constituting him Adalantado, or governor, of any country he might discover, with the single proviso, that he should bear all the expenses of the discovery, and pay a tenth of the profits to the crown. With two vessels he put out to sea and steered for the Canaries—in those days the regions of nautical discovery and romance, and the outposts of the known world ; for as yet Columbus had not crossed the ocean. Scarce had they reached those latitudes, than they were separated by a violent tempest. For many days the caravel of Don Fernando was driven about at the mercy of the elements, and the crew were in despair. All at once the storm subsided, the ocean sank into a calm, the clouds which had veiled the face of heaven were suddenly withdrawn, and the tempest-tossed mariners beheld a fair and mountainous island, emerging, as if by enchantment, from the murky gloom. The caravel now lay perfectly becalmed off the mouth of a river, on the banks of which, about a league off, was descried a noble city, with lofty walls and towers, and a protecting castle. After a time, a stately barge with sixteen oars was seen emerging from the river and approaching the vessel. Under a silken canopy in the stern sat a richly-clad cavalier, and over his head was a banner bearing the sacred emblem of the cross. When the barge reached the caravel, the cavalier stepped on board and, in the old Castilian language, welcomed the strangers to the Island of the Seven Cities. Don Fernando could scarce believe that this was not all a dream. He made known his name and the object of his voyage. The Grand Chamberlain—such was the title of the cavalier from the island—assured him that, as soon as his credentials were presented, he would be acknowledged as the Adalantado of the Seven Cities. In the mean time, the day was waning ; the barge was ready to convey him to land, and would assuredly bring him back. Don Fernando leaped into it after the Grand Chamberlain, and was rowed ashore. Every thing there bore the stamp of former ages, as if the world had suddenly rolled back for several centuries ; and no wonder, for the Island of the Seven Cities had been cut off from the rest of the world for several hundred years. On shore Don Fernando spent an agreeable evening at the court-house, and late at night with reluctance he reentered the barge, to return to his vessel. The barge sallied out to sea, but no caravel was to be seen. The oarsmen rowed on—their monotonous chant had a lulling effect. A drowsy influence crept over Don Fernando : objects swam before his eyes, and he lost consciousness. On his recovery, he found himself in a strange cabin, surrounded by strangers. Where was he ? On board a Portuguese ship, bound for Lisbon. How had he

come there ? He had been taken senseless from a wreck drifting about the ocean. The vessel arrived in the Tagus, and anchored before the famous capital Don Fernando sprang joyfully on shore, and hastened to his ancestral mansion. A strange porter opened the door, who knew nothing of him or of his family : no people of the name had inhabited the house for many a year. He sought the house of his betrothed, the Donna Serafina. He beheld her on the balcony ; then he raised his arms towards her with an exclamation of rapture. She cast upon him a look of indignation, and hastily retired. He rang at the door ; as it was opened by the porter, he rushed past, sought the well-known chamber, and threw himself at the feet of Serafina. She started back with affright, and took refuge in the arms of a youthful cavalier.

“ What mean you, Señor ?” cried the latter.

“ What right have you to ask that question ?” demanded Don Fernando fiercely.

“ The right of an affianced suitor !”

“ Serafina ! is this your fidelity ?” cried he in a tone of agony.

“ Serafina ! What mean you by Serafina, Señor ? This lady’s name is Maria.”

“ What !” cried Don Fernando ; “ is not this Serafina Alvarez, the original of yon portrait which smiles on me from the wall ?”

“ Holy Virgin !” cried the young lady, casting her eyes upon the portrait, “ he is talking of my great-grandmother !”

With this Portuguese legend, which has been charmingly told by Washington Irving, must be compared the adventures of Porsenna, king of Russia, in the sixth volume of Dodsley’s “ Poetical Collection.” Porsenna was carried off by Zephyr to a distant region, where the scenery was enchanting, the flowers ever in bloom, and creation put on her fairest guise. There he found a princess with whom he spent a few agreeable weeks. Being, however, anxious to return to his kingdom, he took leave of her, saying that after three months’ absence his return would be necessary.

“ ‘ Three months !’ replied the fair, “ three months alone !  
Know that three hundred years are roll’d away  
Since at my feet my lovely Phoenix lay.’

‘ Three hundred years !’ re-echoed back the prince :  
‘ A whole three hundred years completed since  
I landed here ?’ ”

On his return to Russia, he was overtaken by all-conquering time, and died. A precisely similar legend exists in Ireland.

In a similar manner Ogier-le-Danois found himself unconscious of the lapse of time in Avalon. He was one day carried by his steed Papillon along a track of light to the mystic Vale of Apples ; there he alighted beside a sparkling fountain, around which waved bushes of fragrant flowering shrubs. By the fountain stood a beautiful maiden, extending to him a golden crown wreathed with blossoms. He put it on his head, and at once forgot the past : his battles, his love of glory, Charlemagne and his preux, died from his memory like a dream. He saw only Morgana, and felt no desire other than to sigh through eternity at her feet One day

the crown slipped from Ogier's head, and fell into the fountain : immediately his memory returned, and the thoughts of his friends and relatives, and military prowess, troubled his peace of mind. He begged Morgana to permit him to return to earth. She consented, and he found that, in the few hours of rapture in Avalon, two hundred years had elapsed. Charlemagne, Roland, and Oliver were no more. Hugh Capet sat on the throne of France, the dynasty of the great Charles having come to an end. Ogier found no rest in France, and he returned to Avalon, nevermore to leave the fay Morgana.

In the Portuguese legend, the Island of the Seven Cities is unquestionably the land of departed spirits of the ancient Celtiberians ; the properties of the old belief remain : the barge to conduct the spirit to the shore, the gorgeous scenery, and the splendid castle, but the significance of the myth has been lost, and a story of a Spanish colony having taken refuge in the far western sea has been invented, to account for the Don meeting with those of his own race in the phantom isle.

That the belief in this region was very strong in Ireland, about the eleventh century, is certain from its adoption into the popular mythology of the Norsemen, under the name of Greater Ireland (Ireland hit Mikla). Till the ruin of the Norse kingdom in the east of Erin, in the great battle of Clontarf (1114), the Norsemen were brought much in contact with the Irish, and by this means adopted Irish names, such as Nial and Cormac, and Irish superstitions as well. The name they gave to the Isle of the Blessed, in the western seas, was either Great Ireland, because there the Erse tongue was spoken,—it being a colony of the souls of the Kelts,—or Hvitramanna—land, because there the inhabitants were robed in white. In the mediæval vision of Owayne the Knight, which is simply a fragment of Keltic mythology in a Christian garb, the paradise is enclosed by a fair wall, “ whyte and brygth as glass,” a reminiscence of the glass-palace in Avalon, and the inhabitants of that land—

“ Fayre vestymentes they hadde on.”

Some of these met him on his first starting on his journey, and there were fifteen in long white garments.

The following passages in the Icelandic chronicles refer to this land of mystery and romance.

“ Mar of Holum married Thorkatla, and their son was Ari ; he was storm-cast on the White-man's land, which some call Great Ireland ; this lies in the Western Sea near Vinland the Good (America) : it is called six days' sail due west from Ireland. Ari could never leave it, and there he was baptized Hrafn, who sailed to Limerick, was the first to tell of this ; he had spent a long time in Limerick in Ireland.”

This passage is from the Landnámabok, a work of the twelfth century. A turbulent Ice-lander, named Bjorn of Bradwick, vanished from his home. Years after, a native of the same island, Gudlief by name, was trading between Iceland and Dublin, when, somewhere about the year 1000, he was caught by a furious gale from the east, and driven further in the western seas than he had ever visited before. Here he came upon a land well populated, where the people spoke the Irish tongue. The crew were taken before an assembly of the natives, and would probably have been hardly dealt with, had not a tall man ridden up, surrounded by an armed band, to whom all bowed the knee. This man spoke to Gudlief in the Norse tongue, and asked him whence he came. On hearing that he was an Ice-lander, he made particular inquiries about the residents in the immediate neighbourhood of Bradwick, and gave Gudlief a ring and a sword, to be taken to friends at home. Then he bade him return at once to Ice-

land, and warn his kindred not to seek him in his new home. Gudlief put again to sea, and, arriving safely in Iceland, related his adventures, concluding that the man he had seen was Bjorn of Brad wick [4]. Another Icelander brought away two children from Vinland, and they related that near their home was a land, where people walked about in flowing white robes, singing processional psalms. Northern antiquarians attempt to identify this White-man's land with Florida, where they suppose was settled the Welsh colony led beyond the sea by Madoc in 1169. I have little doubt that it is simply an Icelandic reminiscence of the popular Irish superstition relative to the Soul Island beneath the setting sun.

“ In his crystal ark,  
Whither sail'd Merlin with his band of bards,  
Old Merlin, master of the mystic lore ;  
Belike his crystal ark, instinct with life,  
Obedient to the mighty Master, reach'd  
The Land of the Departed ; there, belike.  
They in the clime of immortality,  
Themselves immortal, drink the gales of bliss  
Which o'er Flathinnis breathe eternal spring,  
Blending whatever odours make the gale  
Of evening sweet, whatever melody  
Charms the wood traveller.”

SOUTHEY'S *Madoc*, xi

This Flath Innis, the Noble Island, is the Gaelic name for the western paradise. Macpherson, in his Introduction to the “ History of Great Britain,” relates a legend which agrees with those prevalent among other Keltic peoples. In former days there lived in Skerr a Druid of renown. He sat with his face to the west on the shore, his eye following the declining sun, and he blamed the careless billows which tumbled between him and the distant Isle of Green. One day, as he sat musing on a rock, a storm arose on the sea ; a cloud, under whose squally skirts the foaming waters tossed, rushed suddenly into the bay, and from its dark womb emerged a boat with white sails bent to the wind, and banks of gleaming oars on either side. But it was destitute of mariners, itself seeming to live and move. An unusual terror seized on the aged Druid ; he heard a voice call, “ Arise, and see the Green Isle of those who have passed away !” Then he entered the vessel. Immediately the wind shifted, the cloud enveloped him, and in the bosom of the vapour he sailed away. Seven days gleamed on him through the mist ; on the eighth, the waves rolled violently, the vessel pitched, and darkness thickened around him, when suddenly he heard a cry, “ The Isle ! the Isle !” The clouds parted before him, the waves abated, the wind died away, and the vessel rushed into dazzling light. Before his eyes lay the Isle of the Departed basking in golden light. Its hills sloped green and tufted with beauteous trees to the shore, the mountain-tops were enveloped in bright and transparent clouds, from which gushed limpid streams, which, wandering down the steep hill-sides with pleasant harp-like murmur, emptied themselves into the twinkling blue bays. The valleys were open and free to the ocean ; trees loaded with leaves, which scarcely waved to the light breeze, were scattered on the green declivities and rising ground ; all was calm and bright ; the pure sun of autumn shone from his blue sky on the fields ; he hastened not to the west for repose, nor was he seen to rise in the east, but hung as a golden lamp, ever illumining the Fortunate Isle.

There, in radiant halls, dwelt the spirits of the departed, ever blooming and beautiful, ever laughing and gay.

It is curious to note how retentive of ancient mythologic doctrines relative to death are the memories of the people. This Keltic fable of the "Land beyond the Sea," to which the souls are borne after death, has engrafted itself on popular religion in England. The following hymn is from the collection of the Sunday School Union, and is founded on this venerable Druidic tenet : —

" Shall we meet beyond the river,  
Where the surges cease to roll,  
Where in all the bright For-ever  
Sorrow ne'er shall press the soul ?

" Shall we meet in that blest harbour,  
When our stormy voyage is o'er ?  
Shall we meet and cast the anchor  
By the fair celestial shore ?

" Shall we meet with many loved ones,  
Who were torn from our embrace ?  
Shall we listen to their voices.  
And behold them face to face ?"

So is a hymn from the Countess of Huntingdon's collection : —

" I launch into the deep,  
And leave my native land,  
Where sin lulls all asleep :  
For thee I fain would all resign,  
And sail for heav'n with thee and thine.

" Come, heav'nly wind, and blow  
A prosperous gale of grace,  
To waft from all below  
To heav'n, my destined place :  
There in full sail my port I'll find.  
And leave the world and sin behind."

Or I might quote a poem on "The Last Voyage," from the *Lyra Messianica*, which one would have supposed to have been founded on the Gaelic legend told by Macpherson : —

" On ! on ! through the storm and the billow.  
By life's chequered troubles opprest,  
The rude deck my home and my pillow,  
I sail to the land of the Blest.  
The tempests of darkness confound me,  
Above me the deep waters roll,  
But the arms of sweet Pity surround me.  
And bear up my foundering soul

" With a wild and mysterious commotion  
The torrent flows, rapid and strong ;  
Towards a mournful and shadowy ocean  
My vessel bounds fiercely along.

Ye waters of gloom and of sorrow,  
How dread are your tumult and roar !  
But, on ! for the brilliant to-morrow  
That dawns upon yonder bright shore !

“ O Pilot, the great and the glorious,  
That sittest in garments so white,  
O'er death and o'er hell ' The Victorious,'  
The Way and the Truth and the Light,  
Speak, speak to the darkness appalling,  
And bid the mad turmoil to cease :  
For, hark ! the good Angels are calling  
My soul to the haven of Peace.

“ Now, ended all sighing and sadness,  
The waves of destruction all spent,  
I sing with the children of gladness  
The song of immortal content.”

It would be a study of no ordinary interest to trace modern popular Protestantism back to the mythologic systems of which it is the resultant. The early Fathers erred in regarding the ancient heresies as bastard forms of Christianity ; they were distinct religions, feebly tinged by contact with the religion of the Cross. In like manner, I am satisfied that we make a mistake in considering the Dissent of England, especially as manifested in greatest intensity in the wilds of Cornwall, Wales, and the eastern moors of Yorkshire, where the Keltic element is strong, as a form of Christianity. It is radically different : its framework and nerve is of ancient British origin, passing itself off as a spiritual Christianity.

In St. Peter's, Rome, is a statue of Jupiter, deprived of his thunderbolt, which is replaced by the emblematic keys. In like manner, much of the religion of the lower orders, which we regard as essentially Christian, is ancient heathenism, refitted with Christian symbols. The story of Jacob's stratagem is reversed : the voice is the elder brother's voice, but the hands and the raiment are those of the younger.

I have instanced the belief in angelic music calling away the soul as one heathen item in popular Protestant mythology—

“ Hark ! they whisper ! Angels say,  
' Sister spirit, come away ! ' ”

Another is embodied in the tenet that the souls of the departed become angels. In Judaic and Christian doctrine, the angel creation is distinct from that of human beings, and a Jew or a Catholic would as little dream of confusing the distinct conception of angel and soul, as of believing in metempsychosis. But not so dissenting religion. According to Druidic dogma, the souls of the dead were guardians of the living ; a belief shared with the ancient Indians, who venerated the spirits of their ancestry, the Pitris, as watching over and protecting them. Thus, the hymn “ I want to be an Angel,” so popular in dissenting schools, is founded on the venerable Aryan myth, and therefore of exceeding interest ; but Christian it is not.

Another tenet which militates against Christian doctrine, and has supplanted it in popular belief, is that of the transmigration of the soul to bliss immediately on its departure from the body.

The article *stantis vel cadentis Fidei*, of the Apostles, was the resurrection of the body. If we read the Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles with care, it is striking how great weight, we find, is laid on this doctrine. They went every where preaching—1. the rising of Christ ; 2. the consequent restoration of the bodies of Christians. “ If the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised ; and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive [5].” This was the key-note to the teaching of the Apostles ; it runs through the New Testament, and is reflected in the writings of the Fathers. It occupies its legitimate position in the Creeds, and the Church has never failed to insist upon it with no faltering voice.

But the doctrine of the soul being transported to heaven, and of its happiness being completed at death, finds no place in the Bible or the Liturgies of any branch—Greek, Roman, or Anglican—of the Church Catholic. Yet this was the tenet of our Keltic forefathers, and it has maintained itself in English Protestantism, so as to divest the doctrine of the resurrection of the body of its grasp on the popular mind. Among the Kelts, again, reception into the sacred inner circle of the illuminated was precisely analogous to the received dissenting doctrine of conversion. To it are applied, by the bards, terms such as ‘ the second birth,’ ‘ the renewal,’ which are to this day employed by Methodists to designate the mysterious process of conversion.

But to return to the subject of this article. It is a singular fact, that only the other day I heard of a man in Cleveland, being buried two years ago with a candle, a penny, and a bottle of wine in his coffin : the candle to light him along the road, the penny to pay the ferry, and the wine to nourish him, as he went to the New Jerusalem. I was told this, and this explanation was given me, by some rustics who professed to have attended the funeral This looks to me as though the shipping into the other land were not regarded merely as a figure of speech, but as a reality.

[1] Mannhardt, *Germanische Mythen*, 330 et seq.

[2] Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends of the South of Ireland*. 1862, p. 165. See also Kennedy, *Popular Fictions of the Irish Celts*. London, 1867.

[3] Washington Irving, *Chronicles of Wolfert's Roost, and other Papers*. Edinburgh, 1855, p. 31a.

[4] *Eyrbyggja Saga*, c. 64. Hafniæ, 1787, p. 329,

[5] I Cor. XV. 16, 17, 20, 21.

Curious myths of the Middle ages (1874)

Author : Sabine Baring Gould

Publisher : Knowledge Resources

Year : 1874

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : Google

Book from the collections of : Oxford University

Collection : europeanlibraries

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/curiousmythsmid00goulgoog>

Edited and uploaded to [www.augty.org](http://www.augty.org)

December 12 2011