

Legend of the Voyage of Saint Brendan

anon

*from the fourteenth century South English Legendary, a compilation of saints'
lives in verse*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by**

Richard Scott-Robinson

This saint's life has been retold from: Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna J Mill (eds), 1956, reprinted 1967. The South English Legendary, Volume I. Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press. Story taken from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 145.

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richardsr@hotmail.co.uk



Saint Brendan

anon

fourteenth century

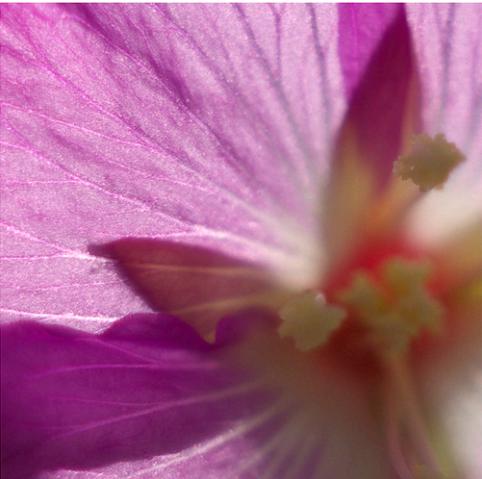
Sein Brandan þe holyman was yend of Irlonde · Monk he was of hard lyf as I vnderstonde · Of fastynge and penance inou [enough] – Saint Brendan was a holy man living in Ireland, happily enduring a hard life of fasting and penance at a monastery with a thousand monks, where he was abbot. And one day it happened, by the will of our Lord, that another abbot arrived at the monastery; a man named Barint. Saint Brendan met him at once in order to learn about the journey he had made and to find out what he had discovered in other lands. When Barint heard that Saint Brendan wished to question him about his adventures, he began to sigh terribly – he started to weep and fell to the ground in a faint. Saint Brendan took him up in his arms, but the man shouted as though he was mad before his wits finally returned.

‘Father!’ replied Brendan. ‘For charity! Take another course! You have come here to bring us comfort, not to drown us in tears! What is it that you have seen, in the great sea of Ocean? What have you encountered in this sea to which our Lord directed you, that encircles the world, and with which all other seas are connected? What have you found in this sea that separates ourselves from the land of the hereafter?’

Then Barint, this old man, still groaning and weeping,

related what had happened to him. He told of his son, Mernok, who was a monk just like themselves, a man of great courage who had wished to retreat into the solitude of an isolated monastery, to serve God.

‘And with my blessing, he went alone, to an island far out to sea,’ he explained, ‘habitable enough, beside a mountain of scree. And he spent so long there that he acquired a sizeable community of other monks for company.’



The legend of Saint Brendan is found in a collection of stories of the lives of Christian saints that was copied and added to throughout the fourteenth century and known as ‘The South English Legendary’. Most notable amongst manuscript volumes containing copies of the South English Legendary are British Museum MS Harley 2277 and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 145, both dating from the very beginning of the fourteenth century.

In conception, the legend of Saint Brendan owes much to early Irish tales such as The Voyage of Maeldun and The Voyage of Bran; in fact the South English Legendary spells this saint’s name as Brandan throughout, and the tale seems firmly rooted in pagan Irish myth. In the legend of the Voyage of Bran, Bran is encouraged by a woman holding a branch of apple blossom to sail to an Isle of Women. Perhaps revealingly, this Christianised version of the story has Saint Brendan sail to Paradise, the land of the afterlife.

‘When I heard this I prepared to visit him and made plans to set out; but in a dream I was told by our sweet Lord that my son had already set off on a further journey. So we got together a ship and sailed after him, in the sea of Ocean, with torments enough. We sailed so far towards the east that we came at last to a place of darkness, where the clouds hid the sun so completely that day was like night; but at last, our sweet Lord led us to where we could see a new land. We thrust our ship eagerly through the waves towards it, and the island was brighter than the sun. All on board were joyful. This land was full of trees and plants, growing everywhere, and precious stones also, shining brightly; and each plant was covered with flowers and each tree with fruit. There was no doubt amongst us that we had arrived in heaven. Joyfully, we stayed for a while, and journeyed until we believed the land to be endless; but at last we came to water, clear, bright water, lying in our way. We stood and looked around, for there seemed to be no means of crossing it. Then a young man approached, a very fair and noble young man, who addressed us individually with every courtesy, each by his own name, greeted us all and welcomed us to the private world of Jesus Christ. This was the land of the hereafter, he said, at the very end of the world, and here would come all the followers of Jesus Christ on Earth. “The land is divided into two, as you can see,” he explained, “and the other half lies across the water. But you are not allowed to see it, and you have been here for a year already, without eating, without having drunk anything or having felt any need to sleep, and you have felt neither heat nor cold and have not seen the darkness of night. For this is God’s private place and all this light derives from him, and therefore it is always day, and never night. And if your souls were pure and unblemished with sin, you would have been able to stay here, and your son also,” he said to me. “But you may not stay. You may remain for no longer than it takes you to make ready to sail again. Although you think that you have been here for just a few days, it has been a year.”



‘So he brought us to our ship and took his leave, and then we found ourselves travelling homewards across the ocean. This fair young man had vanished away, just like my son; and the waves soon carried us back to the other monks that we had left behind, in the land of our home.’

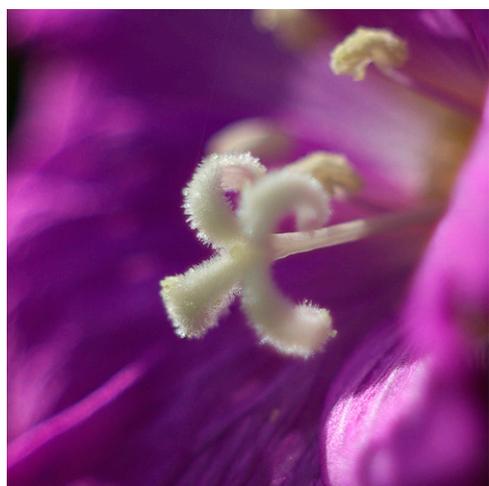
When Saint Brendan heard this, he stood deep in thought for a while. He wished to know more about this place, this land at the gates of Paradise, if it was God’s will, and so he chose twelve of his monks whom he trusted the most and put it to them that, subject to their approval, he would like them to accompany him on a similar voyage of discovery.

‘Dear father,’ they said, ‘we have abandoned our own desires, along with our friends and possessions; all our hopes and loyalties lie with you, as father abbot. If you desire it, we

shall happily come along to see our Lord's grace.'

So they fasted for forty days and did great penance, and then asked eagerly for the Lord's help in their undertaking. And they made a great ship with fine, sturdy timbers held together with strong nails and tarred so thoroughly that no water could enter. Then they took their leave of their brother monks and set sail. In the Lord's name they took ship, and all those who were left behind were very sorry to have been excluded from the voyage.

So this holy man set off, under the guidance of our Lord, and sailed into the great sea of Ocean; they rowed strongly and trusted to the Lord's grace, and they feared nothing. The wind drove their ship onwards, blowing strongly from the south-west, allowing them to keep a steady course. The sun rose on Midsummer's Day and nobody knew



where they were. There was no sight of any land. For forty days they sailed, the wind driving them swiftly onwards, until at last they saw a great island to the north, an island of hard rock rising high above the waves. It took them three days to reach it, and when they were close by, they found a small harbour and were able to climb ashore. Not knowing where they were, they were soon amazed to see coming towards them a handsome dog. It seemed friendly enough, as though it wished to help, and it fell at Saint Brendan's feet, licking his ankles.

'Fair brothers!' cried Saint Brendan, 'there is nothing to fear, for I don't think this dog means us any harm! He is a messenger, perhaps, come to lead us in the right direction.'

The hound led the holy men into a hall. It was large and very well furnished, and there were tables spread with cloths, and bread and fish was laid upon them. None of the monks was disappointed, but all sat and ate a hearty meal. And while they were eating they noticed some beds all made up, so after their supper they retired to get some well-earned rest. When they had slept enough they went back to their ship.

They were on the sea for a long while afterwards before they sighted land again. And then, far to the south, they saw an island, a pleasant, green island, and drove their ship through the waves towards it, with their oars. On nearing this land, they found a place to run ashore, looked about, and saw the fairest sheep they had ever seen, all around them. Each sheep was larger than a bull and pure white in colour. They all felt great joy at the sight. Then there appeared a handsome man, a very noble young man, who addressed them with every courtesy, each by his own name, and greeted them all in a friendly way, telling them that they had arrived at a place he was sure they had never been to before.

'This is called the Land of Sheep,' he explained, 'for the sheep here are magnificent, as you can see; large and white and healthier than any sheep you will ever have seen before,

and much bigger also, for the weather is perfect and the pasture is excellent; there is no winter and no need for hay, for they can eat new growth as soon as it springs from the ground, and I never take their milk. For all these reasons, their lives are the better. And now you shall go, through our Lord's grace, to a place that is a birds' paradise; a very joyful place. And there you shall spend Easter, and Whitsun also. Go swiftly in God's name, so that your voyage may be completed all the more quickly.'

Saint Brendan and his brother monks went back to their ship and rowed strongly through the waves, enduring many storms, until they came to a great isle, and through our Lord's grace their ship drove onwards towards it; but before they could make landfall they came to some protuberance that prevented them from running the boat ashore. One of Brendan's monks waded onto the land, but Brendan and the others remained in the ship. This monk began to prepare a meal from the food he had brought with him, made a fire and boiled some fish in a cauldron. But before it was cooked, before the fire had heated the water even, the island began to move up and down. The monk was scared out of his wits and Saint Brendan watched in amazement as the island began to hurtle through the water, moving up and down like a living thing. It swam for more than two miles before casting the fire into the sea. The monks cried out to Saint Brendan to explain what was going on.

'Be still,' said this good man, 'and have no fear. You think it is an island, but you are all wrong. It is a fish of this great sea, the greatest that there is, and he tries by night and by day to put his tail into his mouth, but cannot because of his size.'

Onwards they rowed across the sea of Ocean, swiftly westwards for three days, and on the fourth day they sighted land. It was a fair island thick with flowers, and there they found a very beautiful spring, and by this spring stood a tree, broad and high enough, a tree full of birds, white birds, covering every bough so thickly that scarcely a single leaf could be seen. It was a joy to look upon this tree! Saint Brendan wept at the sight of it, knelt down on his knees and asked our Lord to explain. A little bird flapped its wings in reply, rose from the tree and flew towards Saint Brendan; and the music that came from the flapping of its wings was better than that from any instrument. The bird looked at Saint Brendan in a friendly way.

'We were, until some time ago, angels in heaven,' he said. 'But as soon as we were born, our master, Lucifer, who was too proud for that place, fell out, and many along with him, each according to his deeds; and we fell out as well, but through no sin, nothing that it is wrong for birds to do, but only through the power of our sweet Lord. And we are in no pain nor anguish, but in joy enough, and can sometimes see our Lord, and sometimes we fly about on the Earth, and in the sky also, like good angels and like bad, the good doing good and the bad, bad; and on Sundays, which is the day of rest, we



take the form of white doves as you can see, to honour God, here in this broad tree. It is twelve months now since you set out on your voyage, and for another six years you will have to travel before your journey is completed. But then the Lord will send a sight that you will long have sought, at the end of seven years. And each year you shall spend Easter here with us, as you sail onwards towards the Land of Promise.'

Now it was on Easter Day that this all took place. The bird took his leave of them and flew off to his fellows, for it was time to begin their evening chorus. A more beautiful song could not be conceived, even if God himself was counted amongst the singers. The monks stayed on the Island of Birds for eight weeks, all through Easter and into Whitsun, and Trinity saw the arrival of the good man who had spoken to them in the Land of Sheep. He filled their ship with food and drink, took his leave of them again, very courteously, and was gone.

Saint Brendan and his fellow monks made their way again on the great sea of Ocean. The wind hurled them up and down on the water, and they became so weary of their lives that they hardly had the will to continue. For four months they voyaged, in torment and great peril, and they saw nothing but the ocean by day and the stars by night.



Then far away on the horizon they made out the form of an island and cried to Jesus, with all the energy they could muster, to guide them towards it. Having seen the island, however, it took them a further forty days to reach it. But at last they came to a little harbour, scarcely large enough for their ship, and they went ashore. It had been a long time since they had felt the ground beneath their feet and they explored the island widely, happy to be on dry land at last. They came to two springs of water; one was very clear and the other was like mud. The monks went to drink from the fair spring, but Saint Brendan

warned them: 'Do not go near that spring without permission from the owners, the old men who live in the water; for with good will they will share it with you.' An old man appeared, very wrinkled with age, and he welcomed them courteously enough and kissed Saint Brendan and took him by the hand, and he led them into the water and by a pleasant path through many places until they came to an abbey. Saint Brendan looked around and asked where he was, and who lived there, but the old man remained silent.

Then they saw approaching a group of monks bearing a cross, with candles on each side, and each monk was dressed in a habit and hood; and as they approached, the abbot who was bringing up the rear took Saint Brendan by the hand and led him into a magnificent hall. He invited them all to sit down and to wash their feet; and he washed their feet himself, with water from the murky well, and then led them into a refectory and set them at a table, mixed in among his own monks, and when they were all seated, they were served and given a meal of bread, a white loaf between two, and fennel and beet;

and a sweeter meal would be impossible to imagine. And they drank the water from the clear spring.

When they had eaten, they rose up and went into the chapel.

Tell me, dear brother,' Saint Brendan asked the abbot. 'How do you hold your silence so well that nobody speaks at all?'

'God knows,' replied the abbot, 'we have been here for eighty years, and have maintained silence at all times, except in the Lord's service. And no one has ever been ill. The weather is always good, and there is no sickness; and when we go to service in the chapel, our Lord provides light, for the candles do not diminish in the slightest, although they burn both day and night.' When Saint Brandon heard this, he wept for joy.

'Dear father!' he cried. 'For God's love, can we stay here?'

'No,' he said. 'You know well that you cannot, for our Lord has shown you all that you must do, and afterwards you must return to Ireland with your twelve fellows. And at that moment a gale blew in at the window, as though from heaven, the candles guttered as the gust swept through the chapel; but they burned still, at the same level they had been at all evening.

'Lord Jesus!' exclaimed Saint Brendan.

Saint Brendan stayed until mid-January and then, through God's grace, he and his monks took again to the sea, rowing onwards in sorrow enough, and the sea tossed them higher and higher, and from that time until well into Lent they saw no land. Then about the time of Palm Sunday they saw what looked like a distant cloud.

'Be still,' said Saint Brandon. 'Here we will find our guide who has already provided for us so well on the Island of Birds and in the Land of Sheep.' So they rowed their ship ever onwards towards this distant isle, and on the day before Good Friday they made landfall, with hardship enough, and their guide met them joyfully, kissed Saint Brendan's feet and washed all their feet, as befitted the rites of Maundy Thursday. And he stayed with them all through Good Friday and on until Easter Eve, and then he encouraged them to go to their ship and spend the day of the Holy Resurrection on the back of the great fish, and afterwards, to return to the Island of Birds. So these holy men set sail, and with God's grace they soon came to the whale. He lay still in the water, like land, and their cauldron was where they had left it, nearly a year before. And about mid-morning the next day, they completed their Masses and their songs and took to their ship again and arrived at the Island of Birds on the same day.

When the birds saw them, they sang a beautiful melody, and the bird who had spoken to them before flew over to their ship.

'You ought to honour our Lord Jesus Christ,' he said, 'for he has provided four places for you to rest in: with your guide and provider in the Land of Sheep, at the start of Easter, then the Resurrection on the back of the great fish, then with us here on the Island of

Birds for eight weeks until Whitsun, and from midwinter until Candlemas on the Isle of Abbey. But all the rest of the time you must spend on the great sea of Ocean, in great danger and discomfort, until seven years have passed.'

These holy men remained on the Island of Birds until Trinity, then their guide came to them, bringing food and drink, as he had done before, and then took them to their ship and bid them sail forth.

One particular year, they spent so long alone on the endless ocean that their food began to run out. Then from out of nowhere came a little bird carrying a great bough in its beak, full of red grapes. They looked about and saw an island which looked verdant and lush, and as they drew closer they could see that it was full of trees and every bough was filled with these same grapes. Saint Brendan went ashore and brought some of the grapes into the ship, and they lasted them for another forty days.

These holy men travelled onwards across the sea of Ocean, here and there, and resting always at one or other of the Isle of Sheep, or Birds' Paradise, or the Isle of Abbey or on the back of the great whale.

They were singing as the waves slapped against their boat when they came to a part of the sea that was so clear they could see right down to the seabed, although the water was so full of fishes that scarcely any of the sandy bottom was visible because of them. The fish all seemed to be asleep. The monks asked Saint Brendan to be very quiet, so as not to waken them.

'What are you afraid of?' he shouted. 'You who are accustomed to climbing upon the back of a whale?' And he sang louder still and woke the fishes up. They began to swim slowly towards the boat and the monks became very fearful, for there were so many of them. But Saint Brendan sang his Mass to the very end, in a loud voice, as the fish pursued their vessel relentlessly.

And when Saint Brendan's song was done · the fishes all dispersed.

The wind was strong and stiff enough · and drove the ship quite fast.

The sea remained as clear as air · 'til seven nights had passed.

'It's just like floating over land!' · the brothers peered, aghast.

Then a wind came up from the south and it blew for eight days. How far they went in that time they could not tell, but they saw, far to the north, a dark land, as smoky as a smithy and their boat was hurtling towards it in the gale. They heard the noise of bellows, and of iron beating upon iron; it was like thunder. Saint Brendan blessed himself and tried to hide his fear. There appeared a grisly fiend, black with coal and fire ash. He cast his eyes towards their ship and suddenly the shore was full of folk holding tongs and hammers. They came to the water's edge, trying to entice the ship towards them, and then let out the most terrifying yells and screams and threw red-hot spiked irons at the boat, so that all around it was heat and fire – even the sea was on fire! Saint Brendan turned the ship around without landing.

Even when they were out of sight of that island, the smoke and the stench persisted.

The southerly wind drove them ever northwards, until they saw the peak of a mountain on the distant horizon. Clouds of smoke surrounded it and a new stench began to fill the air. As they got closer they could see a wall of fire. If there had been a great deal of woe in the other place, there was even more of it here! One of Saint Brendan's monks began to weep and cry out, for he knew that his time had come. He leapt from the ship into the water and began to swim helplessly towards the grisly fire, shouting and crying dolefully.

'Alas!' he cried, 'my wretched life! Now I see my end!'

A devil came towards him, caught hold of his feet and dragged him towards the fire. The mountain burned so strongly that nothing could be seen but fire and smoke. Then, miraculously, the wind turned to the north and drove Saint Brendan and his remaining monks quickly southwards.

The gale blew for seven nights, and they voyaged in a stiff breeze for a long while afterwards until they sighted a lone rock, with the sea washing over it; and sometimes the island was covered by the waves and at other times it was bare. And as they came closer they could see a figure on the rock, a wretched ghost sitting naked, and above him was a cloth that had been tied so that it hung down to his chin and flapped in his face. And when the waves receded with the falling tide and left the rock exposed, the wet cloth beat mercilessly against the man's face and into his eyes. A more tortured and wretched ghost is hard to imagine. Saint Brendan begged him, in God's name, to tell them who he was and why he was compelled to sit there.



'I am,' he said, 'the wretch Judas who was on Earth with our Lord. I sit here from the evening of each Saturday to the evening of Sunday, and also at Midwinter through to Twelfth Night, and from the beginning of Easter until Whitsun, and at the Feast of our Lady; for our Lord is full of mercy. At all other times of the year I am in hell, with Pilate and Herod and all the others, that I may curse the day that I was born. But I implore you, for the love of God, stay with me tonight and protect me from the devils who will come in the morning.

'Through God's grace we will shield you,' said Saint Brendan.

When Sunday evening arrived the devils came blasting in, to lead this foolish ghost back to hell. They cried and shouted: 'Go away, God's men, for you have no business here! Let us have our fellow, for we dare not face our master without him. Go away and do not hinder us!'

‘I do not hinder you,’ said Saint Brendan, ‘and you should blame no one but our Lord Jesus Christ, who is of more power.’

In the morning, as soon as the sun had risen, the devils returned, yelling and shrieking.

‘Away, God’s man!’ they cried. ‘Cursed be your arrival here! Our master has tormented us all night for not bringing this wretch back. But we shall have our revenge, for his agony shall be doubled over the next six days.’ The poor ghost quaked piteously to hear this, as the devils bore him back to hell.

Saint Brendan and his monks voyaged onwards in the sea of Ocean for three more days, and then they saw an island far to the south. Saint Brendan sighed bitterly when he saw this isle.

‘Paul the hermit lives there,’ he said. ‘He has been without food for many years.’

They went ashore and found the old hermit; his hair hung down to his feet, he was naked and his limbs were all bare. ‘Alas!’ said Saint Brendan. ‘I expected to find an angel and have found just a man.’

‘You should not complain,’ said the hermit, ‘for God has shown you more of the concealed truth than he has chosen to show to any other man. A monk lives by what he can provide for himself, and you receive your provisions, through our Lord’s grace, as a gift. I was a monk in the abbey of Saint Patrick, and one day a man came to me and said: “I am your abbot, so have no fear.”’

“I have no abbot but Saint Patrick,” I replied.

“No,” he insisted. “You are wrong. I am your abbot. Arise tomorrow, as soon as it is day, and go to the sea. There you will find a ship, sent by our Lord. Go into this ship and it will take you into the wide ocean, to a place where you shall live.”

‘So I arose the next morning and followed this holy man’s wishes, and went to the sea, and there I found a mysterious ship. After seven days it brought me to this isle, guided by our sweet Lord. And then it went away again in the direction from which I had come.

‘At first I spent my time here all alone, with no comforts, until I saw an otter standing on his hind legs, and in his paws he held a fire iron and a stone for making fire, and some fish to cook. He soon disappeared, but I made the fire, and the fish lasted me for three days. And every third day this otter came and brought me food enough for another three days. I was fifty when I set out from the abbey and now I am a hundred and twenty years old, by our Lord’s will. And I wait here for death, whenever God chooses to send it to me.’

Saint Brendan said farewell and they took to their ship once again. The voyage lasted for forty days, all through Lent, and on Easter Eve they found their guide who led them to the whale, and they spent the night on its back, singing their matins and their masses, and the whale carried them to the Island of Birds, set them safely onto land, and the

monks stayed there until after Trinity. Then their guide and provider brought them food enough for a long journey and went off with them across the sea of Ocean, with our Lord's blessing. They sailed eastwards for forty days, and then it began to grow dark. A mist engulfed them.

'Be glad,' said their guide, 'and celebrate, because now you are near to the Land of Promise.'

When they emerged from the mist and could see where they were, they saw the most beautiful hills that could possibly exist anywhere. It was so light and the air was so clear, and the trees so thick with fruit, laden with apples as though it were harvest time, that there was joy enough! They spent forty days in this land, and could find no end to it. It was always day and never night, and although the wind never blew, the air was clean and clear, neither too hot nor too cold. The joy they felt cannot be put into words.

At last they came to a beautiful stretch of water, but could find no way over it. Beyond, they could see a wonderful land stretching away into the far distance. A young man approached them, a very noble and courteous young man, and he welcomed them all by name, and greeted each of them in turn, and he complemented Saint Brendan and took him by the hand.

'Lo!' he cried, 'here is the land you have all been searching for, all these years! For the Lord has wished to show you the secret truths of his sea of Ocean. Fill your ship with fruit, for you may stay here no longer. You must go back to your own land; although you will soon return to this place, Brendan, for your life is near its end. This channel of water that you see divides this land into two. You may think that the land you have been travelling through is wonderful enough, but the other is much more so. But you may not set foot on it, for it is not right; though the fruit is always ripe and the land is always bathed in sunlight.'

Saint Brendan and his monks quickly collected up all the fruit and apples lying nearby and threw them into the ship. And they took their leave, and when they were ready, they set sail, sadly, for home. And they voyaged across the sea, as our Lord bid them, and spent far less time on their return than they had on their outward journey. And when they arrived home, their brother monks were joyful enough to see them!

Saint Brendan did not live for very long afterwards; he seemed to have lost all interest in the world. He died in Ireland and an abbey was built where his body lay, and many miracles took place there.