

The Shepherd of Myddfai and The Red Book of Hergest

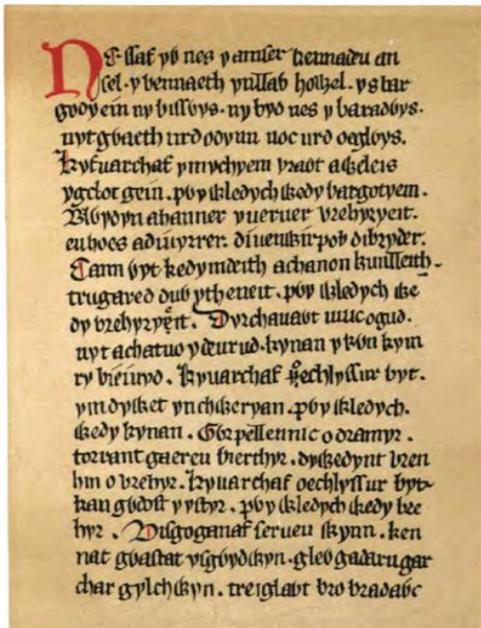
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This story is from an ancient Welsh tale, usually entitled *The Shepherd of Myddfai* (or Myddvai), that being a village in southwest Wales. The maiden arose out of *Llyn y Fan Fach*, a relatively small lake high in the Black Mountains, shown in the photo below.



The story is included within the *Red Book of Hergest*, believed to have been written between 1382 and 1410. The *Red Book of Hergest* is in the Welsh language and contains a collection of medieval prose and poetry. It's called the "Red Book" from the color of its leather binding. Possession of the manuscript transferred many times over the centuries. For a time, it was held by the Vaughans of Hergest Court (hence the name). It is now at Oxford College, England. A sample page of the Red Book is shown below.

The manuscript also includes a collection of herbal remedies and stories behind them. The first to use these remedies was Rhiwallon Feddyg who lived in Myddfai in the 12th Century. He passed on his skills to his sons, who passed them on to their sons, etc., creating a dynasty of physicians known as Meddygon Myddfai, or the Physicians of Myddfai. The last of this line of physicians died in 1739.



How did Rhiwallon, the first Physician of Myddfai, learn of these herbal remedies?

From his mother, the lake-maiden!

The Shepherd of Myddfai is more a preface than a complete story. The larger story is about the physicians who for generations plied their trade and cured the sick.

The original story has the sons of the shepherd circling the lake from time to time looking for their mother. She appeared to Rhilwallon, the eldest, once he achieved manhood. She gave him a gift – her knowledge of herbs and plants used in healing. Rhilwallon passed the knowledge to his brothers, and each of them passed the same onto their sons, and so on for generations. And this is a much-abbreviated story of the Physicians of Myddfai.

I took a few liberties with the story. I thought ending the story (with the mother passing on the gift of healing to her son) would leave the story hanging. So, I ended it with the lake-maiden never seen again.

I also changed the setting from Wales to Ireland, primarily because of my unfamiliarity with Wales. This also gave me the opportunity to add a couple of teasers about the formation of Irish lakes. The first, with the drowning of Lady Erne, is one of the several legends about Lough Erne. The second, with Finn McCool throwing earth into the Irish Sea, is a legend for how Lough Neagh was formed.

Erne, by the way, is pronounced “Urn” or “Errn”.