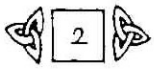


ISLAND OF GIANT ANTS

They sailed for three days and nights until they heard the crash of waves upon land. Turning to the north-east, they found an island whereon dwelled swarms of giant ants, the size of foals. These tried to devour the crew and their boat. The men fled.

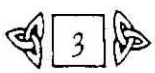
The onset of the voyage provides a period of reflection when the men are alone with the elements. Their fears are represented by the giant ants, the first of many such encounters with enlarged animals and beings. This facility of telescoping size is a common feature in shamanic travel to the Otherworld. Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is a prime example of this tendency. The initial experience of the inner traveller is often one of fearful anticipation. Travelling in the Otherworld often brings up underlying anxieties and self-doubts, especially when confronted by the unknown. All spiritual voyaging is undertaken alone at the beginning. Greater experience lends confidence, but loneliness is the initial stumbling block, bringing up the question, 'Who am I in actuality?'



ISLAND OF MANY BIRDS

They came next to an island with many terraces, on which numerous birds perched. Maelduin himself went on to the island and brought back many birds to eat.

The men begin their quest for food, which sometimes becomes an overwhelming urgency. The Otherworld provides an abundance of good things, though there are often conditions which have to be observed if the men are not to transgress the bounds of hospitality. Birds are animals of otherworldly speech, often appearing as messengers. Here they provide Maelduin with the means of staying alive in this strange environment. It is important to take appropriate nourishment so that we may better attune to and receive the gifts of the Otherworld.

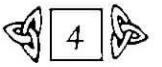


ISLAND OF THE HOUND-FOOTED HORSE

The next island they found had upon it a horse with hound's legs. With the eagerness of a dog, it leaped at them in order to eat them. When it saw them flee, the strange animal dug up earth and stones to throw at them.

This is the first of three islands – the others being 4 and 8 – where horse-like creatures behave in a bizarre way. The horse was a prime animal of reverence in Celtic tradition. Such a combination of the eagerness of

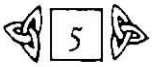
a dog, the speed of a horse and the dexterity of a human being is nightmarish. This is one of many encounters in which the men themselves are a potential part of the food-chain: a salutary experience for those who are used to being the aggressors. Our first explorations on the inner journey are often confused, rather like the jumbled dreams which succeed a busy day. With time we learn how the Otherworld fits together.



ISLAND OF INVISIBLE RIDERS

German drew the lot to explore the next island, but Diurán accompanied him. They found enormous hoof-prints, each one the size of a sail, in the sand, and the debris of great feasting. Made fearful by the size of what they saw, both men returned speedily to the ship from which they were able to view a horse-race and hear the sound of riders encouraging their steeds, but no riders could they see.

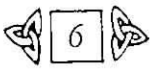
The crew receive their first intimation that they are not the only intelligent species in this realm. At this point, none of them has the sensitivity to see the otherworldly beings who live here, though they hear voices. This corresponds to the manner in which inner voyagers begin to comprehend the extent and organization of the Otherworld, a chastening experience.



ISLAND OF PLENTEOUS SALMON

A whole week of near starvation brought them to an island where a house stood on the sea-shore. One door faced the sea; it had a stone valve that opened when the plenteous salmon carried by the water struck it, allowing the fish to tumble into the middle of the house. The house was unoccupied but there was a bed set ready for Maelduin and a single bed for every three of the crew, not to mention food and drink of the richest sort. They fell upon the food and praised God.

This island and number 24 show the totemic power of the salmon, one of the most important otherworldly animals in Celtic tradition, associated with great memory, inspiration and abundance. The otherworldly hostel set ready for the crew is a reflection of the hospitality that was offered to travellers in ancient Ireland, where inns and hostels were governed by special laws. Hospitality is still a sacred duty among many indigenous peoples today. Here the men experience the abundance and open-handedness of the Otherworld, which is rich in nourishment to those seared by the hard commercialism of our own world.



ISLAND OF TREES

They came to an island of trees. Maelduin took a branch from one of them as they passed it; after three days, three apples began to grow on it which sustained them for forty days.

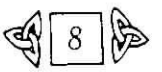
In Celtic tradition, the apple is a fruit of eternal life, in contradistinction to the fruit of the paradisal tree in Eden. To their diet of birds and fish is added fruit. The wondrous apple bough is a scion of the otherworldly tree of tradition that nourishes the spirit. (The Edenic fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil is not called an apple, though it is conventionally symbolized in this way.) The island, they discover, is like the paradisal realm of the British Otherworld, Avalon, the Island of Apples, where King Arthur is said to have been restored to health. On this island the travellers learn to let their gifts and perceptions mature, an important aspect of shamanic journeying.



ISLAND OF THE REVOLVING BEAST

The next island had a great beast upon it which moved swifter than thought. It turned itself round and round and inside out, never at rest. It no sooner achieved one form when it shapeshifted into another. It threw stones at the ship when it saw the crew escaping, one piercing Maelduin's shield and lodging in the boat's keel.

One of the main features of shamanic journeying is the manner in which the shaman can shapeshift from human to animal form. In order to become a shaman at all, the candidate must suffer a wound or illness that makes this ability possible, so it is significant that Maelduin's shield and the ship are pierced at this island. This is an important part of the voyage, for it enables changes to begin.

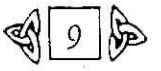


ISLAND OF CANNIBAL HORSES

They then discovered an island of great horses, the sight of which delighted the eye of any lover of horseflesh. However, each horse attacked the other, tearing and eating each other until blood poured out everywhere.

The sight of horses attacking and eating each other is probably one of the more horrific sights to any Irishman, used to the universal Celtic reverence for the horse. Even today, in Britain and Ireland, horseflesh is

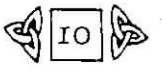
not eaten by human beings. The horse is therefore one of the prime totemic animals, whose flesh is taboo. The senseless slaughter of beautiful animals on this otherworldly island reflects the way in which humans prey on each other in the world. Only by such a shocking vision are we shown the futility of warring on each other.



ISLAND OF FIERY PIGS

They sailed away swiftly, in low spirits, not knowing where they would find land or help. They arrived at the next island in sad shape, hungry, thirsty and depressed. When Maelduin and his men landed, they found the ground hot, heated by the fiery pigs who slept in caverns underground. There were trees with golden apples upon them. Red pigs struck at the apple trees so that the fruit fell and so they could eat from dawn till sunset. During the hours of darkness, they slept. From dawn till twilight, many birds swam around the island, landing at twilight to eat the apples. The men gathered apples to sustain them and were glad of the small respite from hunger and exposure to the sea.

At their lowest ebb, the voyagers see a wondrous sight of both otherworldly birds and underworld pigs eating the apples here. The men share this food, though they cannot live in such a fiery environment. In shamanic and folk tradition, humans are often helped by animals when they are in great need. Pigs are the animals of the underworld, the place of ancestral wisdom in Celtic tradition. In British lore, Merlin learns from the pigs during his madness in the Caledonian forest. Here the voyagers learn that beings of all species and worlds can live together in harmony.



ISLAND OF THE CAT

Nearly dead from hunger and thirst, and sickened of the sea, they came to an island with a lime-whitened fortress upon it. Inside the wall of lime was one of chalk, and the tower almost touched the clouds. They entered the largest house within the enclosure and found a cat leaping from pillar to pillar. A splendid feast was laid ready and around the room were great treasures, stacked in rows. Maelduin asked the cat if the food had been left for them. He felt that it had been, so they set to. One of Maelduin's foster-brothers coveted a necklace and asked if he could take it. Maelduin forbade him, but the foster-brother disobeyed, concealing it about his person. As he reached the middle of the enclosure, the

cat leaped through him like a fiery arrow and burned him to ashes. Maelduin returned the necklace, cleansed the ashes from the floor and scattered them over the sea.

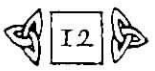
The seemingly cosy guardian of the treasures on this island turns out to be quite the reverse, and the first of the extra men is lost here. This island teaches the travellers that the laws of their own world also apply here, although much is strange to them. Inner journeying may tempt us to relinquish our common sense, but it is a good passport to travel under nevertheless. Respect and good manners are just as important in the inner realms.



ISLAND OF BLACK AND WHITE

They came to an island divided by a brass fence. On one side of the fence was a black flock of sheep; a white flock was on the other. When the shepherd who guarded them threw a black sheep into the other half it turned white; when he threw over a white sheep, it turned black. Maelduin determined to test this effect by throwing a peeled white wand into the black portion so that it turned black. They returned to the boat, still weary and hungry from this adventure.

This island represents a deeper level of experience for the voyager. It features many times in Celtic tradition and marks one of the primary borders of this world with the Otherworld. The reversal of black for white and vice versa is at first confusing, but it shows the Otherworld's ability to reveal the opposite of any situation, feeling or action. The one who governs this experience is the shepherd, a threshold guardian who often challenges those who enter the Otherworld. He shows the traveller that confidence hides a kernel of fear and that fear hides a kernel of courage.

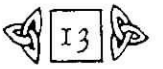


ISLAND OF GIANT CATTLE

The third day following, they found an island of pigs, captured one and ate it. German and Diurán went to explore further. They found a wide, shallow river but when German dipped his spear into it, it burst into flames as though the water had been fire. They could see giant cattle protected by a herdsman on the other side of the river. German beat the remains of his spear-shaft upon his shield to frighten the cattle. 'Why are you frightening the calves?' cried the herdsman. 'Where are the mothers of these calves?' asked German, amazed that cattle larger than those before him could exist. 'They bide over the mountain,'

replied the herdsman. German and Diurán returned to the ship and, on Maelduin's advice, the crew rowed wearily away.

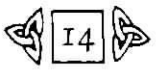
Another herdsman appears on this island, showing the voyagers that there are certain boundaries it is wise not to cross. Over-confidence and bravado are worthless in the Otherworld; only exact skills and ruthless self-knowledge will serve here.



ISLAND OF THE MILL

The next island had a mill and a surly old miller. The crew inquired about the mill and were told that it was called the mill of Innbir the Senant. Apparently, half the corn from Ireland was ground there; it came from those people who begrudged each other or acted in an ungenerous way. They saw the countless loads and the burdened people arriving and hurrying away, signing themselves against the mill.

Although the Celtic Otherworld is not a place of judgement, the deeds committed in life carry their own reward. The mill or turning tower is a common feature of Celtic stories, symbolizing a place of torment or burden where our natural dispositions are refined. Anciently, all grain was ground by the local miller, an unpopular figure who often took more than his own share. A period of service within the mill is often required, depending on the individual concerned. A heart burdened or obscured by grudges cannot range throughout the freedom of the Otherworld and must be cleansed at this point. The experience of this island resonates well with number 32. (See C. Matthews, *Arthur and the Sovereignty of Britain.*)



ISLAND OF SORROW

They came to an island of black-clad and lamenting people. One of Maelduin's foster-brothers drew the lot to go there; he too became a mourner as soon as he landed. Maelduin sent two men to rescue him, but they also fell to wailing. Then four men were sent to rescue these two; Maelduin bade them neither to look at the ground or the air, nor to breathe save through their cloaks. These four men were successful, delivering the two that had gone before them from the island. The foster-brother, however, was left behind. On their return, when asked why they wept, the two men said 'We did as we saw others do.'

This island represents the state into which inner travellers fall when they refuse the challenge of island 13: they fall into lamentation of the past, its unfairness, and the restrictions it places upon present actions.

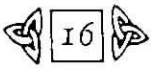
While a period of mourning or moaning is healthy, this is not a place at which to stay forever. All living beings must suffer loss and feel the pain of grief, but there are other islands to explore. The second foster-brother, however, remains on the Island of Sorrow.



ISLAND OF THE FOUR FENCES

The next island had four fences dividing it into four enclosures: a golden one with kings inside; a silver one with queens inside; a brass one with warriors inside; and a crystal one with maidens inside. A maiden brought hospitality, serving them from a little vessel. They lay drunken for three days, and woke on the third day within the body of their own boat.

Here, the crew are greeted for the first time by an otherworldly maiden. Subsequent encounters, on islands 16, 23 and 27, reinforce the importance of women in the inner world. The Otherworld is the natural domain of women, in which they act as guardians and initiators. The everyday world is the natural province of men, in which they are active and dominant. Like islands 11 and 12, this one challenges the travellers to find their correct place or vocation. The otherworldly food offered by the maiden is too strong for their present capabilities.



ISLAND OF THE CRYSTAL KEEP

They came to an island where a crystal keep and bridge were found. The bridge could not be crossed and would throw men backwards. A woman emerged from the keep with a pail in her hands and lifted a crystal slab to draw up water. German demanded a welcome for Maelduin but was rebuffed. Before the door of the keep was a brass net with musical blades which, when shaken, made the men sleep. On each of the following three days, the maiden came out again and rebuffed them. Lastly, she welcomed each by name and gave hospitality. Her great beauty impressed them. Her prophetic foreknowledge had told her of their coming. She took them into her house and served each man with food and drink. The crew tried to persuade her to sleep with Maelduin but she said she was unsure and would give her answer on the morrow. The next day, they found themselves in their ship once more.

The perilous or narrow bridge is a feature of the Otherworld. Only the truly dedicated can cross it. The boorishness of the crew in insisting that the hospitable woman sleep with Maelduin shows their unreadiness to enter the Otherworld proper. Their attempted abuse of hospitality is punished when they are sent back

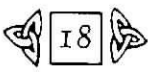
summarily to their boat. The tests of islands 10, 11, 12, 15 and 16 are those of recognizing boundaries and understanding the nature of otherworldly and earthly exchange. On this, the voyagers' second proper encounter with a being of power, they fail in courtesy and preparedness.



ISLAND OF SINGING BIRDS

Towards the north-east they heard the harmony of great chanting as though a choir were singing the Psalms. As they neared the mountainous island they saw that the song was that of birds.

Druidic tradition speaks of the 'perpetual choirs of song', the choirs of bards whose retelling of the ancient, traditional songs and stories wove together the mundane and inner worlds. This tradition was partially transmitted to the Celtic Church whose monks, like those in the rest of the Christian world, chanted the Psalter (the 150 Psalms of King David) every day. The ancient Celtic and pre-Celtic lore, however, was and continues to be maintained in the Otherworld. The harmony of this perpetual song is heard by the travellers to this island, which marks the mid-way point of their *immram*. Birds are often the bearers of otherworldly tidings. This island denotes the place where we listen to the voice of the Otherworld.

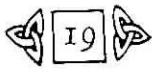


ISLAND OF THE ANCESTORS

They found a small island with many trees upon it. Here a hermit lived, clothed only in his hair. He had left Ireland on pilgrimage and had been shipwrecked. He saved himself by placing a sod of Irish turf under him from which the island was formed, which continued to grow for ever more. Each year another foot and another tree was added to it. The birds in the trees were the souls of the hermit's ancestors awaiting judgement, and they were fed by angels. A half-loaf of bread and a piece of fish was the ration of every being on that island, with water from the well to sustain them. The hermit prophesied that all but one of Maelduin's crew should reach home.

This is the first of four islands (the others being 19, 29 and 32) on which the voyagers meet a hermit. The Irish missionary Church recognized three forms of martyrdom: red martyrdom was death at the hands of an opponent of Christianity; green martyrdom meant severe penance; and white martyrdom was exile in a foreign land. The monks of the Celtic Church often achieved white martyrdom as they were responsible for the conversion and civilization of much of north-west Europe. Some, more adventurous than others, chose to live as hermits on islands off the western seaboard of Ireland. One such notable location was Skellig Rock, an

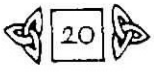
inhospitable and barren island off the coast of west Cork. The Island of the Ancestors brings knowledge of the ancestral realms. It is formed by the faith of the hermit who trusts in his native earth, and so it becomes a place where pilgrims learn about the element of earth itself. This is the first of four islands which teach the gifts and challenges of the elements, the others being 20, 21 and 22. Here Maelduin and his crew are given reassurance of their return, all save the last foster-brother who, at this point, is still with them.



ISLAND OF THE HERMIT

On the third day following, they found an island surrounded by a golden wall. A hermit lived here sustained by a well of nourishment that yielded water and whey on Fridays and Wednesdays, milk on Sundays and feast-days, and ale and wine on other feast-days. They each drank their fill and slept from afternoon to morning. After three days, the hermit asked them to leave and so they set out.

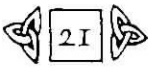
The food well which generously gives forth on this island is equatable with the well of plenty belonging to the Goddess of Sovereignty in Celtic tradition. In many stories concerning the making of kings, we read of an encounter with the Goddess wherein she offers different beverages – milk, wine, ale, whey etc. – depending on the virtue and status of the individual who meets her. Each liquid conveys a distinct gift as well as nourishment. According to the Celtic Church, each day of the Christian calendar was accorded a different status: solemn feast-days of Our Lord or Our Lady – such as Christmas or Candlemas – merited special foods; while the feast-days of saints, apostles and martyrs merited somewhat better food than the ferial or ordinary days. This island teaches the travellers about appropriate forms of nourishment and challenges our views on abundance and scarcity. The Otherworld usually provides an abundance of whatever is scarce within the mundane realm; this is one reason why so many people travel in the inner worlds. There is also a reciprocal exchange, for the mundane world has an abundance of whatever the Otherworld lacks. There is an important ecological balance to be maintained between the worlds.



ISLAND OF THE FORGE

Ahead they saw an island from where they heard the hammering of smiths. The following conversation came on the breeze: 'Are they near?' 'Who's coming?' 'Those little boys floating in their trough.' Maelduin ordered the men not to turn the boat but to start rowing backwards. With the stern foremost, they began their retreat. The voice came again, 'Have they landed yet?' 'They are neither coming nor going.' 'So what are they doing now?' 'They are further away than before.' Then the giant smith came from the forge and lobbed a lump of red-hot iron at them which made the sea boil.

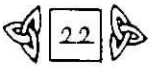
Smiths were held in awe in Celtic society, for they had the alchemical secret of crafting metals, regarded to be a magical activity. The ancient skill of smelting ores from the earth into implements is now paralleled by the chemical processing of uranium – a natural deposit in the earth – into nuclear power. The uses and abuses of such power, which may be used for peaceful as well as aggressive purposes, point to the importance of impeccable responsibility and dedication to the skills of smithcraft. This island represents the discovery that the human achievements of any one generation are puny compared with the eternal and archetypal works of the Otherworld. It also teaches the gifts and challenges of the element of fire.



SEA OF GLASS

At last, the sea turned clear as crystal, so that the sea-bottom could be seen clearly. They spent a day sailing across its magnificent surface.

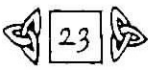
This next encounter marks a transitional stage in the voyage. Between this sea and the Pillar of the Silver Net (number 25), Maelduin and company are prepared for the last stage of the journey. The clear sea is like the clarification of the soul that is accomplished after considerable hard work and spiritual effort. In the *Voyage of St. Brendan*, St Brendan's crew are terrified of this sea because it reveals to them all the possibilities they had never thought of. The Sea of Glass represents the gifts and challenges of the element of water.



SEA OF MIST

The sea changed and became cloudy, giving the crew the sense that it would not support the ship. Beneath the waters they saw forts and countryside. A monster in a tree attempted to eat the herd of cattle a warrior was guarding. It seized an ox and devoured it while the warrior ran away. Maelduin and his crew grew terrified, for they felt that their fragile boat would pass through the waters as through mist.

The next sea becomes like mist and seems, to the travellers' perception, to be unable to support them. This sea symbolizes the difficult stage of trusting the process of the inner journey when there is no prior experience with which to equate it. The Sea of Mist represents the gifts and challenges of the element of air.

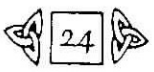


ISLAND OF RECOGNITION

They came to an island surrounded by cliffs. When the people of that place saw them coming they screamed, 'It is they,' in great panic. A large woman came forward and pelted

them with hazel-nuts, which they collected. The people seemed relieved when the crew returned to the ship, for it was apparent that there may have been a prophecy concerning travellers that might come and conquer the island.

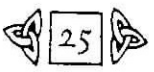
This island is strategically placed at the very gates of the deepest Otherworld enclosure. The inhabitants represent those who have undergone a certain amount of experience or who have made a partial *immram*. They feel threatened by those who aim to complete the journey. The islanders, perhaps unwittingly, gift Maelduin's company with hazel-nuts, the Celtic fruit of knowledge, thus equipping them for the next stage of the journey.



ISLAND OF THE RAINBOW STREAM

The next island had a rainbow stream which went up over the island, flowing onto the opposite strand. Within this stream swam salmon which the voyagers could catch as they ll upon the island in vast heaps. The air was thick with their odour and it was impossible to gather them all up. From vespers on Saturday to prime on Monday the stream was motionless. The crew gathered up plenteous quantities of fish and continued searching the seas.

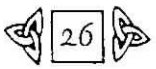
This island presents one of the most beautiful visions of the whole *immram*. Like island 5, abundant salmon can be found here; but the rainbow stream denotes an even greater wonder, for it represents the gifts of the Otherworld which flow unendingly and are always available. The juxtaposition of the salmon of this island and the hazel-nuts of the preceding one is significant, for the travellers have all the otherworldly sustenance they will need for the last stage of the voyage.



PILLAR OF THE SILVER NET

They rowed till they found a four-sided pillar of great height in the middle of the sea, with not a sod of earth around it. From its summit hung a silver net through which the boat passed. Diurán struck it with his spear. 'Do not destroy the net,' cried Maelduin, 'It is the wondrous work of great ones.' 'I take some in God's name,' said Diurán, 'that our story may be believed in Ireland. I shall offer it to the altar of Armagh if ever we return home.' Two-and-a-half ounces of that net remain in Armagh. From the height of the pillar they heard a great voice uttering, but they did not speak its language.

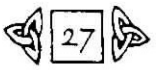
The Pillar represents a significant gateway on the *immram*, for it shows the way into the deepest realms of the Otherworld. The travellers have seen many wondrous things, but they have never been exposed to such a mighty creation as the pillar. On the shamanic journey, passing beyond the net or veil signifies a deepening of experience, a greater confidence and trust, although it does not mean that there are not still tests in store. We note that from this point onwards the terrors that surround the inmost circle of the Otherworld cease. The voice that they hear is almost certainly that of Manannan mac Lír, God of the Otherworld.



ISLAND OF THE SHUTTERED DOOR

The next island stood high above them on a pedestal. Although they rowed about it, no approach could be found, only a locked door at its foot. Above they could see a plough, but saw no-one to speak with.

Just as island 23 represented incomplete knowledge of the Otherworld, so this island represents the potentiality of knowledge accessible within it. The travellers are unable to penetrate this first island of the inmost circle which seems to act very much as a guardian of the Otherworldly gates.



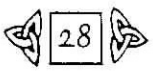
ISLAND OF WOMEN

They came to a large island with a massive interior plain covered with grass. A great fortress stood near the sea, a beautifully appointed house with soft beds. Seventeen nubile maidens were preparing a bath. As the crew landed and made their way to the fort's entrance, Maelduin remarked, 'That bath is being prepared for us.' They saw a richly dressed horsewoman coming towards them, who entered the fort. One of the maidens came and said, 'The Queen welcomes you, enter here.' Maelduin sat with the Queen and his men with each of the maidens while they feasted. The Queen bade each man take the maiden next to him and retire to the canopied cubicles where the beds waited, while Maelduin slept with the Queen. They slept till dawn. The Queen said, 'Remain with us and you will not grow older. You shall have immortality and enjoy what you enjoyed last night. Be no longer wanderers of the wave.' When Maelduin asked how she came there, she replied, 'I was married to the King of this island to whom I bore these seventeen girls. He died and left no successor, so I ruled in his place and everyday I go out to judge the

community and guide its affairs.' 'Why do you need to leave us today?' Maelduin asked. 'Because, unless I judge the people, you will not enjoy the delights you had last night.'

They stayed for the three winter months and it seemed more like three years. The crew grew restless and wanted to return home. 'We shall never find the like of this at home,' said Maelduin. 'Stay here and enjoy your woman, then, but we are going home,' they said. Maelduin reluctantly accompanied them but, as they left, the Queen threw a sticky clew of thread at Maelduin and drew him back. They stayed thrice three months and resolved once more to leave. 'If the thread strikes Maelduin, we will be brought back to this place,' they said. 'Then let some other catch it,' said Maelduin. Again they embarked and the Queen threw her sticky thread. One of the crew caught the ball and his hand was severed by Diurán, so that they might escape. At that, the Queen began to wail and cry, and that was how they escaped.

This is one of the most famous islands of all the *immrama* stories. The tradition of an island whereon a group of women or priestesses guard the earthly paradise is told in Celtic stories and medieval legends alike. One such place is Avalon, where Morgen and her eight sisters reign. It is significant that Maelduin's arrival at the Island of Women is his twenty-seventh disembarkation: twenty-seven is a multiple of the sacred number nine; his crew should have been eighteen, another multiple of nine. Maelduin is unable or unwilling to leave here due to the fact that he has had his sexual initiation, becoming the consort of the Queen of the Island of Women. She is an aspect of the great Goddess of the Otherworld whose reflection we can still discern in the Faery Queen of folk tradition. Maelduin's union with her brings him a deeper fulfilment than he has known before. This island brings immediate fulfilment of desire and refreshment of spirit; it also teaches lessons about life's purpose. Here time does not run and the seasons are constant. This cessation of cyclic time can only be borne by those who are immortal, however; the absence of the turning seasons becomes disorientating for mortalkind and they are compelled to travel onward.



ISLAND OF BERRIES

They were driven by the waves to an island where many-fruited trees grew. Berries of great size grew upon them; and the task of tasting them fell upon Maelduin. He squeezed some juice into a cup and, after drinking from it, fell into a sleep for twenty-four hours, totally senseless, so that it was unclear whether he was alive or dead. When he awoke, Maelduin bade the men gather more berries, for they were good. The crew mixed them with water to lessen their effect and rowed away.

This island provides a cleansing forgetfulness that heals Maelduin of his desire to return to the last island. Many travellers make the otherworldly journey to seek healing of one kind or another; the Island of Berries

and the remaining islands provide different forms of healing or cleansing that help the traveller realign his or her energies physically, mentally, psychically and spiritually. This island brings restoration to the essential inner self and is experienced, to some degree, each night in dreams which connect us to the inner realities.

29

ISLAND OF THE EAGLE

They landed on a large island with a lake. There was a small church where a grey hermit lived, clothed in nothing but his own hair. He said that he was one of Brendan of Birr's company who had gone on pilgrimage. All had died save he. He showed them Brendan's stone, which they had brought with them, and the men bowed before it in reverence. The hermit bade them eat sparingly of the sheep, and so there they stayed for a season.

One day, while exploring the island, they saw a great, ancient eagle which alighted near the lake. It carried the branch of a tree from which red berries like grapes depended. The men hid and watched and, under Maelduin's direction, took some of the berries for themselves. In the afternoon they saw two younger eagles, who tended the old bird and stripped its feathers of lice. They crushed the berries and threw some into the lake to make it red and the ancient eagle bathed therein. The young birds continued to groom the eagle until, on the third day, it rose restored to strength and with fresh plumage. Diurán also bathed and drank of the waters, so that thereafter he remained forever youthful, losing neither hair nor tooth to age. They bade farewell to the hermit, provisioned the boat with sheep and set off once more.

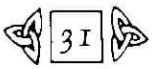
This island brings the experience of complete renewal. The ancient eagle is restored to full vigour and is able to fly away as strong as any young bird. Diurán shares in the healing bounty of the berry-reddened lake and proclaims his experience to all people he meets thereafter by the amazing youthfulness of his form. It is often remarked that those who engage in spiritual pursuits remain miraculously youthful in appearance. This is part of the otherworldly exchange: those who uphold the harmony of the inner realms are themselves upheld by otherworldly powers in the mundane realm.

30

ISLAND OF JOY

Many people filled with laughter dwelled upon the next island. The lot to explore fell on the third foster-brother who immediately joined the inhabitants in laughing and playing, as though he had known them all his life. The crew left him there.

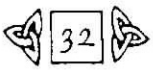
This is the reverse of island 14 and is, in some respects, the ante-chamber to island 31. The foster-brother who is left here enters into the most joyful state he is able to attain, and the crew is once more back at the appointed druidic number of eighteen. Like the other voyagers, he does not enter island 31 which is reserved for those who have committed their mortality into the keeping of the Otherworld. This island brings the fulfilment of island 27 but without remembrance of the mundane world. It is a place of festival and of glad rejoicing because it connects us with the healing grace of shared companionship.



ISLAND OF CIRCLED FIRE

They came to a small island, circled with a fiery, revolving wall. When the doorway to the fortress faced them, they saw beautiful people feasting and enjoying themselves. They heard the music and delighted at the marvellous sight, but were unable to enter.

This is the innermost island of the *immram*, wherein the fullness of the Otherworld is found. It is guarded by a ring of fire and revolves so that no-one can enter it unaware. That fire is the white fire of the *sidhe*, the faery place of peace, which burns away mortality. The most archetypal ideas, forms and patterns are within this island, and all those who are within rejoice in their creation and preservation. They are guarded well in this the inmost centre, but we must not imagine them as only remaining here: concepts and archetypes ripple out from this island to be filtered down into our own world. Some share of them is found in the other islands of the *immram*, but their full richness is experienced here. As Maelduin and his men retain their human condition, they are unable to attain the full experience of this island. The happy Otherworld this island represents is portrayed in many Celtic stories, and is properly the abode of the Lordly Ones, the Faery Folk or otherworldly beings.



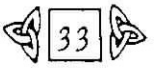
ISLAND OF OTTERS

Not long after, they found a white island shaped like a bird, on which there was a man clad in his own hair making prostrations on a rock. They asked his blessing and demanded to know who he was. He had been the cook of a monastery on Tory Island. He was an ex-thief who used to steal from the church and garner away all his ill-gotten spoils. One day, when he attempted to dig the grave of a sinful man over a holy one, he was frightened by the holy man's ghostly voice. It promised him hell if he persisted in his enterprise, but heaven if he stopped. The cook demanded to know how this could be proved in advance. His answer came when the grave began to fill by itself.

After that, the cook went to sea with his treasures. Strong winds took his boat and he

became aware of a ghostly holy man beside him. The ghost instructed him to cast away his ill-gotten goods into the sea, and the cook obeyed. Eventually, he landed on a barren rock and was miraculously fed by otters who brought him salmon. By their providence, he wanted for nothing. The otters brought similar provisions for Maelduin's men. Before they left, the cook prophesied that Maelduin would reach his destination and find his father's killer, but that he should forgive him.

The cook's voyage, rather like that of Maelduin, is initiated by selfish intentions. From acquisitiveness and greed, the cook is brought to a place of scarcity where he learns to appreciate the simple things once again. We are shown that the most unregenerate person can make an *immram* and discover the inmost self, but only by throwing overboard the luggage that encumbers his or her journeying. This island brings freedom of spirit to the inner traveller and marks the way back home.



ISLAND OF THE FALCON

They came to an island whereon much livestock grazed. Suddenly, they saw an Irish falcon which guided them south-eastwards towards Ireland. They found a small island very like the raiders' island, upon which they had been about to land when they were blown off course. The crew listened at the door of the fortress there and heard those within discuss what they should do if Maelduin came. Maelduin accordingly knocked on the door and was given welcome. They went within and were welcomed, and they related all their adventures.

All journey's ends are marked by a symbol or landmark that brings connection with our home; for the travellers, an Irish falcon appears, giving them new hope. After the many fantastic beasts of the Otherworld it is great relief to see a familiar bird. This island represents the return to everyday reality, a place where the traveller can become earthed in the mundane world. This is a crucial feature of inner journeying that is frequently overlooked. Unless we are grounded and re-established in our own time and place, we are likely to become fey, accident-prone and adrift from our life's purpose. It is therefore important to mark the journey's end by humanizing actions, as Maelduin does, by eating, meeting other human beings and reporting his *immram* to them. Maelduin forgives his enemies and relates his adventures to them, so that the gifts of the inner journey are immediately shared.

