Beneath the Surface

Tales from Welsh Legend

Retold by Eloise Williams

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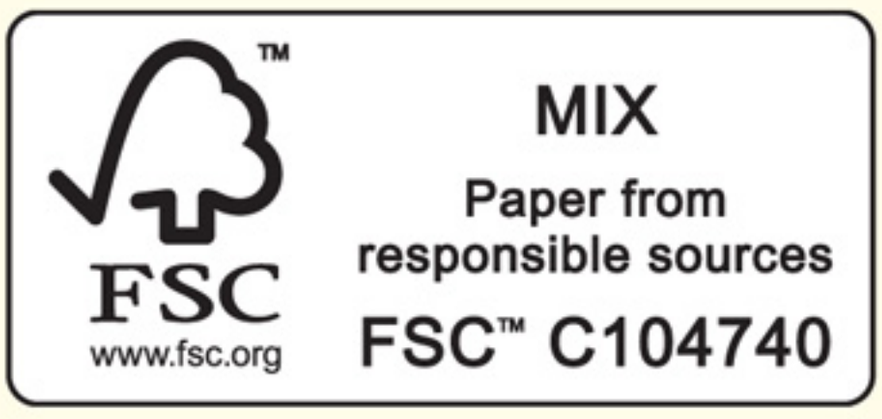

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Tylwyth Teg: say *Tel-with Tair-g*

Cantre'r Gwaelod

"I'm going out." Dion felt as if his head would explode if he stayed cooped up in his aunt's stuffy cottage any longer. His mum had abandoned him hours earlier to go and get some supplies for their stay, and the whole place reeked of hot radiators and stale, dusty air. The rain had been hammering down non-stop since they had arrived, and now he felt a desperate need to get outside before he suffocated, even if he was likely to be soaked to the bone by the wild Welsh weather.

"I'll go and investigate that path down to the beach," he planned. He thought of the estuary they had crossed on their way into Aberdovey, and how its mouth gurgled and spun twirling ribbons of silver into the sea. How he'd love to draw the heron he saw taking flight like a pterodactyl, and sketch the sullen, hissing slide of the water at the edge of the bank.

"You are not going out in that." His aunt's voice sliced the air sharply. "You'll drown."

Dion had sworn to be on his best behaviour while they were visiting his mum's sister for the week, so he kept all of his real thoughts inside his head and smiled his most angelic smile. He set up his drawing pad and pencils by the window where freedom was so close he could almost



taste it, and gave a heartfelt sigh. If he wasn't going to be allowed to go anywhere, he may as well get his half-term homework done. The task his class had been set was to find out about an area of local history and illustrate it, so that he could give a presentation to the class as a show-and-tell. His aunt had told him about a local myth which might be suitable, and he'd found a recording of the story on the Internet. Plugging his headphones in, he listened and began to draw.

There are rumours of a sunken town beneath the waves of *Cardigan Bay*, the voice said in a dramatic whisper. *A Welsh Atlantis. Some report sightings of unusual activity beneath the waves; others claim they have seen it with their own eyes. How did it come to be? And which tale is true? You decide.*

A roll of mystical music conjured up images of a heavy fog parting over the sea and a kingdom appearing. Dion put his pencil to good use by creating a wavy frame.



Cantre'r Gwaelod* or The Lowland Hundred when translated into English, is a lost city which lies beneath the glimmering sheen of Cardigan Bay. How did it come to be there? What caused the kingdom to flood? Can people really hear the sound of bells from beneath the sea? You decide.

The repetition of "you decide" annoyed Dion a bit, but as he simply couldn't face yet another round of that Old Maid card game with his aunt, he went with it.

The first tale of Cantre'r Gwaelod. Long, long ago, the most beautiful, luscious land lay to the west of Wales. Those who farmed there found the soil rich and plentiful. Those who lived there were surrounded by glorious grasslands and towering trees. Those who had families there lived peacefully. They should have been the envy of many others, but there was a titanic problem with where they lived, and it caused them endless concern. The ground was too far below sea level — it flooded regularly, causing such terrible damage that the people had to rebuild their broken homes and replant their crops. After one particularly dreadful flood, they went to their king to beg for him to show mercy for his subjects and do something to stop the catastrophic effect it was having on their lives.

*Cantre'r Gwaelod: say *Can-tra Gwigh-lod*

"I will build a sluice gate," the king proclaimed. "It will be so strong it will hold back the seas and protect us, so we can all live in safety forever."

There was a burst of heroic music and Dion used it to draw a strong, tall gate.

The builders worked tirelessly to construct the gate, and it was soon finished. Majestic and mighty, it stood and glared at the sea as if to scare it. The people of the kingdom were overjoyed and gladly built new houses in this place of newfound safety.

The rain outside the window had eased a bit but Dion carried on drawing. Now he had made a start, he had surprised himself by quite enjoying it.

Because it was now safe from flooding, the town's inhabitants were indeed cheerier. Their crops grew healthily and their happiness rose like the brightest summer sun, just as the king had promised. The kingdom was the envy of all around as it prospered, and the danger of flooding seemed a dismal, distant memory. Gwyddno Garanhir* was a great king, and knowing how important it was to make sure the sluice gates were maintained well, he took great care to find the right person to look after them. Eventually after a wide search across the length and breadth of the kingdom, he found the perfect candidate.

"Seithennin*, you will be the keeper of the sluices," Gwyddno stated. "You will keep watch over the sea, and when the waves grow treacherous, you will close the gates quickly and keep the kingdom safe."

"I will," Seithennin replied and the townsfolk applauded, for this was a great honour and a huge responsibility, and they were all grateful and relieved.

*Gwyddno Garanhir: say *Gweeth-know Garan-here*
*Seithennin: say *Say-tha-neen*

Seithennin was a very strong man. He could turn the huge iron handles to the gates with lightning speed and extraordinary ease — everyone believed he was the ideal person for the job. What the people didn't know, because nobody told them and he hid it well, was that Seithennin was a drunkard. He kept this quiet because of course nobody wants a drunkard in charge of their safety. He enjoyed the celebrity of being the keeper of the gates far more than he enjoyed the actual job. At first, he managed to keep a watchful eye on the tumbling sea and vowed to take his role very seriously. Whenever a menacing storm glowed violet on the horizon or a gigantic swell grew to a watery froth-spewing dragon, he would hurriedly close the gates. If there was an unpredicted high tide, or a screaking storm battered the shoreline, he would be there, on the spot and ready to protect everyone. The kingdom relaxed, safe in the knowledge that Seithennin was keeping danger away.

Unfortunately, as time passed, Seithennin also started to relax. He began to have the occasional drink at his post,



and once he found that he could get away with it without being discovered, he began to have a few more, reasoning that it really didn't matter as long as he turned up for work.

"Unbelievable," Dion muttered to himself as he drew a man sleeping beside the gate. "Of course it's going to matter."

One fateful night, Seithennin was more interested in his drinks than keeping up with his responsibilities. He lost concentration, and the sneaky sea used his lack of attention to its advantage, skulking its way through the gloom and creeping as slow as a cat stalking prey through the gates. Some minor flooding occurred, but when Seithennin defended himself by saying he was tired from his heavy workload, the king felt guilty. The same thing happened several times, but each time, Seithennin was cunning and quick with excuses and lies, so he always managed to talk himself out of any trouble, and continued to be the sluice keeper.

