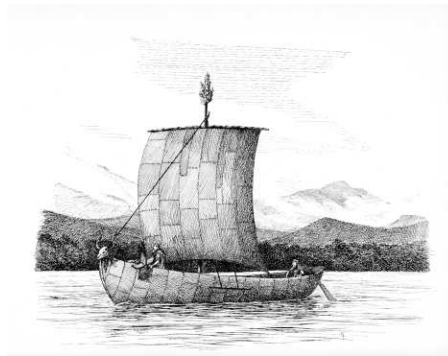


Interlude

The Voyage with Brendan



I am not an experienced sailor although I was born near the sea and spent my childhood living at the mouth of the River Mersey. The opportunity to sail with Brendan therefore would pose a challenge for me. The job of a sailor is a physical one. Most of my professional life has demanded mental rather than physical skills and, as I contemplate the journey, I anticipate plenty of sore muscles and bodily tiredness. I crossed the Atlantic in both directions by ship in the years before the 747 jumbo jet transformed the convenience and speed of trans-atlantic travel. Although the Queen Elizabeth II was such a huge ship compared to Brendan's curragh, the sea was unmerciful and I spent days below deck with sea sickness. I have no idea how I would have survived the journey with Brendan.

However, the Brendan story has served as a liberating structure for my professional inquiries, in a similar way to Torbert's experience with the *I Ching* (Torbert 1991). It has provided the imaginative space in which to play with my experience. At different places in the thesis, and particularly as I draw its threads together at the end, I allude to the story and find it a powerful metaphor of my own journey.

The decision about how to position myself in relation to the story was helped by an invitation from Geoff, my supervisor, to tell the story to my CARPP supervision group in April 2008. In the days before, I read over the story many times, trying to memorise the details. As I drove across the Cotswolds towards Bath that morning I was rehearsing the sequence of the story in my mind when I realised that I was telling it as if I was reading it from a book. While the detail may be accurate I was talking *about* Brendan and his voyage. I felt an urge to get into the boat and tell the story as a personal odyssey. My silent rehearsal changed as I imagined myself invited by Brendan to join him on his quest. A couple of hours later I invited the supervision group to listen to *my* journey with Brendan. It was a hesitant performance and I found my presence in the story coming and going but the decision had been made. This was to become my story.

In narrating the story here I intend to remain close to the accounts handed down over the centuries since Brendan lived⁸. The Annals of Inisfarren record Brendan's birth in the year 486 and he is thought to have died around 575. Many believe that he was the first to discover America and the legend was certainly an inspiration to Christopher Columbus when he set sail into the western seas almost a thousand years later. I have been helped in imagining myself as one of Brendan's crew by Tim Severin's (1978) account of his re-enactment of Brendan's Voyage. Severin's graphic descriptions of building a boat using sixth century materials and design, and facing the ferocious seas of the North Atlantic to re-trace Brendan's journey add rich detail to the legend.

Are you sitting comfortably ... ?

The storms had been swept away by a cold westerly gale blowing in from the sea. From our vantage point we could see for miles, the sea and sky joining at the thin, pencil line of the horizon. We saw Brendan in the distance as he came down from the mountain deep in thought. He had been gone for several days of solitude and

⁸ For a critical bibliography of Brendan's Voyage see Burgess and Strijbosch (2000)

prayer. Later that evening he gestured out to sea as he enthusiastically told us of his plan to go in search of the Land of Promise. He wanted us to join him.

Each of us have our own tale to tell of how we came to be with Brendan. We were just following our calling, or at least what we thought of as “our calling.” In our own way we had a deep longing to belong, to be at one with the world and its creator. It was as if the very nature of the world was an invitation for us to journey and discover it. We had joined ourselves to Brendan, ready to listen and learn from him as an older, more experienced, *perigrini*.⁹

Our first task was to build the boat that would carry us on our voyage. We searched for the best materials: timber to create the frame, skins to cover it, and the tar and grease to make it waterproof. I had never built a boat before and at first I watched in amazement at the skill of others, stripping the wicker branches and stretching them into shape, cutting the thick leather skins and piercing them ready for lashing to the frame. As I watched closely and asked questions my confidence grew. Slowly the boat took shape and I was ready to put my hand to the task, helping stitch the thick leathers together. It was hard work, punching a hole through the thick skin and running the blunt needle through it before the leather closed around the hole. I would break several needles and prick my fingers frequently until my hands were a mass of cuts and bruises.¹⁰ We had no idea how long the journey would be but Brendan told us that we should carry enough supplies for fifteen days. Finding space to store food and water, as well as replacement hides and tools in case we needed to repair the boat, was a challenge. But eventually we were ready.

⁹ Peregrini was the name given to people who sought to learn the ways of God through wandering. In this vocation I notice a connection with the punishment given to Cain for the murder of his brother Abel (Genesis 3). He was “sent out into the land of Nod” - the word Nod also meaning “wandering.” Perhaps our calling was to relive this vagabond existence.

¹⁰ Severin (1978, 45)

Just before our departure two strangers appeared at the water's edge, begging Brendan to let them join us. We were none too pleased to have to squeeze two more people onto the already crowded boat. They had done nothing to prepare for the journey and the sores on my hands and my aching muscles were screaming "that's not fair", but Brendan insisted. Fools, we called them behind their back. We'd make sure they paid their dues on the journey.

We sailed into a strong wind and for several days had no need of navigation. We began to settle into a routine, each of us taking turns at the helm or on the oars, others preparing the food or bailing water. Slowly, as we ploughed the waves, hour by hour and day by day, my actions became instructive. I felt more confident and was able to pull my weight alongside the rest of the crew. Sleeping was difficult. We had to sleep crouched where we sat trying to block out the sound of the constant creaks and groans of the wood and leather of the boat, the howl of the wind and the pelt of rain on our clothes, and the squeal of birds hovering above.

After almost two weeks at sea the wind dropped and we were forced to pull out the oars. By this time we had left the shoreline far in the distance and it soon became clear that we had no idea of the direction we should be pursuing. Our water supplies were running low and it became urgent that we find land. Brendan however, told us to pull in the oars and let the currents carry us where they willed. All we could do was bide our time waiting for the wind to turn again in our favour. There was nothing else we could do.

Days past and it seemed that we were drifting nowhere. Then, one morning, in the distance, we glimpsed an island. We put out the oars to pull ourselves closer. As we approached we could see it was surrounded by high cliffs from which poured streams of crystal clear water. But it was impossible to land and although we tried to come near the cliff so that we could hold out our cups to fill them from the spray it was too treacherous. Despite our desperate thirst it took us three days to find a tiny inlet where we were able to pull ashore. We were greeted by a dog who guided us up the slopes of the hillside to a settlement and into a great hall in which

there was a table set out with food and drink. For three days we ate and slept without seeing anyone, although each morning the food had been replenished.

We could have stayed longer but Brendan decided it was time to return to the sea and as we left the settlement he warned us not to take anything with us. We clambered into the boat with a fair wind blowing, promising us good passage on our journey. But as we pulled out of the tiny harbour the wind died down and we were unable to make progress. There were times when Brendan had an uncanny ability to know what was happening and on this occasion he instructed us to return to the shore telling us that one of us had not heeded his instructions and was carrying something they had stolen from the settlement. We would not be able to leave the island until it was returned. One of the fools who had joined us late fell at Brendan's feet and pulled from inside his tunic a silver necklace. We quickly returned to the shore. While the fool climbed the hillside to return the necklace a young boy came along the beach carrying bread and water - enough, he said, to carry us to our next destination.

We had sailed for many days and again were growing weary. In these conditions tedium became our worst enemy. Most of the time there was little idle conversation between us. We tended to keep our opinion to ourselves, reacting in our own way to events. Early one morning lying right in front of us was a small, flat and barren island. We were relieved to be able to get out of the boat. I was delighted to be able to stretch my legs and began to run backwards and forwards across the length of the island kicking my heels high in the air. Some of my colleagues lit a fire to cook a meal but as the cauldron began to boil the island started to move, at first with a small tremor and then to shake. We scrambled back onto the boat just as the island slithered off and dived into the waves, the fire still burning on its back. Brendan had a wry smile on his face. He had remained in the boat because, he told us, he knew this was not a island but the great fish of the sea, Jasconius.

Jasconius returned several times during our voyage, often accompanying us on our way. The burn on his back had healed and he seemed pleased to see us. He it was who showed us the way to a hilly, wooded island where we landed close to a stream. We followed it up to its source almost a mile from the shore where we found a tree covered with the most beautiful birds whose plumage was made of the purest white feathers. It was Easter and we prepared to celebrate when one of the birds flew from the tree and landed on Brendan's shoulder. The sound of his wings as he flew were "like the pealing of tiny bells."¹¹ It seemed that Brendan could understand their sound for he told us later that these birds were the "survivors of an ancient battle between the angels of light and dark."¹² Because they had not taken sides they had been condemned to travel in spirit form, only being permitted to take shape as white birds on holy days.

We had no idea when we left this island that we would be at sea for three months. The weather was often wild and we saw no land. One day, without warning, the wind turned against us and picked up strength. The sea became menacing, huge swells gathering around us, appearing like advancing hills of water. They say that the seventh wave is the worst, the one that does the real damage¹³. Clinging to the helm of our small open boat in the heaving waters of the storm it is inevitable that you begin to count the waves, perhaps in a way trying to anticipate the next one that threatens to overwhelm you. I could see it coming, becoming steeper and steeper as it came towards us until it could no longer support its own mass, its crest breaking just before it hit the boat with huge force, shaking everything in it. Although we'd been at sea for months and I had gained a lot of experience, every wave was different. We had to respond in the moment to whatever the sea hurled at us. Would the thread holding the leather hides hold? Could the timber skeleton remain intact as it was repeatedly lifted out of the water, suspended precariously in the air, before being released to crash back down into the hollow of the next wave?

¹¹ Matthews (1998, 11)

¹² Matthews (1998, 11)

¹³ Severin (1978, 168-169, 1)

When, eventually, we sighted land we were so exhausted we could hardly row against the unfavourable wind to reach the shore. When we did finally stagger ashore we were greeted by an elderly monk who gestured us to follow him. We entered a simple settlement where we were welcomed by eleven monks who silently washed our feet and offered us a meal of sweet roots and white bread. Nothing had felt so refreshing or tasted so good. After we had eaten the elder broke their silence briefly to explain that they had been on the island for eighty years where they lived in silence, listening only to the inner voice of God. We were taken to visit their church, a square structure with twenty four seats arranged around the walls. While we sat quietly in the space as dusk fell, suddenly a fiery arrow sped through a window, touching the lamps before it sped out again. We were told that this happened every evening. The lamps are lit and bread is always replenished in the larder. It felt like heaven after our weeks of struggle against the wind and waves and I slept soundly that night.

Several days passed before there was an improvement in the weather and Brendan decided we should continue our journey. We loaded a supply of bread and water and set sail. The sea treated us kindly and we made good progress over the next few weeks. We tended to keep ourselves to ourselves at sea, most of the time wrapped in our own thoughts. There were many small irritations that could have erupted into blazing quarrels but we held our tongues and kept our tempers. We had been sailing for several weeks when we came to a small, apparently deserted, island. Near the shore we found a well surrounded by plants and roots and a stream in which lived numerous fish. We drank from the well, some of us one cup, some two and some three and then we slept, some for one day, others for two and some for three. The water had made us drowsy and we left the island hurriedly, our supplies un-replenished. Fortunately it was raining and we were able to catch the rain on sheets of waterproof cloth and drain it into our cooking pots while we were at sea.

The wind and rain died down after three days and the currents gently carried us back in the direction from which we had come towards the island of white birds

where again we celebrated Easter. When the feast days were over we left to continue our journey, soon to find ourselves on a flat and treeless island on which there were three choirs - one of boys, one of youths and a third of elders. They would take it in turns to fill the island with their singing. We ate and slept, to the sound of music. In the morning when we awoke one of the leaders of the choirs came to meet us and offered us a basket of purple fruit and asked us to leave behind one of our number to replace a member of their choir that had recently died. Brendan turned to the one who had been the last to join our company - the one we called a "Fool" and with tears in his eyes he stepped forward to take the place.

We carried the basket of the fruit with us. Each one was the size of a large ball and full of juice that tasted like honey - enough to feed a man for 12 days. We left the island with music in our hearts and a song on our lips. We were sailing across a stretch of shallow sea and the water was so clear we could see great shoals of fish swimming around the boat gathered as if to listen to our singing.

The temperature began to drop and we were now sailing in colder waters. Slowly at first we could see in the distance what looked like a spike poking out of the sea but as we sailed towards it, it became taller and wider. It seem to reach to the sky, so high that we thought we must be coming close, although it was still three days away. Its sides were like sheer walls of clear crystal glistening in the light. It took a day to sail around one side of the great pillar. On one side we came to a hollow through which the boat could pass and, emerging on the other side we saw a chalice and paten sitting on a small ledge within reach of the boat. It was as if we had been invited to celebrate the Eucharist on this magical island.

But if this island filled us with amazement this soon turned to fear. The wind had changed direction and was driving us straight towards a dark stony island covered with slag and full of smiths' forges. For the first time on our journey Brendan wanted to avoid a landing, "This island worries me," he said, "I do not want to go on

to it nor even get near it. But the wind is driving us straight towards it.”¹⁴ As we came closer we could hear the sound of bellows and the thud of hammers on iron and anvil. One of the blacksmiths turned in our direction and, seeing us approaching, hurriedly grabbed a lump of slag to hurl in our direction. We quickly took out the oars to turn the boat around and row as hard as we could against the wind and tide as other smiths joined the first, great balls of molten slag hissing as they landed in the water around us. It was as if the sea was boiling, smoke and steam rising from its surface, accompanied by a great stench. Eventually, more than a mile from the land, we were able to slow the pace, exhausted. It felt like we had been to the edge of hell.

Three days passed before we came upon a small, circular island about two hundred yards in circumference. Its top was bare. Brendan climbed onto the island where he found a small cave with a tiny spring of fresh water at its mouth. In the cave he met an ancient monk who had served St Patrick. When Patrick died his ghost had told him to set out to sea on his own and he would be taken to the place where he belonged. This was where he arrived. Every three days an otter brought him firewood and some fish and he had lived here for thirty years. Brendan received the old man’s blessing and assurance that, in forty days, we would again reach the island of birds from which, this time, we would begin the last stage of our journey.

Just as the old monk had promised we found ourselves for the last time on the island of white birds. Again we were enthralled by their brilliant white plumage and the delicate bell-like sound of their wings when they flew. Each time we had visited one of the birds had landed on Brendan’s shoulder and it was as if they spoke to one another. After their conversation, Brendan knew what to do next, leading us back onto the sea to continue our journey. This time it was different. I not only heard the sounds the bird was making but it seemed that it was communicating with each one of us. It knew about our adventures and witnessed what we had learned. As Brendan and the bird conversed it was as if our experiences were being

¹⁴ Severin (1978, 143)

replayed in our memories and I, for one, began to make sense of it all. I felt affirmed and even the struggles and hardship of the journey seemed worthwhile. It was now time for us to move on and the white bird would be our guide: "You must prepare now for the final part of the voyage," the bird seemed to be saying, "This time I will come with you, for you will not find your way to the Land of Promise without me."¹⁵

Shortly after leaving the island a dense mist settled over the water so thick that we could barely see one another on the boat. Droplets of water clung like dew to the fibres of our woolen hats and to our beards¹⁶. We were told that this mist perpetually encircled the land we had been seeking. It felt heavy like a warm blanket that enveloped us day after day. There was little conversation between us as we paddled our way across the placid water, each of us deep in thought. My mind wandered back to the beginning of our adventure several years before and what I had learned on the way. Then, in a way that can only happen in imagination, my thoughts would leap towards what we would shortly discover, only a moment later to return to the present to witness an oar as it dropped into the water to begin its passage beneath the surface.

Suddenly, after 40 days, the mist cleared and we were bathed in a great light. We were close to land and pulled ashore on a beach of white stones. In front of us were plants and trees full of the most delicious fruits, and the air was full of the smell of pomegranates. It was a strange and beautiful land. Although the time past quickly a year went by as day by day we discovered new treasures. In that time the sun did not set and we never lacked for food or water.

One day we came to a great river, too wide to cross in safety. Here we were met by a young man clad in a garment of radiant light who knew each of us by name. He explained that we had been delayed in our journey in order to learn the ways of the

¹⁵ Matthews (1998, 25)

¹⁶ Severin (1978, 108)

ocean and the world. We could not cross the river now. This much had been shown to us so that we might know of its existence and tell everyone of its beauty. "This might be the lot of all if only they remember this place. For all have been here, and yet they have lost their way back to it,"¹⁷ he told us.

Right now we were to gather fruit and the treasures of the island and return to the place from which we had come. He walked with us as we returned to our boat, talking to us "of the ways of the world and the ways of the spirit and how these might be brought together."¹⁸ As we climbed into the boat he disappeared from view and we set sail for home.

¹⁷ Matthews (1998, 5)

¹⁸ Matthews (1998, 5)