



# HA TOMTA AGEÍRÍ

(WAVES ARE RISING)

*Words: EASKEY BRITTON*



reland is getting quite a name for itself around the globe as a big wave location. In February this year the west coast had one of the best runs of swell for years, seeing waves of up to 80 feet. The tight knit crew of international surfers who have been riding these waves for the last few years were joined this time by wave hunter Easkey Britton – who took some time out to tell SurfGirl some of her memories from this epic winter.



I've sat down to write this story several times over, and each time I've been interrupted

by another deep red pressure system blasting its way across the North Atlantic. The most recent and biggest being a 936 low pressure system in the 'slot' between Greenland and Iceland. With its ever ever-expanding lines marching towards the Irish coast it produced a week long swell with waves ranging from 20 through to a rumoured 80 feet. The swell got into most of the nooks and crannies of the Irish coastline and saw some boundary-busting performances both by Ireland's native and visiting 'chargers'.

### 1.1.11

Prowlers stole the big-wave limelight in 2010. Following the now famous 8th November Prowlers session it became the media's favourite – and the worst-kept secret big-wave spot located 'somewhere' off the west coast of Ireland. But this was the last big swell of 2010. In the wake of Prowlers we suffered a long, deep, icy flat spell. It seemed even the sea was frozen calm during the Big Freeze with the weather patterns dominated by unfamiliar high pressure systems and a shifty Jet Stream. Then, on the 1.1.11, it was as if the flood gates had burst open and low pressure after low pressure marched across the North Atlantic in amazingly quick succession – almost too quickly. It hasn't stopped much since. As I'm writing this it's relatively flat (below head high) for the first time in weeks and the wind has swung onshore, so I can take a moment to let a stream of consciousness flow, and reflect on the broken boundaries and limits overcome over the last few weeks.

## What's it all about?

The philosopher Socrates once said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living'. Inside looking out this is how it feels... The power of the ocean is independent of time or place. The 'new discoveries' of Aill na Searrach at the Cliffs of Moher, Prowlers 'somewhere out there', Fin McCools at the Giant's Causeway, and others – on an ever growing list – have been there long before our human arrival. One of the most ancient conversations on the planet is that between land and sea. John O'Donohue writes in his book, *The Four Elements*, that 'this conversation began millions of years ago and continues eternally and patiently out of sight of short-sighted human immediacy.' It is in this no-man's-land where sea and seashore and water and rock meet that a new conversation is birthed between the human and the sea:

“In coil of wave, winding in dance, The sea is too fluent to feel its own power. Only for the sure gaze and steady grip of the surfer. It would not know itself to be the sea”

*(Adapted from "Expectations" by John O'Donohue)*

O'Donohue suggests it would be interesting to explore whether being an island people living surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean has had any effect on the way our consciousness

AT THE BOTTOM OF A NEVER-ENDING CLIFF, MILES AWAY FROM ANYWHERE... MUST BE AILEEN'S... SURFING ON THE EDGE





shapes itself. Speaking from my own personal experience I know that I have been shaped inside-out by the sea. But it is this idea that the ocean can also know itself through the surfer that I want to explore a little more.

As surfers we give identity and meaning to waves, we personify them, give them names, character traits. We learn to understand their unpredictable nature, their unique individuality and their changeable moods. We know what they like and what they don't like – for some it might be low tides and light southerly winds, for others it's high tides and strong northerly winds. Each wave has its own particular tastes and needs. No two alike.

### Mulla

Mullaghmore is one of a kind. What I call the 'beautiful beast' my tow-partner, Neil, sums-up in one word: heavy. For us waveriders Mulla came into being when the Malloys first surfed it with local lad Richie Fitzgerald and his pal Gabe Davies long before the other big-wave spots were 'discovered'. They were soon followed by Al and Cotty who spent years developing their craft through trial, error and serious drive and determination. 2005 was another turning point when Aill na Searrach (or Aileen's) was ridden for the first time by John McCarthy, Dave Blount, Mickey Smith and Rusty Long. Fergal joined the fray and changed the face of big wave surfing in Ireland forever with his unique form of wave artistry at the likes of bone-crunching Rileys. Each surfer re-writing the impossible in their own way.

The newly formed Irish Tow Surf Rescue Club is testament to how big-wave surfing in Ireland has grown and where it's going. Its emphasis is on building a community of experienced surfers who are committed to developing their water skills and training and recognising the safety and rescue elements of the sport. As a result Paul O'Kane, club chairperson, helped to organise Ireland's first big wave event at Mullaghmore: the Billabong Monster Tow Surf contest. It was held



BIG-WAVE HUNTER EASKEY BRITTON HAD BEEN RIDING HUGE WAVES FOR A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE TOW-IN COMP. HERE SHE IS AT MULLAGHMORE ON 3RD FEBRUARY.



EASKEY AT THE BILLABONG MONSTER TOW COMP. LOOKING BACK SHE REMEMBERS IT WAS, "SUPER SKETCHY - I HAD TO FLY OVER LOADS OF BOILS". GOOD COMMITMENT!



# GEIRI

“The moment between the inhalation and exhalation. That's all it really lasts, a moment of madness. That's the prize we seek”

on the 13th of February – the day the 936 Low hit.

The first time I really thought how important it is to show that this 'isn't just a guy thing' was when I saw my name on the list of invitees along with all the heavyweight names of this very male-dominated sport of big-wave/tow-in surfing. I also knew from my experiences surfing out there that the ocean doesn't discriminate, and certainly doesn't give you an easier ride because of your gender!

In all of its ancient history of battering and shaping the dark, heavy slabs of rock at Mullaghmore Headland to create this remarkable wave, Mullaghmore has never been surfed by a woman, has never been able to express itself through that feminine form.

It is the surfer who gives the faceless ocean wave a name. In return, the wave is a mirror into her soul. Where she faces all her fears.

A sense of wonder at a deeper beauty, confidence within, letting go, baring the soul. These are some of the elements of big-wave surfing. A Zen master once told me about the 'moment of no return'. This moment is when you realise that a decision is truly irreversible. In the moment of no return, you accept the present reality, and live from there forward.

## Game on

Hard, heavy, roaring, angry. It is difficult to see, the spray blasted back into my stinging eyes. Through the salty water running down my

face I saw what was there, and it staggered me. The momentary flash of fear or awe (or fear and awe all mixed up) was ripped away in a sweep of the gale. The sea had gone gigantic and deformed and crazy. Alive with 'beautiful beasts' bursting forth on a greedy, rolling, steel-grey rampage. The size and force of it overloaded me, made me almost dizzy. Like a 'too muchness', a beautiful mindless ache. They had come for me. To drag me off and remake me as part of their powerful and passionate drive to change and intent on obliteration. I was caught there, in that moment of realisation and awareness, when everything comes in to clear focus and this event was all around me, instant and real: a point of no-return. Grabbing the tow-rope and

shouting 'Clear!' to my tow-partner (safety-speak learned from the K38 water rescue course). Then letting go of the tow-rope and torquing into the beast's embrace. Nothing else exists, no awareness of time or space. A strange silence; like even the ocean is holding her breath. The moment between the inhalation and exhalation. That's all it really lasts, a moment of madness. That's the prize we seek. It's where we go to experience the final frontiers of human fragility.

So, this is a small band of crazies. A small tight-knit tribe still growing, always learning – part of an experimental stepping stone – seeking new ways and new breaks to test the limits of what's possible and re-write the boundaries of their own personal limitless potential.