



*A twelfth-century picture of Brendan's ship alongside Jasconius, the friendly whale.*

## CHAPTER 1

# Brendan: A Warm-hearted Saint

*'From small beginnings out to undiscovered ends'*

*Hilaire Belloc*

**B**RENDAN WAS AN IRISH PERSONALITY who became a legend and a world-figure. Many who have never visited Ireland look up to Brendan and claim him as their own man. This hero, teacher, traveller, leader, and saint is well known in a host of countries. The story of his great journey in search of his 'Treasure Island' has been told in many languages – Dutch, German, French, Italian, Spanish as well as in English, and, of course, in Irish!

He is admired, not for his possessions, but for his character. His treasure was not gold or silver or sparkling jewellery. He did not even have great herds of cattle like the

wealthy farmers of his day. Yet he was gifted. The riches that he possessed were given to him by God.

Brendan's gifts included his courage, his faith, his vision, his love of people, his inspired leadership, his skills in seamanship, his compassion, his cheerfulness and, we might add, his sense of humour. He used these graces to the full. The list is long in a life that was crammed with action and exciting adventures spent in God's service. This made him both happy and popular.

## BIRTH

A bright light shone in Kerry on the day that Brendan was born. Bishop Erc tells us of his vision. He baptised the baby born to Findlung and his wife in the year A.D. 483 (or 484). Brendan's mother had a vision, too, when this happy event took place. She had a feeling that someone of great good fortune had come into the world. Like the bishop, she perceived that a bright future lay before baby Brendan.

## BRENDAN'S HOMELAND

Barra, the place of Brendan's birth, was by the sea-shore as you travel from Tralee to Fenit Head. From Tralee Bay, a wonderful view stretches southwards and out to the west. Great mountains sweep down to the sea on that part of the Dingle peninsula. Caherconree rises like a strong fortress, keeping guard over the lower slopes of its towering height. Seen from Fenit and from further north, its peak stands out in the Slieve Mish mountain range that stretches west to Beenoskee and on to Mount Brandon, the highest summit, which bears Brendan's name. Rising ma-

veer begint dat le  
uen en pelgrinad  
des heiligen elts  
Brandanus die een  
was wo va in <sup>an</sup> mou  
Sunte branda  
nus was een  
soen yshrahelades ne  
uen ariel. Dese was  
geboren vanden gest  
eyne tagen sanguis  
des rikes mynencu  
ken die selue sunte bin  
dano was een man  
van groter abstin  
ren en cloer in doech  
den ken was een va  
der volna van dinc  
moniken. ken doe  
hi was in sinen stede  
dat machmen vpaen  
in sinen heiligen leue  
Dat een strijt is reg  
den vint en was in  
sin stede geyent salus  
daer is die oer bronck  
der doeloen. branda

uus of salus machme  
herten een asgaendeklef  
van enen bech. Doe  
hi was in die stede gem  
ekt dat een der moderen  
die gelyken was Barm  
bus die op ene ament  
quam tot hem ken doe  
sunte Brandanus was  
geirager mit voel vde  
vanden seluen voege  
noenden heilige vder  
Brandanus begonde te  
swoepen en sprede hem  
op die eerde en heuet  
hem gerust en selde  
vder wi hebben droef  
heit in dinc toetomst  
en en buste met comen  
tot onser troestinge. Du  
solste den bruderē mer  
blijstap bewyden dan  
droefheit. Thieu om w  
wies ons dat woert ga  
des en spiset onse sielen  
mit menighende in  
malken die du heues

Brendan's story told in the Dutch language five hundred years ago.

jestically about one thousand metres above Brandon strand and sea level, this hill of Brandon, Brandon creek and Brandon point have been landmarks through many centuries, guiding seafarers, sailors and fishing crews, when the storms come and the mists hover over the coast-line.

The view from Brandon's top on a clear day stretches east and south over more mountains and deep valleys. Lakes and streams gleam in the sunlight amid the brown bog-land and stony foothills. Westerly from this height is a grand panorama from the jagged, rocky points of the Three Sisters, to the Blasket Islands, further south to the Skelligs and endlessly out to the wide horizons of the ocean. The mighty Atlantic invites adventure, exploration and new discoveries. Many who 'go down to the sea in ships, and occupy their business in great waters' have been challenged by the vastness of the great deep. They have been fascinated, too, by the mystery that lies beyond the horizon, far exceeding the range of any human eye.

In such surroundings, Brendan was born. His first year was spent with the sound of the sea and of the churning waves in his ears. A wild beauty and some of Ireland's most majestic scenery surrounded his birthplace.

## EDUCATION – WITH ITA AND ERC

However, this saint-in-the-making who in later life was always 'on the move' spent his next few years, from the age of two until he was five, in Killeedy near Newcastle West in county Limerick. Here he was fostered by the famous St Ita (or Íde) who cared for the young in a very special way.



This is Brendan's sea, and yonder Brendan's mountain, cloud-encompassed,  
stands lonely in the sky.

*Mount Brandon, the highest peak in the mountain range that stretches along the Dingle peninsula in Kerry, rises majestically from the water. Beyond, and further to the west, lie the Blasket Islands and the broad Atlantic Ocean.*

The training, the feeding, the teaching and the learning about Jesus Christ prepared the child for life and shaped his character for a future still to be unfolded.

It is thought that Brendan kept in touch with his foster-mother, Ita, in later years. The impression which she made upon him lasted long. He did not forget her. Indeed, Ita was called 'the foster-mother of the saints of Ireland'. Many interesting personalities were brought to her and we can guess how important was her influence from the following story told about Brendan.

It was said that Brendan asked Ita what were the three things that God specially loved. The answer came from Ita:

God loves a true faith in Him with a pure heart;  
a simple life with a religious spirit;  
and open-handedness inspired by charity.

This story helps us to see something of Ita's outlook and way of life. We can understand why her words were popular, and often repeated among the people, who saw these three spiritual treasures shining out of the life and work of Brendan, when he had grown up.

At the age of five, Brendan left Killeedy, and Bishop Erc, who had plans for the child's future, brought him back to the homeland of his parents. Erc was now in charge of Brendan's education and began to teach him more fully about the Christian faith. Termon Eirc (Erc's Sanctuary) is the name of a townland near Ardfert, a short distance



*A nature book, dated 1475, shows all sorts of fishy creatures filling the sea. These are the creatures later fifteenth-century artists thought Brendan saw on his journey across the Atlantic.*

north from Fenit.

Years later, when Brendan was ordained, he was given Ardfert monastery to look after. A well in Ardfert is called after him, and the name of Brendan is affectionately remembered in many ways among the people of Kerry. He had been, as a child, a neighbour among the local families. This was Brendan country.

## OTHER TEACHERS



*Plans for Brendan's great voyage into  
unknown seas are discussed.*

Changes had to come in Brendan's life. Erc wished him to have other teachers at a time when there was little organised school life. For this reason, Brendan's travels began and he was sent to have further education with St

Jarlath of Tuam, a well-known tutor. While he was with this teacher in Galway, he seems to have travelled further north through Mayo. We picture him gaining wider experience of Ireland, visiting families in their homes, and sharing his faith and learning with those whom he met.

Another teacher to whom Brendan owed much was the distinguished Enda whose monastery was on Inishmore, the largest of the three Aran islands in Galway Bay. Enda had been a soldier in his youth, but when he felt called to train for the Christian ministry he found a wise guide and fine teacher in Scotland. This was St Ninian who lived at Whithorn, Galloway, across the narrow channel that separates Ireland from Scotland.

Enda was anxious to find a quiet spot for prayer and study and the life of spiritual discipline. To his great joy, he was granted the kind of place, 'away from it all', that he was hoping for. It was to be called 'Aran of the Saints' after Enda had trained many Christian leaders who in turn founded monasteries in different parts of Ireland. These were built on the same lines as Enda's centre of prayer, study and farm-work on Inishmore.

Brendan was to become one of those outstanding Christian leaders of the early Irish Church. From his teachers he learned the power of prayer and showed a deep and caring love for people. With the example of Erc, Ita, Jarlath and Enda to inspire him through life, he continued the strong tradition of prayer, study and practical Christianity for which the Irish monasteries were to become famous, far beyond the island of Brendan's birth.