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Public Humanities EcoGothic at the Coast in Ireland and Wales

Claire Connolly, Rita Singer, and James L. Smith

ABSTRACT

The Gothic clings to Irish and Welsh coasts and finds voice through strange stories. Centuries of accumulated death and tragedy forms a dense web of sorrow with particularly prolific roots in the literature, songs, and stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These traditions resonate within the longer history of lives and vessels lost in the Irish Sea, becoming part of what Gillian O'Brien has described as the 'ring of sorrow' encircling Ireland, and the wider archipelago, 'binding together communities who have suffered maritime tragedies like beads on a rosary'. This paper explores the Gothic resonances that cross the Irish Sea and some of the conundrums of expressing this material through digital and stakeholder-based public history activities. These manifestations are a form of blue knowledge, sense-making in the face of danger mediated by a sense of ecological anxiety mixed with human feats of bravery. The case studies of this essay originate from the collection of the *Ports, Past and Present* project, an initiative funded by the European Regional Development Fund through the Ireland Wales Cooperation programme.

'The salt is in the wind where the beach bellows wide,
In the night, in the proud Port town.
On Newry Street, smell it in the tightly terraced rows
Through the windows where the grain falls down.

Past the Stanley Arms, smell it on the pavements
In the dregs of the landlord's beer,
And it sits in the cracks of the Roman Fort
Where the dead watch the boats draw near.

In the church yard, on the stones of sleeping sailors,
Who the sea took all for its own,

The salt is in their soil and it holds them there still
In the dark, a grain for a bone.

It flies, a salt spectre, on Hyfrydle chapel's towers
stinging in the rain in the breeze,
It's looking for its kin in the face of a lover,
Down the lanes, in the gorse, past the trees.

It speeds in the night, past Penrhos Feliw
The salt on the standing stone,
Then it sees her awake, a drift in the dark
A woman in the wind all alone.

She walks by the boom of the sea by the moon,
The salt now settled in her hair,
It mingles with the water falling down on her face,
for her sailor is no longer there.

They rode their bikes here, the salt in their spokes
With the scent of cowslips by the shore,
and they walked to their chapel, under big open skies,
and prayed not to be riven by War.

His Captain had called him out to her sea,
So he gave her his dagger of gold,
The salt crusted thick on the side of his ship
and on her skin, in Porthdafarch, in the cold'.

Gillian Brownson, 'Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore' (2021).

In 'Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore', Holyhead poet and creative practitioner Gillian Brownson (2021) recalls a story of a romantic relationship that fell victim to the power of the sea and the shaping force of history. The poem began with Brownson's encounter with a Dutch sword on display at the Holyhead Maritime Museum. Her subsequent research into the history of this

resonant object led her to the story of Jan Christiaan Van Aller, a Dutch mariner who landed in Holyhead following the German invasion of the Netherlands in 1940. There he met a local woman by the name of Evelyn Hughes to whom he gifted the sword, known in the Museum as 'the Midshipman's Poniard' and displayed alongside other maritime curios. Van Aller returned to sea, posted to the Dutch East Indies, and Hughes held onto the sword for many years until her daughter finally gifted it to the museum (see Holyhead Maritime Museum, 2020). Brownson's poem is inspired by the stories that the sword has accrued over its sixty years on Anglesey, including deeply personal recollections of a presumed death at sea.

In some ways a familiar lyric poem of loss, 'Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore' is haunted by forms of absence that are deeply placed in their island context: salt tears mingle with salty water while the sea's presence is at once pervasive and spectral. Traversing the landscapes of Holy Island and Anglesey, including its ancient sites and graveyard, the poem alights in Porthdafarch where it contemplates the 'salt crusted' entanglements of memory and loss. Despite its invocation of a familiar flora (cowslips, gorse) and a recognisable topography, the poem remains haunted by a sense of secrecy, expressed in terms of a constellation of images connected to ideas of depth, cold and distant violence.

What happens when public humanities work, located at the perimeter of the Irish sea, speaks in a gothic idiom? 'Salt, or Evelyn on the Shore' is a good place to start a conversation about public humanities ecoGothic at the coast. Commissioned by *Ports, Past and Present* (hereafter *PPP)*, an initiative funded by the European Regional Development Fund via the Ireland Wales Cooperation programme, the poem probes the raw edges of a real-life story and draws out its ecological resonances. Attuned to the bleakness as well as the beauty of Anglesey, 'Salt' expresses an understanding of island life that mingles environmental and Gothic modes.

Public humanities ecoGothic at the coast consists of fundamental affective tropes and idioms drawn from the Gothic as cultural mode, brought into connection with lived experience of loss and shadowed by looming environmental dangers. Public humanities, in this context, means thinking about 'how the humanities are viewed and provide a road map for changing the world' (Smulyan, 2020) while also being aware of tensions between what Margaret Kelleher (2020) calls 'the arts as a form of social cohesion' and the disruptive, jagged forces of culture and creativity. As traces of tragedy mingle with the vibrancy and polychromatic

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melange of life, mediated by the ecologies of the coast, coastal ecoGothic may help to explore the 'challenge' articulated by John Brannigan et al (2019): 'to understand how some forms of cultural valuation are connected intimately to forms of ecological catastrophe' (p. 298). The case studies below explore our experiences of narrating coastal regional identities in combined public humanities and Gothic modes.

In using Brownson's poem to capture a sense of the reach and potential of public humanities ecoGothic at the coast, this essay seeks to understand how Gothic operates within the Anthropocene, considering the ways in which past tragedies connect to environmental fears secreted within narrative and memory. T. J. Hillard (2019) reminds us that '[i]f we consider [fearful secrets] in the context of the story of ecocriticism, the Gothic mode (or the "ecoGothic") urges us to ask: What has ecocriticism been burying? What has it been keeping out?'(p. 28). Nature writing and stories about a particular environment—in this case the coast—can be perceived in a purely pastoral or positivist mode, but to do so would be to ignore the anxiety that lurks at their edges. The conventions of the Gothic as genre cling to the coast because they are a good match for its preoccupations. Littoral spaces bring to the surface the ecophobia and caution that characterises the human condition. Jimmy Packham (2019) points out that the coast and the Gothic are entwined through shared liminal and anxiety-inducing indeterminacies:

> 'While definitions of the genre are quick to point out the nebulousness of the gothic, a recurrent theme of this fiction is the occupying and transgressing of borders and boundaries—political, cultural, spatial, ontological, epistemological, and so on—in order, on the one hand, to spook readers with the threat of such transgressions and, on the other, to highlight the constructed nature of those limits' (p. 206).

The specifically environmental register of this uncertainty and border-anxiety is expanded upon by Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019) in the inaugural issue of *Gothic Nature*

Journal: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic. They explain why it is that the traces of coastal tales cling with such tenacity:

> 'We see the "overwhelmingness" of Nature reflected in the fact that canonical Gothic is frequently associated with the sublime, an important precursor to Gothic Nature, which emphasises the awesome, exciting, and terrifying aspects of landscape. Ambience is vital to the Gothic and we have many instances in which it is the natural world that provides much of this ambience' (Parker & Poland, 2019: p. 3).

The Gothic resonates with coastal communities and their folkloric imagination because the coast and the Gothic are matched in their confusion regarding and transgression of borders, physical and ontological. Gothic *nature* specifically adds to this enduring influence by merging terror in and wonder at the natural world with Gothic uncertainty, melding the character of bioregion and fluid marine boundaries. As a result, a great deal of the power of Coastal Gothic stems from human anxieties about the uncertain nature of the coast itself coupled with the anxieties originating from thrills and fears of corporeal transgressions (e.g. the monstrous) and that of environments. In Ireland, Jack Fennell (2020) has made a case for the role of landscape in the monstrous: haunting and disrupting neat categories, a heterotopia or space of crisis. In an age of Anthropocene upheavals and economic uncertainties generated by the twin forces of climate crisis and Brexit, the Irish Sea has merged Irish and Welsh Gothic with twenty-first century fears about the constitutional state of the region, coastal erosion and disruptive weather events (see Connolly, 2021; Evershed, 2021).

Irish Sea Gothic

The Gothic has long been familiar to the inhabitants of the North Atlantic Archipelago, embedded in some of its most famous works of literature and shared across these islands over centuries, including Mary Shelley's classic novel, *Frankenstein* (1818). When north-easterly winds carry Victor Frankenstein from the Orkneys to the coast of Ireland, Shelley asks her readers to imagine islands joined by sea, buffeted by wind and weather. Victor's 'skiff' must battle with prevailing south westerly winds while navigating treacherous Hebridean currents.

Shelley may have had in mind the writing of her father, the Gothic novelist William Godwin, for whom Ireland as fatally entangled with Britain and 'a place of less security than most other countries which are divided from it by the ocean' (Godwin, 1794, Vol. 3: p. 93). That image of an insecure island shadowed by injustice is ramified in the shadows cast within the literature of archipelagic sea crossings. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the ship that transports the vampire from eastern Europe to the eastern shores of Britain has been read as 'a capstone to a long tradition of nautical and maritime gothicity in literature and legend' (Alder, 2016: p. 4; see also Trower, 2021). The great twentieth-century teller of ghost stories, M. R. James, meanwhile, situated some of his most famous tales on the eroding East Anglian coastline, at the edge of 'the monstrously avenging, unstoppably advancing North Sea' (Armitt, 2016: p. 107; see also Bacon & Whybray, 2021: p. 218).

According to Jane Aaron's (2013) study of Welsh Gothic, 'coastal spots frequented by smugglers or wreckers' were teeming with stories of ghosts and hauntings during the eighteenth century (p. 14). The Dolgellau-born surgeon, antiquarian and writer Thomas Richards explored the effects of great storms not just for ships foundering in the water, but also for the coastal communities who tried to save lives. In his short story 'Alice Denby', first published in 1825, Richards mingles childhood memories of All-Hallows Eve, which include various practices of divination still in use in the Barmouth area around 1800, with descriptions of a dramatic wrecking occurrence during 'a sore night for the sailors' with a white foaming sea described as 'the mermaid driving her flocks ashore' (2017: p. 28). Further south, along the Pembrokeshire coast, mermaids were less associated with storms, but more with sightings of mercurial people and sharing some traits with fairies. In folklore, the Plant Rhys Ddwfn were a tribe of magical people who lived on their own enchanted island just off the coast, but who frequented the markets at Fishguard, Cardigan, Milford Haven and Haverfordwest, all towns with considerable port activity up to the nineteenth century (Davies, 1911: pp. 89-92; Singer, 2021b). Ireland has similar legends of the *Sí* or fairy folk, especially surrounding the supernatural coastal events of November 10th, St. Martin's Night, when fishermen must never take a boat out to sea (Smith, 2020b). On Anglesey, the supernatural attaches to several holy wells that used to be venerated for their healing powers, whereas others attracted pilgrims with more sinister motives. The coastal Penrhos estate was home to such a cursing well until the farmer on whose land it was located destroyed it because of the busy stream of visitors who caused damage to his property (Singer, 2021a; Stanley, 1872: p. 256).

These traditions resonate within the longer history of lives and vessels lost in the Irish Sea, becoming part of what Gillian O'Brien (2020: p. 112) has described as the 'ring of sorrow' encircling Ireland, and the wider archipelago, 'binding together communities who have suffered maritime tragedies like beads on a rosary'. In centuries-old literary and folk traditions, Irish and Welsh coasts invoke the Gothic through strange stories of drowning, shipwreck, suicide and smuggling. The ecologies and bioregional imaginaries of the Irish Sea basin knit adjacent coasts together as stories, imaginaries and tragedies span the crossings that define it. The resulting accumulated death and commemoration found expression in the songs, and stories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as echoed within Brownson's poem.

Histories of a haunted shore run deep in the Irish Sea region meaning that a version of Public Gothic is well known to visitors. Ireland is home to a rich folklore of the sea and millennia-long thalassic mythologies. The Welsh coast exhibits a mirrored version of this aesthetic, as do the other Gothic coasts explored in papers across this collection. Perhaps less well understood, the public *ecoGothic* draws on the participation of Ireland and Wales in a region defined by monstrous ecologies of animal, vegetable and mineral, desolate haunts and hidden coastal caves. The ever-changing fortunes of the coastal communities in the region are of crucial importance. Within the PPP cases discussed below, public ecoGothic involves digital and stakeholder-based public history activities that constitute a form of blue knowledge, sense-making in the face of danger mediated by a sense of ecological anxiety mixed with human feats of bravery, infrastructure, climate vulnerability, tragedy and community identity in equal measure. The cases discussed offer examples of what Sarah Rich (2021) terms 'hauntographs', identified as 'liminal objects that are capable of negotiating those murky, fluid boundaries between past and present, nature and culture, and particularly life and death' (p. 13). The uncanny ecological ruins of the Gothic are fixed in material form in lighthouses, wrecks, memorials and infrastructures, but also haunt the present by shaping the undercurrent of ecoanxiety experienced by coastal culture. Today, these hauntographs sit alongside more visible phenomena such as storm surges, coastal erosion and the vagaries of ocean-going traffic and trade.

Public Coastal eco-Gothic

A shared past framed in Gothic modes can bring benefits to communities: London exploits its macabre literary and social history, while the Cornwall of coastal Gothic horrors outlined by Joan Passey in her doctoral research (2020) and in her edited collection of Gothic short fiction, *Cornish Horrors: Tales from the Land's End* (2021), gains a great deal of its bioregional and cultural lure from this identity. In regions such as the Welsh and Irish coasts, suffused by Gothic tropes and yet not strongly defined by them, the question of how much of the public humanities 'mix' should be Gothic—and coastal—in nature is an important question. Reframing the narrative is a task that cannot be undertaken lightly, but is frequently required to remediate a sense of place in the face of upheaval, such as the collapse of industries, the loss of jobs, a shift in generational and social memory. As Chambers et al. (2021: fig. 5 for summary) put it, shifting the frame is fundamental to 'co-develop more creative and transformative possibilities', but also runs the risk of creating echo chambers if the frame spans conflicted identities with power differentials. When reframing the ecoGothic along with a region, it is important that the result curates the memories, emotions and affects that resonate not only with the visitor, but also with the local community. Lived experience can never be reduced to a spook show, nor would the notion of and discourse on the ecoGothic suggest that it should.

Humanists telling stories of these coasts continuously ask themselves how tragedies and macabre deaths fit into a frame and constructive identity for community. They certainly tell as much of a story as positive stories, and coastal communities retain the grim legacies of the past and its triumphs in equal measure. Tourism cannot exist without also being—to some extent—thanatourism, and nowhere is this truer than in coastal zones. The ecoGothic intrudes when the tenuous relationship between humanity and technology clashes with the often-unforgiving terrain and hostile waters of oceanic spaces. As Emma McEvoy (2016) describes, engaging in Gothic tourism means presenting a place 'in terms of the Gothic'(p: 3). As a result, presenting environment and social life through this frame means, as the metaphor implies, making what is outside of the frame invisible. At the same time, as Simon Estok (2019) reminds us, not all fear of the environment is fundamentally Gothic, and the balance must be maintained:

'Ecohorror and the ecoGothic are always ecophobic. Antipathies and ecophobia toward   nature, on the other hand, often arise from rationally perceived threats to physical survival, such as tsunamis or earthquakes, and clearly do not always rank as ecohorror or the ecoGothic' (p. 48).

In the communities with whom we work, a wholly Gothic Irish Sea would not be welcome: there are many histories interweaving to produce a complex mix that allows community members to understand themselves with pride while visitors can understand them with admiration. As Estok (2019) suggests, not all fear of and negative emotion towards the coast is ecoGothic: rational fear of loss of life at sea or coastal erosion or extreme weather is only Gothic when glossed as such by culture. The way communities absorb this tension and make sense of it through story is a topic of interest to our project specifically, and to all scholars of the Gothic more broadly. Some elements of coastal life are macabre, others thrilling, and some are ornately Gothic: others are living community problems that should not be made into something gaudy for tourism. Too many Gothic tropes applied without discretion can cause imbalance. An excessive reliance on the Gothic in framing coastal identity risks turning daily life into a spectacle.

In addition to the ethical rationale, there is an equally important commercial tourism reason. Simply put, community preferences and the shaping of narratives that meet them is an important enabler of just blue growth. As Pafi et al. (2020) explain:

'Developing a systematic understanding of the tourist market that reflects community preferences and needs is a tactical challenge that is valuable to local communities. Lay knowledge and anthropological narratives are useful but normative constructs that give communities a sense of the complexity of markets are also tactically important as Blue Growth will intensify the multiple pressures they face in the future' (Pafi et al., 2020: p. 9).

Localised manifestations of a littoral life are defined in part by danger in the face of the ocean: the unpredictability of the Atlantic and Irish Sea coasts of Ireland and Wales define the storytelling and folkloric cultures that they nurture. The infrastructures designed to offset and prevent the loss of life caused by the waters are integrated into and captured within the reception of this history of blue tragedy, including lighthouses, lifeboats, the evolution of shipping and the rescue of lives at sea. They define identity, the contours of its negotiation, the aesthetics of its communication to publics large and small, and the kinds of stories taken into the corpus or canon of what is popularly remembered. They mingle with other large-scale hyperobject-like human events, such as the Industrial Revolution, the British Empire and its legacy, the First and Second World Wars and, most recently, Brexit (see Morton, 2013).

The ecoGothic privileges engagement with the political and affective ecologies of Gothic tropes and idioms, seeing them as an essential component of a discourse on subsequent phenomena such as climate crisis, ecophobia and ecogrief. Likewise, seeing the participation of Irish and Welsh coastal communities in a shared regional participation in the Gothic tells us a great deal not only about the present identities of these communities, but also the evolution and potential futures of a specifically coastal Gothic littoral space. The haunting of shores by clinging memories explains much of the character of place in the present and how it came to be storied, but also allows us to anticipate what stories might be told into the future without sanitising the past.

Case Studies from *Ports, Past and Present*

With the help of storytelling activities, the *PPP* project seeks to present a depth of narrative across five coastal communities—Dublin Port, Rosslare Harbour, Pembroke Dock, Fishguard and Holyhead—and to bring the past to life for visitors and residents alike. The goal of *PPP* is to increase tourism activity in the ports of the Irish Sea basin and to join stakeholders together in a tourism network. Using a taxonomy established by Chambers et al. (2021), the project engages in a range of knowledge co-production modes aimed at sustainability. The most relevant mode to this essay is that of reframing problems, which can be a key component of efforts to reframe agency, navigate differences, reframe power and brokering power. The modes by which a port community, and a region, understand themselves define a great deal of

which histories are 'in' and which are 'out', and the scopes of narrative and community agency in self-imagination and self-narrativisation. This is important in the context of the public humanities ecoGothic because the role of Gothic themes and tropes in the constitution of identity forms part of regional and community self-expression. As Susan Smulyan (2020) puts it, contemporary public humanities should be 'rooted in process and collaboration and dedicated to political activism', because 'we don't do research about communities, we do research with communities and then present what we've learned together'. Publicly-funded research projects that address landscapes at once historic and lived have to look 'beyond the boundaries of the academy, embracing both past and present, and theory and practice, in equal measure' (Daniels and Cowell, 2011: p. 116).

The stories that are emerging in the corpus of *PPP* are diverse in both theme and affective register. They are both history and living memory, and a reminder of the hardiness of coastal people and their vulnerability, running the full spectrum of coastal Gothic: tragedy, folklore, criminal activity, shipwreck, technology and disruption painted in an often-stark palette of long nineteenth-century flavour. Increasingly, they trace the inescapable entanglement of the human and non-human, the ecologies of Gothic emotion. Coastal Gothic framing is a method for making sense of generations of labour, loss, growth, decline and ecological entanglement. It draws on literary strains of Gothic tropes and themes, but also gives voice to their overall affective resonances and preoccupations in other modes. Some are creative, ranging from tragic to mournful to reflective. Others are historical, detailing gory motifs that titillated the contemporary press and the community alike. Some are a mix of modes, combining the creative and the scholarly, the 'professional' and the 'amateur' and the positive and negative valences of coastal life. In combination with geolocation, these interactions often trace the endurance of the physical imprints and relics of intangible cultural heritage, a different form of haunting on the shores of the Irish Sea. Capturing the emotionology of this landscape in a widely consumable public format is difficult, especially when ensuring that stakeholders with a very personal stake in the narrative are happy with the results. In this section we will explore a set of stories that run this thematic gauntlet and consider what decisions they might necessitate by their curators and what messages and modes of coastal living they might engender.

In what follows, we explore a series of stories from our project collection that participate in the themes of the Coastal Gothic. They are tinged with the hidden threat of the ocean and the fragility of coastal life, the vital services of coastal communities in the form of the lifeboat service, the long tail of community trauma and resonances that link nineteenth-century material to the present. When taken together, they demonstrate the longevity of the Gothic and its vital role in modern identity at the coast. These stories also demonstrate that tinges of the ecoGothic permanently tie the human and non-human together, making the story of coastal life inseparable from the whims of the environment and the intrusions of the plant and animal world.

In the case of the famous shipwreck *Alfred D. Snow*—located in the watery estuary that forms the border between Counties Waterford and Wexford—we glimpse the depth of memorialisation embedded into coastal memory (Smith 2020a). Rich (2021) has described shipwrecks as 'uniquely capable of dismantling the murky, fluid boundaries between past and present, sacred and secular, 'nature' and culture, and particularly life and death'(p. 13). This episode of tragic loss of life and heroic performance of the lifeboat service in challenging circumstances is an excellent socio-ecological illustration of her thesis. Steve Mentz's (2015) account of shipwrecks as a form of 'ecological parable' captures the fight against the ocean, documenting its capriciousness and patterns on an intimate local scale. He creates a lasting image of the destruction and the legacy of death at sea as flotsam washes up on the beaches for many weeks and months to come:

'They're willing for to risk their lives
to the coastguards' house they go
And they ask the captain for the boat
And he quickly tells them "No".
At last when he gave his consent
To the gallant hearted crew
In spite of storm, wind and tide
To the sinking ship they flew
But just as they reached the doomed ship
In hopes some lives to save

They see the last let go the mast

And sank beneath the wave

The dauntless Captain Cotter

With "Dauntless" ship by name

With courage brave they face the wave

To their assistance came' ('The Alfred de Snow', duchas.ie).

This poem memorialises and reinforces the double coin that is rescue at sea: heroism and tragedy combined. For every ship in distress off the Irish Sea coast that the lifeboatmen saved, another was lost with all hands. This harsh reality is best observed in the reaction to a wreck off the coast of Wexford that saw the crew of the lifeboat set out to sea under appalling conditions and fail to save the crew. In a piece of weather-themed lore from Passage East, County Waterford, 'the fishermen fishing near the spot [of the wreck] got warnings of an approaching storm [and] hear cries just like the cries of drowning men. When they hear these cries they make for home at one' ('The Fishermens' Warning', duchas.ie). Omens and predictions of weather to come tie the ecological into the Gothic, tuning in the community to the capricious changes in weather that characterise that stretch of coast. In another macabre piece of lore, 'Passage-men for weeks afterwards recovered the bodies. They are all buried at Ballyhack graveyard. The captain's body was found in a life jacket at Arthurstown strand the next day' ('The Wreck of the Alfred de Snow', duchas.ie). Tragedy and the subsumed discomfort of the ecoGothic are separate, but always close.

The temptation is to focus on the wreck of the *Alfred D. Snow* as either a community tragedy or as a macabre piece of folklore alone, but it can never be just one or the other. As we have seen, fear of the coastal environment is rational and is often openly on display: memorials to shipwrecks, life-boat disasters, drownings, and aeroplane crashes sit side by side—all of which can be found across all of our *PPP* port communities—with macabre mediated folk tales like the story of the *Alfred D. Snow*. As a result of this multifaceted affect, it would be a disservice to those who are the custodians of these stories to turn their community history into something simplified for the purposes of tourism. The long-term memory of the wreck haunts the present, and the medium of the national folklore collection also ensured that the legacy of

community reaction survives, recorded in the early twentieth century when the wreck was still living memory.

In contrast to submerged wrecks, lighthouses represent more visible key components of coastal lore: they are repositories of an identity centred around imperial and industrial engineering achievement, challenging sites that were often erected at great human cost, beacons that saved lives, and lodestones of a particular genre of coastal Gothic ambience. The once lonely life of the lighthouse keeper, now automated, is a central trope of the genre. When crossing the Irish Sea, its lighthouses are impossible to ignore. South Stack, Strumble Head, the Skerries, The Smalls, Tuskar—they mark out the dangerous contours of a stretch of water that has long claimed lives.

The story of Tuskar Rock, so prominent in the shipping lanes entering and exiting Rosslare Europort today, is a sign of the macabre ambience of prominent public locations. The mode in which their story is told is a bellwether for the entire enterprise of telling the stories of coastal communities. When done with nuance, it can be a prism for the multitudes of stories that are possible within this region. If reduced to thrills and chills, it eclipses later perspectives, and tragedies. The story of the lighthouse and its construction on a tiny rocky outcrop is recorded in popular folklore and memorialised by the community of Rosslare Harbour village (Smith, 2020c). It couples a major improvement in shipping safety with large-scale drowning of workmen in harsh and unforgiving conditions:

'In the Spring of 1813 it was decided to erect a lighthouse on Tuskar Rock. Beams were thrown across it, and connected to it firmly by iron clamps. On this a platform was laid on which huts were erected for 41 workmen.

Six weeks afterwards a terrible storm arose. Some of the men ran naked from their beds to the highest point of the rock, but before the rest could escape a surge swept the huts away and many men were drowned. Those who escaped were clinging to the rock from Sunday at 4 o'clock until Wednesday' ('Local Happenings (Murrintown)', duchas.ie).

The men who died building the rock are memorialised in Rosslare Harbour town, but also form part of an ecoGothic mythology. Lighthouses and shipwrecks are such powerful Gothic tropes that episodes featuring them are dragged into the orbit of the Gothic. Despite this powerful magnetism, it is still important to avoid defaulting to the ecoGothic. This is not fiction, although related through folklore in a fictional mode. This is not literature, although it is amenable to ecocritical reading because of the mode of its recording.

For comparison, another more macabre and overtly Gothic companion piece to the Tusker Rock story exists on the other side of the ferry route to Pembrokeshire on another tiny rock in the sea where the Smalls Lighthouse is erected (de Chroustchoff, 2021a). In a famous story, two lighthouse keepers fell out and became antagonistic to each other, trapped together on a tiny wooden structure in complete isolation for prolonged periods of time. When one of the keepers died of natural causes, his companion, fearing accusations of murder, kept his rotting corpse lashed to the outer face of the lighthouse for the remainder of his tenure, haunted by the increasing odour and consequences of his actions. The story is both a disaster that led to reforms in the staffing practices of lighthouse keepers—set at three men on shift minimum— but also a dripping Gothic confection that has spawned two films entitled *The Lighthouse*: a 2016 Welsh film starring Mark Lewis Jones and Michael Jibson and the 2019 American version based loosely on the episode at a genre (and importantly, at a Gothic) level, starring Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe. The ecoGothic nightmare of Dafoe's and Pattinson's descent into isolated madness is simply another layer of adornment upon the already sensationalised Smalls Lighthouse story, which in turn is a story of tragedy and what we might describe as cascading structural failures. Tourism Gothic risks adding a layer on top of community memory and raw emotions that does not fit the source content—a dangerous possibility.

Moving on from the Gothic affordances and risks of *PPP*'s Irish Sea stories, it is worth focusing on the environment itself to explore the *eco*Gothic more explicitly. Another notable nineteenth-century tale of improbable journeys glossed with the Gothic appears in the case of Alfred 'Centennial' Johnson, a Danish-American mariner who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a small dory. He avoided death at sea by clinging to his boat, (allegedly) fought off a shark and eventually washed up, bedraggled, on the Pembrokeshire coast:

'The inhabitants of Abercastle, Pembrokeshire were much surprised on Saturday [10th August 1876] by the arrival on their coast of a seaman named Alfred Johnson in an open boat in which he left Gloucester Massachusetts on the 15th June. The boat is called "Centennial" and is only 15ft 6ins keel... After partaking some refreshments at Abercastle he again put to sea, directing his course for Liverpool' ('Extraordinary Voyage across the Atlantic', cited in de Chroustchoff, 2021c).

Johnson is a fascinating case, because the *story* of his crossing has a Munchausen-esque quality. It is impossible to verify any of the more outlandish details of the crossing—Johnson supposedly fought off a shark—yet cross the Atlantic he did. The achievement, even rendered down to its most mundane elements, is still extraordinary. But the story contains layers upon layers of additional reception and adaptation: Johnson's tale of the crossing is likely to be tall, there is no way to know the full role of reporters and first-hand accounts in the telling, and the legacy of the tale has gained the added inflation of folklore and local legend. Despite all this, it did happen: Johnson was celebrated locally, and the *Centennial* was towed back to Gloucester, MA. The boat can be found today, expertly restored, in the collection of the Cape Ann Museum.

Other stories of improbable survival participate in the dissonances of coastal Gothic at once extreme and every day. In another story from 1859, the villagers of Cwm-yr-Eglwys in Pembrokeshire survived an unprecedented weather event known as the *Royal Charter* Storm—for the ship that it famously claimed off the coast of Anglesey—despite their vulnerable parish church being swept away (see also Jones, 2021). The tones in which the aftermath is described are directed through a mournful and stoically macabre Gothic lens:

'The congregation in the church, many of belonging to sea going families, were doubtless praying for deliverance but at the height of the storm the tide, driven by the wind, surged through the east door and across the nave, bringing down

the north and east walls of the building. Miraculously, no one was lost or injured in the confusion and all the worshippers managed to escape via the west door. The graveyard however sustained the full force of the waves and was half washed away. Coffins were exposed or broken apart and some were seen bobbing on the water, with the corpses of the recent dead visible to their kinsfolk' (de Chroustchoff, 2021b).

The trope of the Big Storm and its strange revelations—a common Welsh theme along with that of the drowned hundred, Cantre'r Gwaelod—is often an omen for the deep, dead animals, strange deposits on the shore or other unusual weather lore. It has attached itself to the small community as a memory of potential extinction. This tale is distinctly ecoGothic because it merges uncertainty about the extent of coastal vulnerability with the anxiety-inducing unpredictability of weather to create a story of hardship and commemoration. In a time of rapid climate change, it also functions as a warning for galloping coastal erosion around the Irish Sea which threatens many coastal villages' future. Today, only the stories remain, and Cwm-yr-Eglwys is empty, except for three permanent residents, a host of holiday homes and a car park, the mournful relics of the village and natural beauty most often experienced through the lens of coastal walking, boating and sea swimming. In 2009, poet Emyr Lewis, who knew the place from childhood holidays, wrote a short epitaph that captures the lonely aftermath of a place swept away by time and weather so that only stone remnants and incongruous tourists remain:

'Gwylan haerllug a glaw yn arllwys,

cŵn, tai haf ac acenion Tafwys,

tonnau a beddau ar bwys, a chreigle;

mae rhyw wagle yng Nghwm-yr-Eglwys.

Impudent seagull and pouring rain,

Dogs, summer homes and Thames accents,

Waves and graves nearby and rocks,

There is an emptiness in Cwm-yr-Eglwys'

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(Trans. Morys Rhys, as cited in de Chroustchoff, 2021b).

Conclusion

As blue tourism becomes increasingly popular and a valuable way to tie coastal regeneration to the preservation of community histories, the public role of coastal eco-Gothic remains in question. Just as *Dracula* can be interpreted in tones ranging from Hammer Horror to subtle refashioning and psychological drama, so too can shores be haunted by more than ghosts and pirates. Ports, Past and Present has collected coastal Gothic material that touches on every theme of coastal life imaginable, and it is crucial that this material forms an intrinsic component of the project's public humanities storytelling. Such a merging of the Gothic into public narrative requires that distinctions such as that between literary criticism and history, texts and the lives of their authors and 'professional' and 'amateur' scholarship be dissolved. This is wholly appropriate to a Gothic nature, for one of the central tenets of the discourse is the inescapability of a grasping, enveloping ecology populated by the monstrous and strange animal, vegetable and mineral alike. The clinging affective tendrils of the ecoGothic are a dream for the public humanities scholar when used sensitively and sparingly. Its final effect—or affect—is a slow education in the emotional complexities of shores haunted by layer upon layer of complex emotions and often traumatic stories, digested and blended to present an entirely new sense of littoral spaces and their importance.

Although the PPP project is not fully realised at the time of writing, it has become clear that a tourist identity for the Irish Sea Basin is not complete without Gothic and ecoGothic dimensions. Gothic natures reside in every tale, from deposited sand-encrusted traces of tragedy at sea to intruding waters to fragility in the face of unyielding environments. The stoicism and endurance of those who live at the coast remains a rebuke to any urge to exoticise the coast. Only when a balance is achieved in which triumph sits adjacent to tragedy and love is mingled with loss can the multi-faceted experience of a life at the mercy of and attuned to the ocean and the littoral ecology emerge.

This article has suggested both the attractions and limitations of public humanities ecoGothic. While it is true that it is 'useful—maybe even therapeutic' to tell stories that concern

the Gothic pasts of coastal places, there are ethical concerns to bear in mind (Bacon & Whybray, 2021, p. 230). Different publics—the local community, visitors and tourists, observers from afar—experience a rich bricolage of affects when learning about the coast. There are some fearful, traumatic and uneasy stories to be found, expressed with and alongside mediators such as the sea, the sand, the coastal biosphere. By the reckoning of family and local history, much of the coastal Gothic in Ireland and Wales remains close at hand. Deaths are remembered and mourned: they are not presented as fictions, the cruelty of the coastal environment does not exist for atmosphere, and the legacy that they represent is tied to a long sequence of memories and tales. But no history is complete and there is always more room for further research, always adhering to the principle that ecoGothic stories can only be told with and alongside the coastal communities from which they originate.

BIOGRAPHY

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