

Defining Mermaids:
Irish Seal Woman Folk Tales, the Mermaid Poems of
Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill,
and their Japanese Translations

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INTRODUCTION

Japan has embraced Western tales of mermaids and many Japanese writers have adapted Western-type mermaids in their works. Japan, an *insular country surrounded by the sea*, has her own mermaid legends which have doubtless made it easier to appreciate the imaginative half-fish, half-human creatures in Western tales. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many works of Western literature were translated into Japanese as part of the larger project of Westernization. In such a context, Western literature based on folk tales or fairy tales became popular: the Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson's works are a good example, although they were translated from German, French or English versions. Anderson's "The Little Mermaid" strongly attracted Japanese writers. Mimei Ogawa's "*Akai Rosoku to Ningyo*" ("Red Candles and a Mermaid"; 1921), one of the best Japanese stories of a mermaid, was created under the influence of Anderson's story, with a Japanese backdrop. More recently, Disney's adaptation of "The Little Mermaid" (1989) has enjoyed a great popularity in Japan.

However, Western mermaids do not always fit the Japanese conception of these creatures. Japanese mermaids have been called *ningyo*. The word

consists of two Chinese characters: “human” and “fish”; thus, it means a “human fish,” and has been adapted for the translation of the word “mermaid.” Therefore, for the Japanese, mermaids are recognized as creatures with a human upper body and a fish’s tail.¹ On the other hand, the English word “mermaid” literarily means “sea woman” as the prefix “mer” refers to “sea.” This difference has directly and indirectly influenced the Japanese acceptance of Western mermaids. In some cases, the original appearances of Western mermaids are deformed in translated literature and the imagination of Japanese readers.

In the British Isles, the word “mermaid” embraces diverse images. On visits to the Orkney Islands and Northern Ireland over the last two years to collect “Seal Woman” folk tales, I have been struck by the very different concepts of “the mermaid” held in these areas. In Orkney, a mermaid is a conventional mermaid; in Northern Ireland, a mermaid is a woman in sealskin.²

In this paper, the Irish mermaids translated into Japanese will be examined: those in the folk stories retold by professional writers and in the poems of Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. This investigation will show the diversity of images of mermaids in Ireland and the present condition of their acceptance in Japan.

I. Mermaid and Seal Woman

Some folk tales reappear all around the world. In the folklorist field, such shared stories are called “Migratory Legends.” The details often reflect *topographical characteristics*. Norwegian folklorist Reidar Th. Christiansen numbered the Migratory Legends, examining Norwegian folk stories. Katharine Briggs borrowed this system and adapted it to British folk tales in the English Language in her *Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*.

The type of story in which a man marries a supernatural sea creature taking a human form is one of the Migratory Legends. In the British Isles, a seal often plays the role of a supernatural sea creature in such folk tales. The basic plot of the story is as follows. A man, in most cases a fisherman, comes across naked people dancing on the shore at night. He finds sealskins there and steals one of them. The naked people are seal people, and the seal woman whose skin he has taken cannot return to the depth of the sea. The seal woman marries the man and bears several children. But one day, she happens to discover her sealskin hidden in some secret place. She returns to the sea, leaving her human family. This type of story is categorized into the tale group of the "Seal Woman" and is referred to as ML4080—no. 4080 of the migratory legends.

Many prominent folklore scholars point out that in many areas of Ireland mermaids supplant the role of the seal woman in the ML 4080 folk tales (Note no. 8 in Almqvist 4-5, Lysaght 160 and Ní Fhloinn 234). Briggs categorizes the ML 4080 stories of marriages between male humans and mermaids into a group of "Seal Woman" stories in Part B of her British folktale dictionary. In such stories, mermaids have combs, caps or other items of apparel stolen, not sealskins. Another point we should draw attention to here is that in some of the Irish ML 4080 folk tales a seal woman, not having a fish's tail, is called a "mermaid."

II. The Collected Tales by Yeats, Glassie, Muir and Curran and their Translations

Many Irish or British folk tales of mermaids or seal women have been collected and compiled in books. I will here focus on the Japanese translations of these stories in order to consider the Japanese reception of the image of Western mermaids. Four examples will be examined, and these will show the diversity of the images of mermaids in Ireland and the

British Isles.

William Butler Yeats collected and edited many Irish folk tales and published several books of them in his young days. In one of these, *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892), we may find a story of an Irish mermaid originally collected and retold by Thomas Croker in his *Fairy Legends and Traditions in the South of Ireland* (1828), “The Lady of Gollerus.” This story has become “most commonly quoted in scholarly literature,” although it is an “atypical, rather stage-Irish version” of this type of folk story, as Bo Almquist, the authority on Irish folklore, puts it (Note no. 44 in Almquist 28). Japanese readers have been acquainted with Croker’s version since Yeats’s book including “The Lady of Gollerus” has been translated several times into Japanese—the frequently reprinted *Celt Yosei Monogatari* edited by Kimie Imura for example.

While the details of Croker’s tale are “atypical” and very “stage-Irish,” the plot of Croker’s story is faithful to the basic storyline of ML 4080 Seal Woman stories. A local man named Dick Fitzgerald steals a magic cap, “*cohuleen driuth*,” of a mermaid, and marries the creature. After bearing three children, the mermaid finds her hidden cap, and returns to the sea. A point worth noticing here is that the mermaid is called a “Merrow” in the story (Yeats, *Fairy* 330). Furthermore, in the appendix added by Yeats to *Irish Fairy Tales*, he categorizes the fairies of Irish folk tales into several kinds, and recognizes “Merrows” as a group of water fairies. He calls them “Merrows” rather than “Mermaids” (Yeats, *Fairy* 384).

The American authority on Irish folklore, Henry Glassie, also included a version of ML 4080 Seal Woman folk stories in his book, *Irish Folktales* (1985). This was translated into Japanese in 1994. The story collected by Jeremiah Curtin in Kerry in 1892 is entitled “Tom Moore and the Seal Woman” (Glassie, *Irish* 182-184). In this tale, the item which makes a seal woman stay on land is a hood. Although this story’s

supernatural sea creature is a seal woman, her magic item is a hood, not a sealskin.

Turning from Ireland to the Orkney Islands, Tom Muir's compilation, *The Mermaid Bride and other Orkney Folk Tales* (1998)—translated into Japanese in 2004—includes several versions of ML 4080 Seal Woman stories; one of them is the title story, “The Mermaid Bride,” which originally appeared in a book compiled by Walter Traill Dennison in 1892. As the title shows, the sea creature is called a “mermaid.” The stolen item which prevents the mermaid from returning to the sea is a golden comb. She seems to be half-fish, but behaves like an ordinary human being. Her lower body is “clothed in a petticoat” which is silver and glitters. It seems to end in a “tail.” She can open the petticoat and run on the land (Muir 154-155). On the other hand, the other ML 4080 stories included in this book, such as “The Selkie Wife” (21-22) and “The Selkie Wife of Westness” (142-145), are typical of “Seal Woman” folk tales; the supernatural beings marrying a man on the land are seal women, and the stolen items are sealskins.³ While these stories share the same storyline, there is no confusion between mermaids and seal women in this book. It is also noteworthy that seal women are generally called “Selkie” in this collection of Orcadian folk stories.

A story clearly demonstrating the amalgamation of mermaids and seal women in Ireland may be found in Bob Curran's *The Creatures of Celtic Myth* (2000). This book treats the folk stories of the various areas of the Celtic Fringe. Most of the stories included are highly dramatized by the compiler, and their sources are various. One of the stories, “The Sea-Bride,” is declared to be collected by the author himself.⁴ Although embroidered with the author's own narrative techniques, the plot never deviates from the pattern of ML 4080 Seal Woman stories.

Curran writes as follows: “There was an old legend which McCurdy

had heard from his grandmother that if a mortal were to take the sealskin cloak of a mermaid he would have her in his power. . ." (69). This passage suggests that at least in some districts of Northern Ireland a mermaid can be identical to a seal woman; it is understandable that they may have been exchangeable, or confused, in some folk narratives. Since Curran's book was translated into Japanese in 2001, Japanese readers have been able to learn of the complex interrelation of the two.

III. Heaney, Ní Dhomhnaill and their Translations

Among the Western literature flowing into Japan, Irish literature has enjoyed a special favour since the early days. Many Japanese literary scholars eagerly follow the production of prominent Irish writers, and most of their works are translated into Japanese. Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill are such distinguished poets of Ireland. Some of their works translated into Japanese show Japanese readers the diversity of images of mermaids in Ireland.

Folklorist Bo Almqvist selects the Heaney and Ní Dhomhnaill poems with mermaid motifs and profoundly examines their folkloric origins (1-74). The poems are Heaney's "Maighdean Mara" and Ní Dhomhnaill's "An Mhaighdean Mhara." Both are based on ML 4080 Seal Woman folk stories, and both have been translated into Japanese. We will here focus on the representations of the mermaids in the poems and examine how they are translated into Japanese. "Maighdean Mara" is a Gaelic title which means "sea maiden," i. e. "mermaid"; on the other hand, "An Mhaighdean Mhara" is "the mermaid."

Heaney's "Maighdean Mara" is dedicated to "Seán Oh-Eocha" (*Poems* 146).⁵ Almqvist identifies this person with a famous folklore collector named Seán Ó hEochaidh (19). In an interview with Almqvist, Heaney said that he dedicated the poem to Ó hEochaidh because the folklore

collector told him a story of a mermaid (Almqvist 43-45). It is well-known that Ó hEochaidh has collected folk stories mainly in Donegal, the area of Ulster beside Northern Ireland, and Heaney and Ó hEochaidh met when Heaney was a student of Queen's University, Belfast (Almqvist 19-20). The folk tale on which Heaney's poem is based is probably a version of ML 4080 stories collected in some northern coastal area of Ireland, where seal women without fish's tails can be called "mermaids."

"Maighdean Mara" in *Poems, 1965-1975* seems to start after the story finishes. The mermaid has returned to the depth of the sea and sleeps. The poem is divided into three sections and the first stanza starts as follows:

She sleeps now, her cold breasts
Dandled by undertow,
Her hair lifted and laid.
Undulant slow seawracks
Cast about shin and thigh, . . . (1-5)

This mermaid has "shin and thigh." In the second part, we read why and how she came to live on the land for eight years:

He stole her garment as
She combed her hair: follow
Was all that she could do.
He hid it in the eaves
And charmed her there, . . . (14-18)

The magic item which made her stay away from the sea is figuratively described as a "garment."⁶ This item is already mentioned in the end of the

first part as “[h]er magic garment” (12). The magic item of apparel appearing in this poem is not described as a small thing such as a cap or a hood. Bo Almqvist examines the origin of this poem, considering that the “garment” can be a cloak (17-18).⁷ It is noticeable that Bob Curran uses the phrase “sealskin cloak” in the quotation above.

Next, we will turn to this poem’s Japanese translation. The title of the translation is “*Ningyo Hime Mara*” (“Mermaid Princess Mara”); here the Gaelic word “Mara”, meaning “sea”, is treated like a proper noun (Heaney, *Seamus Heaney Zenshishu* 192). As discussed above, the Japanese word *ningyo* literally means a half-human, half-fish creature. Because of this translated title and the general and traditional image of mermaids in Japan, Japanese readers are unlikely to imagine the creatures in sealskin by reading the translation of “Maighdean Mara.”

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s “An Mhaighdean Mhara” was first compiled in *Selected Poems: Rogha Dánta*, translated by Michael Harnett, in 1986. Its dual language format edition, in which the original Gaelic poems by Ní Dhomhnaill and the translations by Harnett are juxtaposed, was published in 1988. Much of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry has been translated into English by prominent Irish poets. A Japanese translation of “An Mhaighdean Mhara” was published in 1994, accompanied with the original text and Harnett’s translation. Harnett’s translation of the title is “The Mermaid” while its Japanese title is “*Ningyo*” (Ní Dhomhnaill, Sano and Ohno 32-33). In the poem, a mermaid, who seems to marry a man on the land, describes her appearance by herself—thus, the reader can know she has a fish’s tale, *eireaball éisc*—and narrates how she came to live on the land (*Selected Poems* 52). In the last stanza, we can clearly see that this poem is based on a version of ML 4080 Seal Woman folk tale:

D’imís

is thógais leat mo chaipín draíochta.
 Níl sé chomh furast orm teacht air,
 is a bhí sa scéal
 i measc cearachaillí an díona. . . (40-44)

The above quotation is translated by Hartnett as follows: “You left/ and took my magic cap/ It’s not as easy to get back/ in the roof’s rafters/ as it was in the fable” (41-45). The mermaid with a fish’s tail, who has had her *chaipín draíochta*, i. e., magic cap, taken away, cannot return to the sea. While this poem originates from a version of ML 4080 Seal Woman folk tale, the mermaid represented here is a half-human, half-fish creature.

After “An Mhaighdean Mhara,” Ní Dhomhnaill kept writing poems with mermaid motifs, and they were collected and published as *Cead Aighnis* in 1998. That book was republished under the title *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, accompanied with the English translations by Paul Muldoon, in 2007. Hiroko Ikeda’s Japanese translation of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry on mermaids based on *Cead Aighnis*, *Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill Shishu*, came out in 2010. Its subtitle is: “*Airurando no Ningyo Uta*” (“Mermaid Songs of Ireland”). The poems in these collections are highly developed; they are not raw folkloric materials. The merfolks seem to be thrown into modern society and some of the poems can be interpreted as the poet’s reactions to various social or political issues. A long history of the conflict between the Irish and English languages in Ireland can be counted as one such issue, and allusions to traditional Gaelic culture such as Irish myths or folklore are scattered throughout these collections of poetry.

The mermaids appearing in the poems of Ní Dhomhnaill’s *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* seem to assume half-human, half-fish appearances, although they are described in poetical language with multi-layered words and phrases. In some of the poems, they are clearly represented as

creatures with scales or fish's tails. For instance, in the poem entitled "An Mhurúch san Ospidéal" ("The Mermaid in the Hospital"), a mermaid finds her "fishtail" gone when she awakes in a hospital. Its original lines are as follows: "Dhúisigh sí/ agus ní raibh a heireaball éisc ann/ níos mó. . ." (1-3). Paul Muldoon's translation accompanied with Ní Dhomhnaill's poem is: "She awoke/ to find her fishtail/ clean gone. . ." (1-3). The Gaelic phrase "*a heireaball éisc*" in the second line of the Gaelic quotation literally means "her fish's tail."

When we consider the relationship between seal women and mermaids in Irish folk tales, another poem of *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* entitled "Filleadh na Murúiche ar an dTír-fó-Thoinn"—"The Mermaid Returns to Land-Under-Wave" in English; "*Ningyo, Nami no Shita no Kuni ni Modoru*" in Japanese⁸—is important. The poem apparently shows that Ní Dhomhnaill knows that a seal woman often plays the role of the mermaid in the ML 4080 folk tales of Ireland. Watching a mermaid sleeping, the narrator of the poem reflects on what happened to her:

Bhí sé mar a bheadh an cochall draíochta
 a bhí curtha i bhfolach le cianta sa chúl-lochta
 aimsithe aici de bharr a síorphóirseála.
 Cé go raibh sí fós inár bhfianaise go corpartha
 bhí sé mar a bheadh seithe róin
 fillet go cúramach aici uimpi
 is í ag snámh amach in aigéan éigin fo-intinneach
 nárbh fhéidir le héinne againn í a leanúint ann. (6-13)

Paul Muldoon's English translation of this stanza is as follows: "It was as if/ she'd one day stumbled upon the magical hood/ that had been hidden for ages up in the back loft/ simply because of her endless poking and pottering

about./ Even though she was still physically in our presence/ it was as though she had wrapped a layer of sealskin/ carefully around herself/ and was swimming off in some deep subconscious ocean/ where none of us could follow her” (6-14). In these poems, mermaids or merfolks are highly individualized by the poet. In some cases, they are described as beings not identical with their folkloric representations, although they still seem to be supernatural creatures with Irish folkloric backdrops. However, by inserting the “*seithe róin*” (sealskin) in the narration on the half-fish mermaid’s condition, this poem suggests their folkloric origin, i. e., the ML 4080 Seal Woman folk tale.

CONCLUSION

The Japanese have adapted the word *ningyo* meaning “human fish” to translate the English word “mermaid” meaning “sea maiden.” Although some Western mermaids do not take half-fish, half-human forms, the Japanese word inevitably has readers imagining fish-like creatures. The British Isles abound with folk stories in which a human marries a supernatural sea creature. Seals often play the roles of such creatures, and this type of migratory legend is categorized as ML 4080 Seal Woman stories. On the other hand, mermaids supplant the roles of seals in some such folk tales of Ireland. Thus in some Irish tales the creatures called “mermaids” take the form of seals or wear sealskins.

Various Irish or British ML 4080 folk tales have been translated into Japanese. Among them, at least one version has told Japanese readers the story of an Irish mermaid with a sealskin, although it is not a scholarly reproduction of the story but a dramatized version of the ML 4080 folk tale the original of which the author himself collected.

Japanese readers can enjoy translations of poems by Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill derived from Irish ML 4080 Seal Woman folk

tales. The Gaelic phrase for a mermaid, “*Maighdean Mara*” or “*Mhaighdean Mhara*,” has been translated by the Japanese word *ningyo*, too. While Heaney’s mermaid with “her magic garment” has “shin and thigh,” the mermaids in Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems clearly take half-fish, half-human forms. Among many of Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems with mermaid motifs, the lines of one poem by Ní Dhomhnaill show that the poet knows mermaids and seal women may take similar roles in Irish folk tales. Japanese translators can hardly abandon the word *ningyo* for the sea creatures called “mermaid,” but they need to understand the diversity of the images of mermaids in Ireland. They may look like fish, or seals.

Notes

1. Many critical studies on mermaids done by Japanese scholars demonstrate the Japanese obsession with the figure with a human upper body and a fish’s tail. Satoru Tanabe’s book-length study, *Ningyo*, deals with both Western and Eastern mermaids from the age before the Common Era to the present, but all the creatures treated in his study are only half-human, half-fish creatures. In the Japanese translation of Vic de Donder’s study of supernatural water creatures in Western culture, the contents of its original are re-organized, and the translation mainly treats half-human, half-fish creatures. While the original title is *Le chant de la sirène*, the translation’s title is *Ningyo Densetsu* (*Mermaid Legends*). Hiroko Ikeda’s essay on mermaids, added to her translations of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poems with mermaid motifs, also deals with a wide range of supernatural water creatures in Western culture. Since the essay is written in Japanese and the Japanese appellation for the water creature, *ningyo*, is used in it, the image of the half-human, half-fish figure is conspicuous throughout the essay. Tooru Matsuura’s study in a similar vein exceptionally discusses water fairies, not just mermaids. See Matsuura.
2. For the details of the research that I did in Orkney, see Shimokusu 97-114. A “Seal Woman” folk tale collected there is fully reproduced in it. Interestingly, the Orcadian storyteller, from whom I collected the story, strictly distinguished

a seal woman or “Selkie” from a mermaid. The informant said that their relationship was like “finches and eagles. They both fly, but they are different.” In 2010 I collected a seal woman story in Coleraine, County Derry, Northern Ireland. It is reproduced in the APPENDIX to this article. The story is about a seal woman from Rathlin Island, County Antrim. Rathlin Island is a small, inhabited Northern-Irish island. It boasts abundant stories and beliefs concerning seals (Linda-May 33-42). Accordingly, the people living on the coast opposite to the island also share these traditions. (Coleraine is an inland town close to the coastline.) Some of the McCurdy families inhabiting the coastal area of Antrim are said to be descendants of “seal” people. McCurdy is a common name in the district. For example, one of the farmers living on the coast of Antrim, Jack McCurdy, gave Dunseverick Castle to the National Trust in 1962 (“County Antrim Coastline”). An old woman who lived in Dunseverick and had the name of McCurdy told the original of the story of the APPENDIX, according to the informant.

3. The original story of “The Selkie Wife” was published in 1908: that of “The Selkie Wife of Westness” was also compiled in Dennison’s book in 1893.
4. Bob Curran lives in Coleraine. The story of “The Sea-Bride” is virtually identical with the tale found in the APPENDIX to this article.
5. Heaney’s poem “Maighdean Mara” first appeared in *Wintering Out* (1972) and was then collected in *Poems, 1965-1975* (1980). This article cites the lines from the latter.
6. In the revised edition of Heaney’s *Wintering Out* published in 1993, the first line of the stanza quoted here is as follows: “He stole her garments as. . .” (14). The “garment” is turned into “garments,” although the other words of “garment” in this poem remain singular.
7. The third section of the poem starts as follows:

In night air, entering
Foam, she wrapped herself
With smoke-reeks from his thatch,
Straw-musts and films of mildew. . . (28-31)

Though these lines do not describe her “garment/s,” a connection of the images between the things that “wrapped herself” may be observed.

8. The English title is the translation by Paul Muldoon (*The Fifty Minute Mermaid* 143); the Japanese one is that by Hiroko Ikeda (*Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill Shisyu* 65).

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APPENDIX

The following story was collected at the Lodge Hotel in Coleraine, County Derry on 13 August, 2010. It was recorded with an IC recorder. Following the model of Seán Ó Súilleabhán's *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, the collector recorded the name, age and address of the informant. The typescript of the IC recorded story was made by the collector, and after that it was checked by the informant himself. The collector finalized the corrected script, listening to the recorded story. The collector asked the

informant to tell the first story he imagined on hearing the phrase “Seal Woman.” The informant is male and 64 years of age; he lives at Coleraine, working as a professional writer and social activist.

You have to remember that Celtic seals, which are seal women, are very different from mermaids. We tend to think of mermaids as the women on the top with fish tails. But in the Celtic tradition, in France and Ireland, Scotland, even further north, even among Vikings, women or likes could sometimes take the guises of seals. Now, this came about because they wrapped themselves with seal cloaks to travel about on the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Whenever they took off the sealskins—while they were swimming, of course they looked just exactly like seals—but when they came ashore, they took off the sealskins, and they were just like you and me. There are three ways to tell a seal woman. One, that she likes a lot of fish. She likes a lot of fish. Secondly, that she will not enter the place of Christian worship. And thirdly, that she has incredibly flat feet. So, if you have a woman with all the three attributes, you have married a seal woman. Other than that, there is no real difference between them and us.

So, this story concerns a seal woman who came ashore and left off her cloak. Now the belief was that if a human could take the woman's cloak, or the seal person's cloak, he or she had a power over them, and they could not return to the cold sea until they had found the cloak. So, that's the basis of the story. And it concerned a fisherman who lived on the North Antrim coast, and his name was McCurdy which was a common name all along the North Antrim area. And he was a fisherman, and he was not married.

So, each night, he would leave his cottage. And he walked down to the sea and sat on a rock and smoked his pipe. And normally, nothing came there and only he heard was the cry of gulls. But one night, he overheard something which made him sit up; it was the laughter of women. Now he knew that nobody was living quite close. So, he wondered who these people were. And so he concealed himself among the rocks and waited; and three seals appeared on the beach. And as they did to his astonishment, they stood up like humans, and removed their sealskins. And there were three, very attractive women standing; one was particularly attractive, and she had green eyes and long red hair; and from where he could see, from his hiding place what he could see that, and McCurdy was quickly attracted to her. They took their cloaks and placed them on the rock. They went off dancing and laughing along the beach. When they were gone, McCurdy slipped out of his hiding place, and lifted one of the seal cloaks that belonged to the woman who he had been attracted to. And then, he went home. And he hid the cloak between, in a secret place, which we call here in Ireland, up in the scraghs of the roof. That is the place where the thatched cottage's thatch of the roof meets the stone of the walls; under the space between them; that's where he hid the cloak. And then he sat down and smoked his pipe. Shortly after, there was a knock at the door. And he went and opened it, and there was a woman. "Give me back my cloak," she said. "Because I know you have taken it." He said, "I haven't taken your cloak." And this went back and forth for a little while. And then he said, "All right, I have taken your cloak, but I won't give it back to you." "Why not," she said. "Because," he said. "I'm very attracted to you." And he said, "If you went to the sea, back to the sea, I will lose you forever." So, he said,

“Stay on the land”; he said, “And marry me, and I will be very good to you.” Well, she had no way of getting back to the sea. So, she agreed. And they were married, but they were married on the beach, and not in a Christian church, because the seal woman could not enter a Christian church. And she was a subject of much gossip, but she was a good wife to McCurdy, and he was a good husband to her. And over time, she bore him a number of children. Each night however, she would leave the house and go down to the beach. And there, on the reef just out in the sea, a massive bull seal would come up and roar towards the land. McCurdy was very curious about this. “Why does that seal always come?” “Well,” said the seal woman. “That is my husband who lives under the sea. He cannot come ashore. So he calls to me each night, and asks me to come home. And of course, I cannot come home.” “Well,” said McCurdy. “You are married to me, and your home is now on the land.” And so it went on. And each night, the woman went down and looked longingly out into the sea and saw the big bull seal come up and roar. But nothing transpired between them.

Now, as the children were growing up, McCurdy continued fishing. And one night, one evening, he was way out towards the place called Raghery. Now “Raghery” is actually an old name for Rathlin Island. And he was fishing off there. And he saw the clouds out on the horizon begin to be very dark, and he knew the storm was coming. So, he pulled on to Church Bay, which was also a main harbor on the island to wait out the storm. And he hoped it passed by quickly. Back at the house, his wife noticed the rising wind, and was frightened that it would lift the thatch from the cottage. So, she went up to secure it and tie it down. And in the scraghs of the house, in the secret place between the thatch and the

stone wall, she found the cloak. Now the storm reached but the battle was very brief. And soon McCurdy was able to sail out of the Church Bay, and back to the mainland. When he arrived at his door, he found it lying wide open. And the children were playing, but there was no sign of his wife. And though he looked high and low, he could not find her. And then he looked up in the scraghs of the house, and he saw the cloak was gone. She had put it on and returned to the sea. And that was the last McCurdy ever saw of her. I said that's the last time, but possibly not. Because, as he grew older, he walked down to the beach sometimes, sat on the rock and smoked his pipe as he had done so whenever he was single. But each night two seals, a big bull and a cow seal, would come up to the rock and roar; and the bull seal would roar but the cow seal would watch him with her eyes. And then he knew that his wife beneath the sea had not forgotten. And that was the story of the Raghery mermaid. From whom many of the McCurdys who still live along the North Antrim coast claim their descendency. That's it.