

THE CAVE HILL GODDESS



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The Cave Hill, previously referred to as Ben Madigan, dominates the skyline north of Belfast. It's resemblance to an upturned face in profile has rendered it an icon. Referred to by Alice Milligan as "The glorious face of the sleeper, that slumbers above Belfast," the hill is more popularly referred to rather less romantically as 'Napoleon's Nose' perhaps due to the promontory above the face resembling a tricorn hat. Compellingly, Mary Lowry suggests that "the noble face on the hill has often been called the Goddess of Liberty."

The aforementioned 'tricorn hat' bears an ancient rath referred to as McArt's Fort, which

so the legend goes, was once the seat of the Ulaidh (Ulster is the anglicised form of Ulaidh's Tir,

or the territory of the Ulaidh), the native inhabitants of ancient Ulster. This was, no doubt, the reason why the fort was used by the United Irishmen prior to the 1798 rebellion to swear a "solemn obligation...never to desist in [their] efforts until [they] had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence." Perhaps this is why Mary Lowry, writing at the centenary of the rebellion, saw the Hill as a symbol of 'Liberty.'

The failure of the United Irishmen and the disruption and violence of the 20th century lead to a recasting of the Cave Hill Goddess. In 1898 the stone throne in the centre of McArt's fort was thrown over the cliff edge and dashed to pieces on the rocks below by an unidentified vandal; perhaps this was a dark portent of the century ahead.

Perhaps Liberty lies imprisoned, much like Gulliver in the village of Lilliput (it is another popular local tale that the 'face of the sleeper' inspired Jonathan Swift when he was appointed as a priest in nearby Kilroot), being used as a pawn in the arbitrary battles between the Little-Endians and the Big-Endians. Perhaps Liberty herself gazes to the heavens and dreams of freedom.

Then again, perhaps it is the over-romanticisation of the mountain that has got us into trouble. The eyes over the Goddess, after all, do not watch over the city but instead gaze upwards and away from the city, not regarding us at all. If, as Mary Lowry suggests, "That wonderful face was there long ages before the Sphinx gazed over the plain at Giza, and will be there when all the work of our world is done," why would the Goddess pay us any mind at all?