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Legends, Myths, and Facts of Kylemore Abbey

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### Abstract

Nestled in the side of a mountain in the west of Ireland is the iconic Kylemore Abbey Castle. This paper explores the history of this structure by examining the legends, myths, and facts behind it and the surrounding land. The myths and legends are linked to Ireland's old Celtic beliefs and explain much of the interesting landscape surrounding the massive structure. Majority of the paper focuses on the factual history of Kylemore which starts from the first construction of the castle all the way to how it is being used today. The Victorian castle has had many owners throughout the years, each with their own rich history. While the research component includes a plethora of websites, books, and peer reviewed articles, much comes from personal touring of the abbey itself and viewing estate lands with which it is surrounded by.

Kylemore Abbey, previously referred to as Kylemore Castle, stands in beautiful Connemara, located on Ireland's west coast, as an iconic landmark. Nestled in the side of Dúchruach (Black Stack) mountain, Kylemore is more than just a pretty face. Lying within this beautiful structure is a story of love and loss, while the surrounding landscape holds stories of magic and power. For all the stories written on the walls, some remain mere myths and legends of what might have been, while others live on as the factual moments in history. Becoming the home to many opulent families over the years, Kylemore, today, has become a preserved symbol of Irish history and an iconic monument of the love stories brought in by each owner.

Kylemore Abbey is a beautiful giant structure with a picturesque view from all angles. However, the land in which Kylemore sits on is more than just picturesque. Nestled in a mountain, and surrounded by other mountains, Kylemore Abbey sits between one of Celtic mythology's most famous giants. Legend has it, two nearby mountains used to be the homes of mythological giants who were known to fight quite often. Dúchruach Mountain is the mountain in which Kylemore Abbey sits in and was inhabited by the hero Cú Chulainn. Dúchruach means Black Stack and got its name from its unusual black stone that makes it stand out from the other mountains in the area. On the opposite side of Kylemore Valley sits another mountain, known as The Diamond, for its exposed quartz which sparkles in the sun, was inhabited by giant Fionn McCool. These giants were known for being "hot-tempered" and rarely did they agree on anything. It is said that during one of their famous arguments Cú Chulainn picked up a large stone and heaved it at Fionn McCool. Though the stone narrowly missed McCool, it landed on what is now the Kylemore estate and at an unusual angle so it looks like a traditional iron that would be used for ironing clothes. It is for this unusual shape that this stone earned the name, "The Ironing Stone". Today, this stone is said to grant wishes if one stands with their back to it and throws three pebbles over the stone while making their wish. (Kylemore Abbey, 2017).

Fionn McCool's tales are not just mentioned with the Ironing Stone however, as he is also associated with a well-known, unusual looking outcrop that can be seen in the mountain high above the Kylemore's cathedral. This rocky ledge is called "Leim na h'Eilte" or The Deer's Leap (Kylemore Abbey 2017). Legend has it that McCool's hound dog, Bran was chasing an enchanted deer one day. Bran began running too close to the rocky cliff's edge so McCool tried to call him back, but Bran was already too far ahead and focused to hear him. When the deer leapt off the rocky ledge, Bran followed. Both disappeared into the lake below and were never seen again. (Kylemore Abbey, 2017).

The lake, which sits as a beautifully sparkling mirror to Kylemore Abbey holds many more myths as well, other than the disappearance of a hound and an enchanted deer. One of its most famous stories is the legend of the white horse. Supposedly, once every seven years, a majestic white horse arises from the lake and gallops across before it disappears again. Interestingly, in 2011, the staff at Kylemore Abbey claimed to have seen this horse rise. Some believe it was just the water being whipped up from the wind making little wispy white clouds above the lake and dancing across, but if this is true, that would mean the horse's next appearance is due for the year 2018. (Kylemore Abbey, 2017).

Of all of Kylemore's legends and myths, one of the most famous is the tale of The Giant's Bed. This myth explains a large, flat rock that lies near the Abbey. Locals say it is the grave marking of one of Ireland's most cruel giant. This giant is said to have terrorized the people of Kylemore. In order to keep the giant's large appetite assuaged, the people had to feed him with their already meager provisions. When they began to run low on livestock, fish, and vegetables from their gardens, the giant proclaimed they must start feeding him their children. However, before this horrendous ritual could begin, a brave young man, who had just recently returned from fighting in France, devised a plan to take the giant down. He dressed up as an old lady, wearing his mother's shawl, so the giant believed a little old lady was just bringing him his breakfast. Once close enough, the young man delivered a fatal blow with his sword, instantly killing the giant and ending his reign of terror. To ensure the giant would never rise

again, the large flat rock was placed over him and as time has passed, as become the legendary Giant's Bed. (Kylemore Abbey, 2017).

The legends and myths of Kylemore Abbey are some of the most well known in Celtic history, but these tales are not the only history on this land. Kylemore Abbey has had its fair share of owners over the years, and each inhabitant has a story contributing to the rich, factual history of this Irish castle. Construction began September 4<sup>th</sup>, 1867 by the Mitchell Henry, an eye surgeon, who wanted Kylemore estate to be an elaborate love token to his wife Margaret. Kylemore Valley was the chosen place for the growing family's new home as this was where the Henry's honeymooned. Mitchell also believed it would help boost the economic growth of this struggling little village. Not long before Margaret laid the foundation stone of the castle, Mitchell's father passed away leaving him a widely successful family business and making him one of the youngest and wealthiest men in Britain. This newfound wealth is what ultimately led him to leave his career as a doctor and go into liberal politics in hopes of changing the world for the better. With his wealth, he also bought the grounds to build his Kylemore Castle. Mitchell hired Irish architect, James Franklin Fuller, who designed the castle to reflect the opulent Victorian style of the era. (Downing, 2014). Kylemore has "thirty-three bedrooms, four bathrooms, four sitting rooms, a ballroom, billiard room, library, study, school room, smoking room, gun room and various offices and domestic staff residences, as well as gardens, walks and woodlands which eventually covered 13,000 acres of land at a cost of a little over 18,000 euros," which equates to roughly \$19,500 (Villiers-Tuthill, 2002). To top it off, an intricate angel surrounded by birds was carved over the entrance of the castle, reminding all who enter that this is Margaret's home and the "nesting" place of the Henry family. (Downing, 2014).

As opulent as Kylemore Castle turned out, the extravagant example of love Kylemore stood for quickly became a place of sorrow and loss when tragedy struck the Henry family. In 1874, only a few years after the castle was completed, the Henrys went to Egypt for a vacation, or "holiday" (Villiers-

Tuthill, 2002). Unfortunately, while travelling, Margaret fell ill and after only two weeks, sadly passed away. She was only forty-five years old, with her youngest daughter only two years old. Mitchell Henry was devastated. Though he remained in Kylemore Castle, life was never the same. As a lasting testament of Mitchell Henry's deep love for his wife, he built a neo-Gothic cathedral near the castle. (Villiers-Tuthill, 2002).

Eventually, the Henry family left Kylemore in 1902, selling the estate to the Duke of Manchester by 1903. Immediately upon moving in, the Duke and his Duchess began major renovations, taking away the Italian influences Mitchell Henry put in, the German stain glass windows and the local Connemara marble. Many of the locals felt this was a disservice to the memory of the beloved Margaret Mitchell and were not happy with the Duke and Duchess. Eventually, the Duke and Duchess left Kylemore castle, some say because the Duke lost it in a bet, but the more accepted story is that he could no longer afford to live once, the Duchess's father died as he was their main source of wealth. It was also about this time, when the Duchess divorced her husband and remarried the tenth Earl of Kintore, Scotland. (Walsh, 1989).

Kylemore Castle eventually switched hands again in December 1920 and this is officially when the castle became Kylemore Abbey as Benedictine nuns became the new owners of this opulent structure. Three years after the nuns moved in, they opened up an international boarding school for girls, carrying over this tradition from their time in Ypres and other places of inhabitation before that. The nuns also opened up a farm and guesthouse, but the guesthouse tragically closed in 1959 after a devastating fire. However, the all girl's boarding school continued going strong until it closed just recently in 2010. At first, the school was very prestigious, housing hundreds of students from all over the world, but as society began to change, so did the numbers for enrollment, and soon the school only needed one nun teaching. With that, they decided to close the school but have kept it open to hosting many school performances such as choirs. Today, the nuns use Kylemore Abbey as a place to develop

new education and hold retreat activities. They have even opened about five rooms on the first floor for public viewing and tours. (McGouran, 2003).

The story of Kylemore Abbey began as an open landscape full of heroes, giants, and magic. From these tales of legends and mythology, came the true history of the construction of a beautiful castle built by one man for the love of his life. From love to tragedy, Kylemore passed to another family whose love died, where it was finally passed off to the Benedictine nuns that take care of the Abbey and land today. Now, Kylemore Abbey stands in the west of Ireland's beautiful Connemara landscape as a fond memory for girls who attended the boarding school and as a reminder of the deep love of a family. A love not only for each other, but for the beautiful sights of Ireland. Just like Ireland, Kylemore Abbey will continue to capture the hearts of all those who come to visit and take in its beautiful sights and deep history.

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