

Flannan Isle: Teachers Background Notes

Background to the Poem

Flannan Isle is situated in the Atlantic Ocean 15 miles off the west coast of Scotland. The poem is based on events which occurred on 26 December 1900 when the three lighthouse keepers were discovered to be missing. The bodies were never found. In his poem, Gibson has taken a degree of licence with the actual events.

The official investigation determined that they had most probably been swept out to sea by an unexpectedly large wave but other, more outlandish, theories attribute the disappearance to aliens, sea monsters and, even mermaids.

The Author

William Wilfrid Gibson (1878-1962) worked as a social worker in the east end of London, served in the first world war and was a friend of Rupert Brooke. 'Flannan Isle' is not typical of his work which focussed mainly on the experience of war and on the everyday lives of ordinary British families.

The Mary Celeste

The lesson plan for this poem suggests engaging students' interest by telling them about the story of the Mary Celeste.

In December 1872 in the Atlantic Ocean near the Straits of Gibraltar the crew of the sailing ship Dei Gratia spotted another ship under full sail but drifting aimlessly – the other ship was the Mary Celeste. Members of the crew boarded the Mary Celeste and found that its crew and passengers had disappeared. Theories about what happened can be found at Wikipedia.

Scaffolding the poem

Most of the language of the poem should be accessible to students. The only term they might be unfamiliar with is guillemot. Students should be able to deduce from context that it is a form of sea bird.

References

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A1061335> (Accessed 10 April 2008)

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9036762/Wilfred-Wilson-Gibson>