

## The search for Brazil (2)

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“FOR the last seven years the people of Bristol have equipped two, three, four caravels to go in search of the island of Brazil and the Seven Cities.”

This is what Dom Pedro de Ayala, the Spanish ambassador in London, wrote to the king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, on 25 July 1498. The English were so desperate to find these fabled Atlantic islands, *Í Breasail* of the Irish and the Spaniards’ own Isle of the Seven Cities, that they had mounted an expedition every year for seven years!

De Ayala goes on to say that last year, 1497, they discovered some islands (these were in fact Greenland, Newfoundland and Cape Breton), and that the king of England has sent a fleet of five vessels, led by the Genoese John Cabot and provisioned for a year, to explore them. “News has come that one of these, in which sailed another Friar Buil, has made land in Ireland in a great storm with the ship badly damaged. The Genoese kept on his way.

“Having seen the course they are steering and the length of the voyage, I find that what they have discovered or are in search of is possessed by Your Highnesses because it is at the cape which fell to Your Highnesses by the convention with Portugal. It is hoped they will be back by September . . . The king has spoken to me several times on the subject. He hopes the affair may turn out profitable. I believe the distance is not 400 leagues. I told him that I believed the islands were those found by Your Highnesses, and although I gave him the main reason, he would not have it.”

In fact Cabot was in the middle of discovering what is now the United States. But for centuries to come, cartographers continued to place Brazil a hundred miles west of the Shannon, presumably because every Irish sailor they consulted assured them that it was there. Indeed, when the seventeenth century arrived, reports grew ever more circumstantial. Last time I quoted one from 1636, and in 1644 a Breton traveller called Boullaye le Gouz, approaching Ireland, saw a “phantom land”, one to three miles from his ship, with trees and cattle. He was told it was O’Brasil.

In 1684, in his “Chorographical Description of West or h-Iar Connaught”, Roderic O’Flaherty tells the curious tale of Morogh O’Ley, *Muireadhach Ó Léigh*, whom he knew personally. “The manner of it he relates, that being in Irrosainhagh, in the south side of the barony of Balynahinsy, about nine leagues from Galway by sea, in the month of Aprill, Anno Domini 1668, going alone from one village to another, in a melancholy humour, upon some discontent of his wife, he was encountered by two or three strangers, and forcibly carried by boat into O’Brazil, as such as were within it told him, and they could speak both English and Irish.

“He was ferried out hoodwink’d, in a boat, as he immagins, till he was left on the sea point by Galway; where he lay in a friend’s house for some dayes after, being very desperately ill, and knowes not how he came to Galway then. But, by that means, about seaven or eight years after, he began to practise both chirurgery and phisick, and so continues ever since to practise, tho’ he never studyed nor practised either all his life time before, as all we that knew him since he was a boy can averr.”

Folklore has added a strange twist: that O’Ley was given a book in O’Brazil, and told not to look into it for seven years. When at last he opened it he received the gift of healing. I’ve seen the book myself, for it’s now in the library of the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin, duly catalogued as “The Book of the O’Lees, also known as *Leabhar Í Bhreasail*, the Book of Hy Brazil”.

The truth of the matter, as James Hardiman pointed out long ago, is that Muireadhach came of a family of hereditary Gaelic physicians, which explains why his surname was *Ó Léigh* (“Physician’s Grandson”) and why he had the book. It was written in Irish and Latin in the fifteenth century, and has the date 1434 in it, with “P. Lee” in modern handwriting – a descendant of Muireadhach’s, no doubt. The family had land, which was lost during the upheavals of the 1640s. Muireadhach tried to get it back when his father died in 1662, but his claim was rejected, and he resigned himself to a career in medicine, which he had never taken the trouble to learn. The text of the book is arranged in weird patterns, and he may have used it as a talisman for impressing gullible patients rather than as a source of information.

The next major account of St Breasal's Isle comes from a letter allegedly written by William Hamilton in Derry, 14 March 1674, to his cousin in England, and printed in London in 1675. When he first came to live in Ireland, says Hamilton, he heard many stories about an island called O-Brazile on the coast of Ulster. He laughed at the idea, but was solemnly told by "many sober and religious persons" that on bright days, especially in summer, they could "perfectly see a very large absolute Island; but after long looking at it, it would disappear".

People would call their friends and neighbours to see it, and they would put out in boats, but when they got to the spot, there was nothing. Hamilton notes that it's in "many of our both ancient and modern maps" by the name of O-Brazile. The addressee's late cousin in Glasslough, Matthew Colquhoun, even put himself to the expense and trouble "to take out a patent for it, whensoever it should be gained", looking upon it as an enchanted kingdom or island "that, in time, might be recovered".

There had been many recent reports, says Hamilton, of its being found. One, in 1663, was from a member of the Irish parliament. Then there was a Quaker who "pretended that he had a revelation from Heaven" that he was the man to do it, and had a ship built for the purpose, "but what became of him, or his enterprize, I never heard". Now the island is discovered, however, says Hamilton, and he proceeds to a circumstantial narration about a Captain John Nisbet, formerly of Lisnaskea in Fermanagh, now of Killybegs in Donegal. "In September last he fraught out a vessel of about 70 Tuns, laden with butter, tallow and hides, for *France*, which was to bring back French wines, which vessel being returning, and near the coasts of *Ireland* (as they thought) upon the 2nd of this instant *March* 1674, after a most clear frosty night, in the morning about the time of sun rising, of a sudden, there fell a most terrible thick mist of fog, upon the sea, round about them; which continued the space of about three hours, and then cleared up again, very bright.

"But when the mist was vanisht, they found themselves upon a certain coast, close by the shore; and of a sudden also, a very high wind, driving them still nearer to the land. When the Master, and the rest with him (who were but 8 persons in all, viz. *James Mac Donnel* the Master, *Alexander Johnson* Skipper, *James Ross*, carpenter, and 5 mariners) saw themselves so near an unknown shore, and cou'd not imagine what place it should be; for though they knew most of the shores of *Ireland* and *Scotland*, yet they cou'd not possibly give any guess where they then were.

"Finding themselves therefore so near land, and some little rocks not far off them, the master gave orders to sound what water they had; and finding it not 3 fathoms, they thought it was the best course to strike sails and drop an anchor (which accordingly they did) until they might inform themselves where they were. And having cast anchor, they resolved to set 4 of their 8 men ashore, to see if they cou'd learn where they were; and how to get off: which, after they had taken down their boat, they did. The persons that were to goe, were the carpenter *James Ross*, and 3 mariners, who took with them swords and pistols.

"Presently after landing, they past through a little wood, and within less than an *English* mile, in a most pleasant green valley (wherein were many cattle, horses and sheep feeding) they saw a very strong-like castle appearing, unto which they repaired, and called, thinking to find some that might direct them where they were, and what to do, but after they had long knockt, and saw nor heard any creature (not so much as a dog) answer, they concluded it was some waste place, and therefore left it, and going further up a most pleasant green hill, they saw multitudes of black rabbets, about a mile from the castle: but when they came to the height thereof, look which way they pleased, they cou'd see neither man, woman, child nor house."

They return to the boat, and all but one of the eight-man crew come ashore to scour the island. This they do in vain. In the evening it gets cold, so they make a huge fire from a fallen oak-tree, where they sit "discoursing and taking tobacco". Suddenly they hear "a most terrible hideous noise" over almost the whole island. They flee back to the boat, but can't put out to sea, because they have only two fathoms of water and the wind is against them.

At sunrise next morning they see "a very ancient grave gentlemen" coming down to the shore with ten followers. He calls out "in the old Scotch language", asking where they have come from. This, I take it, is Scottish Gaelic, and given their surnames, I suspect the master and carpenter, at least, would have no trouble understanding him. The master answers that they are bound for Killybegs from France, but were lost in fog. The old gentleman invites

them to come ashore again, where they will be “courteously entertained, told where they were, well rewarded, and guided to their own coast”.

Six sailors go ashore, well armed. “As soon as they were landed, the old gentleman embraced them one by one; telling them, they were the most happy sight that island had seen some hundred of years, that the island was called *O-Brazile*; that his ancestors were sometimes princes of it, telling them also, that he and several other persons of quality by the malicious diabolical art of a great Negromancer, had been tyrannically shut up in the castle they knockt at yesterday, in which several of their progenitors had ended their miserable days.”

He explained that the island was made “a receptacle of furies”, useless to mortals and “invisible until now that the cursed time was expired”, that is, three or four days before. He and the others “had neither power to answer any that spoke to them, nor free themselves from imprisonment, until fire was kindled upon the island by some good Christians”. Being asked if the island was now free of enchantment for ever, he answered that it was, for all the powers of darkness fled “when they heard that hideous noise”.

The other two seamen are fetched, and the old man shows them all around the island, which is over sixty miles long and thirty broad. (These are the dimensions of Skye, or Lewis and Harris.) It’s full of “horses, cows, sheep, stags, rabbits, but no swine, and all sorts of fowls, and rich mines of silver and gold, but few people, and little or no corn, there have been cities and great towns, but all consumed”.

After being “nobly feasted and richly rewarded”, the mariners set sail and reach Killybegs “next day at night”. The minister and others are sceptical until they display “many of the pieces of gold and silver which were given them there, which were large and of a most ancient stamp; somewhat rusty, yet pure gold”. An expedition is promptly mounted: Alexander Johnson brings several gentleman to the island, where they are nobly entertained and return bearing gifts. “Since then, several Godly Ministers and others, are gone to visit and discourse them (but at the writing hereof, I heard nothing of their return).” Nevertheless it’s true, for “I had it from Captain *Nisbet* his own mouth”.

So our search for Brazil swings north. Hamilton is saying in effect: “The reason none of you can find it is that you’re looking in the wrong place.”

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