

HY BRASIL: CARTOGRAPHIC ERROR, CELTIC ELYSIUM, OR THE NEW JERUSALEM? EARLY LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE IMAGINARY BRASIL ISLAND

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In the late thirteenth century so-called portolan charts began to be produced which were named for the *portolano* or pilot book. They were then much in demand for the increasing Mediterranean trade and shipping, because they provided practical navigational help which was derived from seafarers and specifically compiled for seafarers. When commercial interests drew them into the Atlantic, the Mediterranean traders had the portolanos extended northwards to take in the British Isles and Northern Europe as well as the newly discovered (or imagined) Atlantic island groups (Campbell 67).

The early portolan charts were produced almost exclusively by Italian and Catalan cartographers. One of these, the Genoese cartographer Angelino Dulcert, was the first, as far as we know, to put Brazil Island on the map. His early-fourteenth-century chart marks a large round island called 'insula de brazil' to the west of Ireland.¹ Other mapmakers copied it, and for the next five hundred and fifty years this island held its place until it was finally removed from the charts in 1865.

One might well ask why this Genoese cartographer marked an island where there is none, and what prompted him to give it this particular name. When mapping out new territories, the cartographers strove to draw information from as many sources as possible. They incorporated older maps and local knowledge into their charts, and, in time, they would revise these through use and comparison with other charts (Kelley 18). But with Ireland lying on the outer margins of the ancient world, older maps hardly existed,² and cartographic progress was hampered by the fact that not long after Dulcert, other Mediterranean mapmakers applied the name of Brasil Island to one of the larger islands of the Azores group, which we nowadays call Terceira. A little later we find two, sometimes even three, Brasil Islands marked in one and the same chart in different parts of the Atlantic Ocean.

1 Some attribute the chart to Angelino Dulcert, a Majorcan mapmaker of Genoese origin, others to his colleague Angelino Dalorto, who, some argue, is the same person as Dulcert, as their maps show such a remarkable accord in style, form, and content. Because of this uncertainty we come across references like "Dulcert/Dalorto" or the "Dalorto-group." Exactly when this map first appeared is also somehow uncertain, but most cartographers put it between 1325 and 1330. The map is preserved in Florence and forms part of the Prince Corsini Collection.

2 The earliest maps in which Ireland is represented are those of the British Isles and charts of the Western Coasts of Europe and World Maps. No particular map of Ireland is known from before 1489; see Andrews 13.

The free distribution of the name is confusing and has indeed caused consternation. Small wonder, then, that in his discussion of 'Brazil' as a geographical appellation, Walter Scaife remarks in 1890 that this toponym has something of a will-o'-the-wisp character, "for [...] it may be seen designating a great Antarctic continent, extending to the South Pole, or a small island near the arctic circle; or it may be as far west as the southern part of South America or as far east as [...] the coast of Ireland." Even the form of the name, he observes, "is almost as various as the positions in which it is found [...]" (Scaife 209), and he lists thirteen different variations.³

Trying to establish what local knowledge the early cartographers would have had, we find that Irish trade relations with France and Italy are pretty well documented from the Norman invasion onward, and so we must assume that the mariners of France and Italy had ample opportunities to familiarise themselves with the coasts of Ireland where they would have obtained further local information (Westropp, "Brasil" 259).⁴ What is not so clear, however, is whether they garnered this information from the native Irish, the Norse, or the Normans. Westropp points out that most of the Irish places marked on the early portolan charts were well known to the Anglo-Normans. Accordingly, French or rather Norman influence underlies these maps from the very first, while distinctive Irish names remain unrecorded (Westropp, "Early Italian Maps" 363-364; "Brasil" 259).

What is more, Westropp also draws attention to the fact that the maps contain names which are neither Norman nor Irish, but are toponyms of southern European extraction. In some cases they represent straightforward Spanish translations; for example, 'The Bull Rock' in Kerry is marked as *Toro*, its neighbouring island, 'The Cow,' is down as *Vaca*, and 'The Old Head' in Cork is called *Cap Veio*, etc. Other sites are given names that bear no resemblance to the local versions whatsoever, as is the case with 'Bolus Head,' which is marked as *Lespor d'irlanda*. The two corollaries of this are, first, that it is quite erroneous to assume that the names on the portolan charts are all somehow derived from the Irish language and, second, that, as there is no corresponding island named in the Irish tradition, a Mediterranean origin of the toponym is more than likely.

In the early Middle Ages, 'grana de Brazil' was a coveted and very valuable commodity. It was a dye whose name is derived from its colour, namely a fiery red. "Weight for weight it was more valuable than gold, and the demand for clear strong colours for the clothes of [...] rich men [...] made it an ideal adventurer's product" (Hills 54-55). Chaucer already refers to its use in the *Canterbury Tales*, where he says, "Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyn with brasile, ne with greyn of Portyngale" (206; epi-

3 Scaife lists the following names: *Brasilia*, *Bresilia*, *Prislia*, *Prisilli*, *Brasiellie*, *Brazili*, *Brasil*, *Brassil*, *Brazil*, *Brazill*, *Brazile*, *Presillg*, *Brasi* (Scaife 209).

4 Traces of merchants from Florence, Lucca, Pisa, Sienna, and Parma are found as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Ireland, but none from either Venice or Genoa; see Andrews 18.

logue to *The Nun's Priest's Tale*). The dye was mainly extracted from the logwood tree of the genus *Caesalpinia*, commonly referred to as brazil-wood, after which the South American country is named. What is less well known is that the dye was also prepared from two types of lichen called *Rocella* or *Orchella* moss. This northern species of brazil, which grows on Atlantic rocks and headlands, has been found not only in Irish waters, but also as far north as Iceland. Columbus mentions "collecting brazil" in the accounts of his third and fourth voyages, and judging by the equipment he brought along for this – slung bags and knives – one can only assume that these were lichen-gathering and not tree-felling expeditions (Hills 54). As with the South American country, then, the dye may very well have been responsible for giving Brasil Island its name.

Others have argued that originally the name could have denoted a volcanic island, since it is a Romance word for "brazier," of which we find variants in French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian, all having to do with fire, also red of course (Kelley 25). The Italian geographer Revelli, who holds that *brasile* is cognate with *brazi*, the Genoese word for red embers, is certain that it was this Genoese word which supplied all the Atlantic islands with the name. He points out that in the district of Genoa we still find a place called 'Brasile' (Revelli 380-381).

If seafarers had understood the name to mean a volcanic island, they would hardly have made such determined efforts to find it. There is some anecdotal evidence of Cornish and Welsh gentlemen⁵ squandering their family's fortunes in fruitless attempts to find the elusive island. Far better documented are the endeavours of Bristol merchants in the last decade of the fifteenth century, who sent two to four ships each year in search of it. In 1497, an Englishman by the name of John Day informed Christopher Columbus that John Cabot had found Brasil Island, adding that Columbus knew of course that its discovery had already been made by the English some time previously.⁶ To this day, it remains a mystery to which island these letters are referring.

Once on the maps, Brasil Island not only attracted merchants; writers, too, fell for its lure. Spain provides us with the earliest literary references to it. As early as 1340, an anonymous Spanish Franciscan monk wrote a travel book in which the first person narrator purports to give an account of a journey through Africa, Europe, and Asia. Among many other islands, he claims to have visited Brasil, by which he clearly meant Terceira (*Book of the Knowledge* 29). In one sense his claim is negligible be-

5 In the early fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Arundell of Filley, "having injured his fortune by a wild adventure in attempting to discover an imaginary island called Old Brazil [...], sold his manor and barton, and removed to the parish of Sithny" (Hitchins 2, 206). From *A History of the Isle of Man* we also learn that one Sir "Richd Buckley of Anglisey" had fruitlessly endeavoured the discovery of "O'Brazille" by "twice manning out a ship of his own from Beaumaris" (Blundell 1, 7).

6 Of the dozens of studies on the subject, the most succinct is probably by A. A. Ruddock.

cause the name is all we hear of it, but the early date is important. It tells us that people already knew of its existence although it had not yet been marked on any known map.⁷

More intriguing is a fifteenth-century Spanish version of the legend of King Arthur, written by one Lope García de Salazar (1399-1476). Salazar changed the traditional story of Arthur's final resting place by substituting Brasil Island for Avalon, placing it near Ireland, twenty-five leagues from Land's End in Cornwall (see Sharrer; Ryan; "Salazar's Account"). He justifies the substitution by pointing to sea charts which clearly show the island and also by giving an account of a meeting with Bristol sailors who told him that they had found the island and had taken on there a load of what they thought was firewood, but which turned out to be brazil-wood. Having made a fortune from its sale, they naturally wished to rediscover the island, but were unable to do so. To Salazar, this made perfect sense, because he knew it was enchanted. He comments on the belief of the English that Morgain, Arthur's sister, had cast a spell on the island and that it could only be discovered if the ship could see the island before the island the ship ("Salazar's Account" 5). Its enchanted status notwithstanding, Salazar firmly believed in its existence, and his reference to brazil-wood and Bristol sailors are obvious indications that his story was inspired by the nautical explorations of the Englishmen.

While there are passing references in earlier novelists and playwrights, the seventeenth-century English writer Richard Head (c.1637-1686?) was the first to elevate Brasil Island to a full-blown literary topic. It is not entirely surprising that Head, author of *The English Rogue* and by all accounts a bit of a rogue himself, found disappearing islands attractive. An inveterate gambler, he frequently faced bankruptcy, which obliged him temporarily to duck out of sight and also to produce books quickly by borrowing from other works, thereby resulting in his notorious reputation for plagiarism. Head published three works in which Brasil Island figures: *Hic et Ubique; or The Humours of Dublin* (1663), *The Western Wonder; or, O'Brazeel, an Incharnted Island Discovered* (1674), and *O-Brazile; or, The Incharnted Island* (1675). Like Salazar before him, Head makes reference to the maps, to the island's enchantment, and to the English expeditions. In his first two books, a bunch of blackguards on the run are desperately trying to find Brasil Island, because they need a hiding place and because they hope to lay their hands on its fabled wealth. In each of the books their attempts fail. His third literary quest for Brasil Island is not only different in style, tenor, and format, but also in its outcome. In *O-Brazile; or, The Incharnted Island* the island is discovered and explored. The lucky seafarers are one Captain Nisbet and his crew, who chanced upon it close to the coast of Northern Ireland. All the circumstances of the exploration are related in the manner of a factual eyewitness account and are contained in a letter supposedly written by William Hamilton, a man from Derry, who

7 The earliest map showing this particular Brasil Island is the 1351 Portolano Laurenziano Gaddiano seu Atlante Medicaeo, preserved in Florence.

claims to have faithfully written down everything Captain Nisbet told him about his exploration of the island. To this day the letter is still sometimes quoted as an authentic piece of evidence.

So what did Captain Nisbet have to say about Brasil Island? We learn that its inhabitants are destitute Scots-Gaelic-speaking people who feel greatly relieved at having been discovered at long last. Descended from noble ancestors, these once prosperous islanders have been unable to manage their own affairs and plentiful resources and are incapable of ridding themselves of an evil spell under which they have lain for hundreds of years. In other words, their *ancien régime* has failed miserably. With its rich gold and silver mines untapped, its towns derelict, and its population languishing, the island is clearly in need of a competent colonial power to rescue it.

The view that a culturally superior nation could by rights take over another considered inferior was of course quite commonly expressed in the context of colonial expansion, but I do not think that Head intended to make a political statement here. He needed to write books which catered for, and satisfied, a popular taste. *O-Brazile* was clearly intended to excite the English reading public, with whom travel books, in particular those which fuelled their sense of superiority, were prodigiously popular. In fact, reports of newly discovered islands, whether real or fictitious, were sure to cause a sensation among the reading public all over Europe. One such example is Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines*, which was published in London in 1668. It was an instant success throughout Europe and was translated into French, Dutch, Italian, and German (Ford). Head's *O-Brazile* is clearly modelled on the *Isle of Pines*, which was ambiguous enough to make some readers believe that it was a true story of discovery, and it, too, was published in the form of a letter purporting to be an eyewitness account.

In the 1720s, another booklet appeared under the title of *The History of the Incharnted-Island of O-Brazile*, claiming to give an account of a visit to the island. Head's influence is unmistakable. Here we have a sailor named William Hogg, on board a ship sailing from Londonderry to Boston, who describes how the crew suddenly espy an island, about twenty leagues off Galway. When they explore it they learn that they have landed on Brasil Island, where they stay for the next seven years. Again, the island is portrayed from the point of view of someone who is smug in the knowledge of coming from a culturally superior background, and the islanders are described as pretty barbarous and devoid of art, culture, and industry.

If we turn to Ireland for early traces of Brasil Island, we find that as a literary motif it occurs much later than in England. There is, however, a highly intriguing case of an attempt to write about the island, a case involving treason and piracy within the lofty echelons of Irish society.

The four main players in this drama: the Reverend Thomas Contarine, Oliver Goldsmith's uncle; Charles O'Connor, a preeminent antiquarian; Richard Digby, a historio-

grapher and relative of Henry Brooke; as well as Henry Brooke himself, the Anglo-Irish poet and dramatist and better known as the father of Charlotte Brooke. The time: 1743. In June of that year, a prospectus was published advertising a book entitled *Ogygian Tales; Or, A Curious Collection of Irish Fables, Allegories and Histories, From the Relations of Fintane the Aged, for the Entertainment of Cahal Crove Darg, during that Prince's Abode in the Island of O'Brazil, In which are occasionally set forth, The Manners, Customs, Arts and Religion of the Ancient Inhabitants of Ireland, with the Characters of the most illustrious Persons in Science and Government*.⁸

Apparently, O'Connor, who had written the manuscript, had given it to his friend Richard Digby, who in turn passed it on to his cousin, Henry Brooke. Brooke, sensing its marketability, kept the manuscript and tried to pass it off as his own (O'Connor, *The Letters* 1, xvi; O'Connor, *Letters: A Catholic Voice* 103n). Unbeknownst to the others, he advertised under his own name the proposal for *A History of Ireland from the Earliest Times*, which was based entirely on O'Connor's manuscript.⁹ When this was discovered, the Reverend Contarine was so incensed over Brooke's "treachery" that he advised Digby to file a bill against him in order to brand him with public infamy (O'Connor, *Memoirs* 192), while Charles O'Connor, who had taken legal advice in the matter, was equally encouraged to bring Mr. Brooke's "dirty" tricks out into the open (O'Connor, *Memoirs* 195). Regrettably, in the end, neither the *Ogygian Tales* nor the *History* appeared.

In the late eighteenth century, the island suddenly comes to be called 'Hy Brasil'¹⁰ in Ireland, where it develops into a popular theme in the following century. For the patriotic movements the west generally began to acquire a special significance, but the

8 K. O'Donovan mentions that he had found references to the prospectus in a number of catalogues, but as he was unable to trace it he assumed it was now lost. Happily this is not the case, for a copy of it is preserved as part of the *Stowe MSS* in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin. I am afraid that in the light of the story surrounding the prospectus, Donovan's praise for Brooke's ground-breaking enthusiasm for Irish antiquities has to be modified somewhat.

9 *Dublin Journal* no. 1868 (26-29 January 1744/5). The full title of Brooke's proposal was *The History of Ireland from the Earliest Times; wherein are set forth the ancient and extraordinary Customs, Manners, Religion, Politics, Conquests and Revolutions of that once hospitable, polite and martial Nation; interspersed and illustrated with extraordinary Digressions, and the private and affecting Histories of the most celebrated of the Natives*, in 4 vols, by Henry Brooke.

10 In spoken Irish *Hy* and *O* share the same sound, being like the English 'O,' but in English the first part of the island's name is pronounced 'hi.' *Hy* (or *I*) signified a district, a tribe or an island, and when annexed to the name of persons, it frequently signified a chief. As a surname we find *O Brazil* and *Brassill* which are anglicised forms of the Irish sept of Ó Breasail. Then there is the Clann Bhreasail, which was the tribe name of the Uí Bhreasail of Oriel; see Mac Lysaght 39-40. As a place name it is mentioned in connection with the Synod of Ráth Breasail. There is a place in Co. Armagh called Clanbrassil, formerly *Hy-Breasail*, and another *Hy-Breassail* used to be in Co. Tipperary, but it no longer exists; see Ó Muchadha 151-161.

Literary Revivalists, in search of the pure, uncontaminated soul of Ireland, pushed the focus of their attention as far west as possible, that is, farthest away from England, to the western island.

Local folklore around the Irish coastal areas abounds with tales of enchanted islands, often based on one of the commonest of sea phenomena, which is the delusion of sighting land. A cloud on the horizon or a fogbank is easily mistaken for a shadowy island, and its disappearance and reappearance explained by magic. Indeed, as early as the twelfth century, in his *Topography of Ireland*, Gerald of Wales drew attention to the folklore surrounding one such imaginary island, without name or location, which he simply referred to as the "phantom island" (66).

All along the western and northern coasts in particular, we find a firm belief in such phantom islands, most of which have local names and different legends and tales attaching to them. But in none of the even moderately old folklore collections do we come across 'Hy Brasil.' Nor do any of the early Irish texts, records, or annals mention it. And this is the reason why Irish scholars dismiss it as a non-authentic name (Westropp, "Brasil" 255; MacNeill qtd. in Westropp, "Brasil" 393), with the great Celtist James Carney insisting that this "curious term" is found "exclusively in non-Gaelic and comparatively late sources" (Carney 47).¹¹

And yet the imaginary island of Hy Brasil came to be presented as the epitome of all things Celtic. As both an incarnation of Gaelic Ireland and as the location of the Celtic Otherworld its charm proved irresistible for the Celtic Revivalists. Here, imagination and reality could meet, the spiritual and the common could be reconciled, the mythical Celtic past could be merged with the rural Irish present: its romantic possibilities were endless. While numerous poets and writers sang its praises, Lady Gregory laid the scene of one of her plays in Hy Brasil (*The Jester*), and Jack B. Yeats painted it (*A Race in Hy-Brasil*). It also became a Christian designation, on a par with the terrestrial paradise reserved for God's saints. It was the island which St. Brendan set out to find. The association between St. Brendan and Hy Brasil had in fact become so commonplace by the end of the nineteenth century that the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* could confidently state that according to tradition, St. Brendan "made a voyage in his curragh across the Western ocean, in the sixth century, in search of the shadowy land of Hy-Brasil [...]" (66).

Unfortunately, there is not enough space to trace this fascinating later development, and so we will finally turn to Northern Ireland. Nowhere else is Brasil Island more cryptically bound up with questions of national and religious identity than in the northern province of Ulster. The two most elaborate stories concerning the island stem from here. Although published anonymously, both were in all probability written

11 If it did reflect an Irish tribal name, Carney argues, it is difficult to see how it came to be associated with the idea of an imaginary island.

by Northern Irish clergymen, and, by peculiar coincidence, they both date from the same year, 1752.

A Voyage to O'Brazeel is about an island which was once situated close to the coast of Donegal, but whose inhabitants had opted to become invisible, and who now, having lived under water for generations, dread the possibility of their discovery. So the story focuses on the islanders rather than on the enterprising conqueror or would-be coloniser.

The island is a little paradise with cattle in fair pastures, splendid vegetation, fruit and grain in full perfection, where the people are happy and virtuous. Two men from Northern Ireland manage to visit the island, and the author contrasts what he obviously considers to be the unfavourable social conditions of Ulster with O'Brazeel's ideally organised society. The two could hardly be any more different. There is no aristocracy, no military, and no institutionalised church in O'Brazeel. Personal property is limited, poverty, corruption, and injustice unheard of.

Overall, it amounts to a pious yet progressive vision of an autonomous Ulster which serves as a model for possible unification with the rest of Ireland. It is presented as a popular sovereignty, underpinned by a radical and egalitarian philosophy, prudently governed by elected representatives, and spiritually guided by a church brought back to her apostolic origins.

The other book, entitled *Old Ireland's Misery at an End*, is also set in Donegal and shares a number of features with *A Voyage* in the conception of Brasil Island. In both cases the island is bound up with millenarian prophecy. Both texts portray the island as hidden under water, and, as its concealment is deliberate on God's part, it follows that the islanders are the chosen people. Like the biblical New Jerusalem it is not yet "seen," but its emergence is prophesied in time to come.

The two authors imaginatively explore Brasil Island's complex symbolic possibilities. Coming from opposite sides of Protestantism – apostolic and episcopalian – they both use it for patriotic ends, albeit with different political goals. *A Voyage* is aiming at a totally independent Ireland, while *Old Ireland's Misery* is only looking for legislative independence for Ireland within an English Empire.¹²

To conclude, what began as an error by an Italian cartographer initiated a spate of exploratory voyages, but, more importantly, has for centuries provided writers in Spain, England, and Ireland with a rich literary motif. In Ireland, when the ethnocentric approach to the west and with it the romantic sentimentality disappeared, poets and writers began to explore, without strain, Hy Brasil's philosophic dimension. In the United Kingdom there were sporadic sightings, including mythical apparitions

12 The author specifically rules out Scotland, which is why he is not talking about a British Empire.

throughout the last century, and in 2002 the island resurfaced in all its glory in Margaret Elphinstone's novel *Hy Brasil*.

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