

The Heritage of Water in Ireland

Water is not just regarded as a physical resource in Ireland. It is also strongly embedded in our history and national identity. Ireland is often described as the “Emerald Isle”. In fact, the late singer Johnny Cash was so captivated by the Irish landscape when he visited in 1959 that he was inspired to write the well-known song “40 Shades of Green”.

Water has played a significant role in Ireland’s history and influenced the location of early settlements and the development of towns and cities. Early civilisations settled near water for practical reasons such as it being a source of food and transportation. Ireland has many rivers, lakes and being an island nation a long coastline which provided the basic and vital lifelines of sustenance and trade for these early settlements.

In addition to providing practical resources such as food, water is also considered of spiritual importance. Early monastic and religious sites such as Glendalough, County Wicklow, Clonmacnoise on the River Shannon and Lough Derg, County Donegal were established near water features not just for practical reasons but also due to the spiritual, symbolic and life-giving properties that water represented.

The Irish landscape is dotted with many holy wells which are often associated with local saints and have become places of pilgrimage and healing. Holy wells are still visited by people today and the water from these wells is believed to have healing powers.

Water continues to have an important role in our culture and identity. Water features frequently in Irish literature, music and poetry. Poets such as W.B Yeats have drawn inspiration from Ireland’s lakes and rivers:

“I will arise and go now, for always night and day

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore”

The conservation and management of water resources is of huge importance in modern Ireland. There is a growing awareness of the need to protect and preserve this vital resource and heritage for future generations.

National Heritage Week takes place every autumn in Ireland. Its aim is to bring communities together and to educate people on the important role water plays in our national heritage. The theme for 2024 is “Connections, Routes and Networks”. This year several communities held walks along their local riverbanks tracing the history of the area and demonstrating how water shaped development of the community over the centuries. The events are free and open to all age groups. Several events are organised specifically to cater for children such as “Wild Child and Water Day” which sounds like a fun day out!

From the early settlements to holy wells and literature water continues to be a source of inspiration for Irish people. Ireland’s Water Framework Directive, environmental policies and initiatives such as Heritage Week aim to highlight the importance of protecting of our water bodies and to educate us all on the vital role water plays in the natural beauty and heritage of our country so that we can continue to be known as the “Emerald Isle”.

ⁱ The Lake Isle of Inisfree W. B Yeats