

A Walk to Aideen's Grave in Howth, Ireland

By Kelley O'Rourke

During my visit to Ireland in May, 2026, one of the most memorable experiences was a walk through the grounds of Howth Castle with CIMPN director and oral historian Linda Fitzgibbon and Gregg Thomassin, to visit the ancient monument known as Aideen's Grave.

Hidden beneath towering trees and surrounded by flowering rhododendrons, the pathway leading to the site felt almost timeless. As we followed the winding woodland trail through the castle demesne, it became easy to understand why places like this continue to occupy such an important place in Irish cultural memory. The landscape itself seems to hold the stories.



Figure 1: Kelley O'Rourke and Linda Fitzgibbon on path to Aideen's Grave.
Image Credit: Kelley O'Rourke

Located on the slopes of Howth Head near Deer Park, Aideen's Grave is an early Neolithic portal tomb, often referred to as a dolmen or cromlech. According to information provided through the Howth Castle estate and research conducted by the community archaeology group Resurrecting Monuments, the earliest portal tombs in Ireland date to approximately 3800 BC during the early Neolithic period. Constructed from local Cambrian quartzite stone likely dislodged from the nearby cliffs of Muck Rock, the tomb remains one of the most striking prehistoric monuments in the Dublin area.

The structure consists of a single chamber marked by two large upright portal stones supporting an enormous capstone measuring over five metres in length. Although part of the chamber has collapsed over time, the monument still conveys a remarkable sense of permanence and endurance. Standing before it beneath the canopy of trees, one cannot help but reflect on the immense span of human history represented by these stones.



Figure 2: Gregg Thomassin and Kelley O'Rourke standing at the mouth of tomb known as Aideen's Grave.

Image Credit: Kelley O'Rourke

Yet Aideen's Grave is remembered not only as an archaeological site, but also through Irish mythology and folklore.

According to legend, the tomb is associated with Étaín Fholthinn — often known as Aideen — daughter of the local chieftain Aengus. Folklore tells that she married Oscar, son of Oisín and grandson of the legendary Fionn MacCumhaill. When Oscar was killed at the Battle of Gabhra near the Hill of Tara in 284 AD, Aideen is said to have died of grief. Oisín then caused the great tomb to be built in her honour.

Like many ancient places in Ireland, archaeology and storytelling exist side by side here. The monument predates the legend by thousands of years, yet the folklore has become inseparable from the site itself. It is through these stories that monuments often continue to live in public memory long after their original purpose has faded from history.

The site also inspired the nineteenth-century Irish poet and antiquarian Samuel Ferguson, who immortalized Aideen's Grave in his 1861 poem *The Cromlech on Howth*. Ferguson's words capture both the beauty and solemnity of the landscape:

“A clear pure air pervades the scene,
In loneliness and awe secure.
Meet spot to sepulchre a queen
Who in her life was pure.”

Walking through the woods with Linda Fitzgibbon, surrounded by blooming rhododendrons and ancient stone, it was difficult not to think about the enduring power of storytelling and place. Much of CIMPAN's work in Quebec centres around preserving memory landscapes — cemeteries, migration routes, oral histories, monuments, and sites connected to Irish settlement and migration. Visiting Aideen's Grave offered a reminder that Ireland itself is filled with these layered landscapes where myth, history, archaeology, and identity continue to intersect.

Our visit also included time exploring the exterior of Howth Castle, one of Ireland's oldest continuously inhabited castles and long associated with the St. Lawrence family. The medieval architecture and surrounding estate added another dimension to the experience, reinforcing how deeply history is embedded within the Irish landscape.



Figure 3: Howth Castle
Image Credit: Kelley O'Rourke

What stayed with me most, however, was not simply the age of the monument, but the atmosphere surrounding it. The pathway lined with brilliant pink rhododendrons, the quiet woodland, and the massive stone tomb hidden among the trees created a sense of reflection and continuity that is difficult to describe fully in words.

Places like Aideen's Grave endure because people continue to walk the paths, tell the stories, and connect the past to the present. In many ways, that ongoing act of remembrance remains as important as the monument itself.

Source: Howth Castle Estate. n.d. "Aideen's Grave."

<https://howthcastle.ie/about/estate/aideens-grave/>