Wild Atlantic Women

Shredding under cold heaven with the next generation of Irish surfers

Writer **Kristen Poli** travels to Donegal with photographer **Aisling Clark** to explore a different side of the surf scene. Speaking to two Irish champions, **Maia Monaghan** and **Una Britton**, Poli finds out what's been drawing higher numbers of girls and women to Ireland's waves, despite still being outnumbered by men in the water 3:1.

This feature forms part of our Solstice Stories collaboration with Skein Press.

I ARRIVE IN BELALT STRAND, a stretch of beach on the southern shores of Donegal Bay, less than 48 hours after St. Brigit's day. It's cold, even by Irish standards. The wool scarf I used as a brat-bhríde is strung tightly around my neck; the sea is granite grey. Fifty kilometres north, it's snowing on Mount Errigal. The water is never colder in Donegal than it is now, in early February, when winds from Greenland's glaciers funnel through the narrow coves and windworn crags of the Wild Atlantic Way.

Surrounding the bouldered beach is the tiny resort town of Rossnowlagh. I expect it to be all but closed for the season, but as I approach the car park outside the Rossnowlagh Surf Club, I find it's packed. Parents wielding takeaway coffees and duffle bags chat amongst themselves. Groups of girls weave in and out of the club's doors searching for stray neoprene booties and fitting foam-top surfboards. Sunday practice is about to begin.


Maia Monaghan


Una Britton

All of the arrivals are either shielded from the elements with a parka and gloves, or taking cover inside the octagonal brick-and-mortar club building. My companions, celebrated Irish surf champions Maia Monaghan and Una Britton, are the exception.

'Surfing is like 70% of my personal life,' says Maia, tugging on a damp wetsuit.

The wind pulls the girls' hair away from their faces while they wax their surfboards, a necessary preparation to ensure their feet don't slip from the boards' surface while they're in the water. Una chuckles at the tropical-grade variety she's brought, better suited to California than Coolmore. Donegal is often nicknamed 'the forgotten county' because of its lack of inroads – both economic and cultural – to Dublin. But Una and Maia are making an opposite case. Last year, Maia was crowned national women's champion by the Irish Surfing Association (ISA), a title that Una won in 2019. Six months ago, both girls competed on behalf of Ireland at the World Surfing Games in Huntington Beach, California – a qualifier for the 2024 Olympics.

Una and Maia are in their early twenties, and look forward to our interview as a break from studying for their final undergrad exams. They arrived as a pair, dressed in the casual, college-cool outfits of young women with busy schedules. They have an easy, bubbly camaraderie that makes them seem more like sisters than competitors or co-coaches, but they are both. In addition to studying full time and competing in international surf competitions, Maia and Una run the Rossi Rippers: Ireland's most popular surf club for girls.

A Female Past, A Female Future

Since its founding, the club has been hugely successful in changing the gender dynamics of their local lineup. 'Back then, it was just the two of us,' says Maia, gesturing towards Una. 'Now, the girls outnumber the boys.' This is an unlikely configuration, and not just by local standards – according to a 2021 report by the Surf Industry Members Association, less than 40% of the global surfing population is female.

With support from the ISA, Maia and Una expanded the club's offerings from a limited-run, female-only clinic to a set of weekly training sessions held over the summer for girls of different age groups. When talking about her students, Una is clear about the force of their talent. 'They'll be pushing the standard of surfing.'

Incidentally, it was a woman who brought the first surfboard to Donegal. The Rossi Rippers are a subgroup of the Rossnowlagh Surf Club, founded shortly after Mary Britton (Una's great-aunt) brought a longboard from Southern California to the counties in 1969. As the story goes, Mary, who owned The Sandhouse Hotel on Belalt Strand, hoped that the board would make a cutting-edge amenity for guests. Her sons, immediately enthralled with the sport, made sure that it never did. A standalone marble bench in the shape of a split-tailed shortboard stands between the hotel bar and the beach, in their honour.

Some fifty years later, I'm underneath the awning of the clubhouse they built, the first of its kind in Ireland. Today it doubles as a lifeguard centre. It feels awkward to sit on the bench's glossy memorial, so I lean against the building instead, and feel oddly vindicated when it starts to drizzle. Gradually, the younger Rossis exit the club. In dark, hooded suits, they bounce from foot to foot on the pavement near the beach. 'I thought you were coming in too,' one says, looking directly at me. I offer up a rain-check – today I showed up without the board or the bravado.

Inventing a Macho Male Sea Monster

For all of their successes in competition, Una and Maia are adamant about the fact that mastering manoeuvres isn't what brings them to the water. They talk about surfing as an escape from everyday stresses, a chance to commune with friends, and an opportunity to connect with nature. Surfing is a haven from the highs and lows of ambition, friendship, and alienation that define young adulthood; they describe it as both a lifelong sport and a familial practice. With students, they focus in particular on the merits of social surfing, and the sometimes soothing, eternally awesome, power of the sea.

'The message we try to portray is: you're there to enjoy yourself,' says Una.

There's something quietly radical about her words. For one thing, Una speaks from a surf scene that is known on the international stage for its otherworldly *slabs* – that is: heavy, rapid deep-water waves. A thirty-minute drive down the coast from Rossnowlagh will land you in Mullaghmore, where prevailing winds winch trees, and big-wave surfers like Conor Maguire and Ollie O'Flaherty regularly face off with the largest waves in the world. Like many such places in Ireland, Mullaghmore Head is notoriously temperamental. When Maguire and O'Flaherty surf, they're accompanied by tow rescue teams, paramedics, and camera crews hungry for marketing material. Capturing surf footage at this level is big business: the energy drinks companies that sponsor big-wave surfers in Ireland are the major players in their industry, together representing 70% of the global market.

I'll admit it: I watched dozens of local big-wave surf compilations on YouTube over the past few weeks in the name of research. Diageo's famous *Surfer* ad made for Guinness in 1990 looks cartoonish in comparison to these clips. More *Ponyo* than *Point Break*.

In addition to improvements to national travel infrastructure and the development of better cold-water wetsuits, these videos are part of the reason why Ireland has become a recognisable surf destination over the past twenty years. In 2020, a single YouTube video of Conor Maguire surfing a 60-foot slab garnered nearly 300k views. More often than not, the stakes at Mullaghmore are life and death. Conversations about big wave surfing, and Irish surfing in particular, are often presented through a combative, masculine lens. In the comments of Conor Maguire's viral clip, one user compares the wave to Mike Tyson. Another mistakes him for Conor McGregor, attributing his bravery to his MMA background. To sell more fizz, the bottlers-cum-advertisers try to heighten their viewers' blood pressure by any means necessary.

The result is a remarkable flow of fairly extreme content promoting what is essentially a niche sport. It's easy to imagine that Ireland's reputation in the media, built on big waves, might make getting in the water more intimidating for newcomers.

You Can't Stop the Grommets

This could be especially true for young women. According to new research from Sport Ireland, girls are most likely to drop out of sport around age thirteen, a fact that Una and Maia readily acknowledge. The report notes that girls are quick to judge their abilities harshly and label themselves as 'not sporty'; they can also feel less comfortable around male coaches. Even Una, a born surfer by all definitions, remembers feeling surprised that there was room for her in more competitive lineups. 'There were always about ten lads – it didn't even cross our minds that we could get on the team. The dynamics are that girls shouldn't be interested in sports, they should be interested in how they look.'

In this regard, the tide is only beginning to turn. Zoe Lally, CEO of the Irish Surfing Association and 13-time national champion, would know. While the mainstream media has increased its coverage of women's sport in recent years, it leaves behind a long legacy of lopsided storytelling. Zoe offers an anecdote about an infamous 1989 Huntington Beach tournament that cancelled the women's heat to make space for the *Miss Ocean Pacific* bikini-beauty contest. 'The role models were the girls on that stand in their bikinis – not the girls in the water surfing. Worldwide, you'd open up any surf magazine and the only women you'd see … weren't surfing.'

Despite this legacy, Una and Maia are decidedly optimistic about the future. When I ask them about the differences between their mentees and themselves at age thirteen, they respond unanimously. 'Well, for one thing, this generation is more competitive,' says Maia.

She's right, and for reasons that have as much to do with generational differences as with a small group of forward-thinking executives across the Irish Sea. It's in nearby Cornwall, at the European Surfing Federation (ESF) headquarters, where the powers-that-be oversee the continent's most vital surf tournaments. 2022 was a breakthrough year for women's surfing, and not just in Ireland. For the first time, Eurosurf Junior – a continent-wide competition for under 18s – adjusted their rules to require 50% female participation across all teams. This meant that during Europe's largest junior competition in Portugal last July, more girls competed than in any previous year. Now, other events organised by the ESF are beginning to follow suit. According to Zoe Lally, these regulations are impacting when – and which – young people get into the water. 'People think competitive surfing doesn't have much to do with the lifestyle,' she says, 'but it does.'

As it happens, not everyone in the sport's upper echelons is in favour of these changes. Notably, not all ESF events require equal participation across genders, including both Junior and Senior European Tours. As one of the Federation's executive committee members, Zoe has been pushing for gender parity in competitions for years, but she's often met with sneers. '*You can't put little girls out in that*,' she says, quoting another senior member. Cut to the suited-up youngsters in the car park. Many of these 'grommets', as Zoe calls them, convinced their parents to bring them to this session, between their Sunday chores and schoolwork. A few have forgotten their boots or gloves, but don't seem to mind.

Besides changing regulations, other factors have brought more wave-chasers from Ireland's cities to its seaside towns. Like many outdoor recreational sports, surfing in Ireland experienced an unlikely boon during the harshest months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when widespread lockdowns resulted in a large influx of new signups to local surf clubs. Out of these, hundreds of new beginner-level surfers were inaugurated, many of whom were women. Zoe estimates that Rossnowlagh's Surf Club increased its membership by 75% between 2020 and 2021. As a result of the sport's growth, Zoe was able to hire two more associates at the ISA and lobby for increased funding from the Federation of Irish Sport. These funds continue to support the Rossi Rippers and its sister club, the Ripgurls, located in Tramore Bay.

A Rising Tide Lifts All Boards

On the sand, I watch Una and Maia take the group through a series of preparatory stretches on the sprawling beach. It's late afternoon, and the tide rises slowly, erasing a set of tire tracks left by a couple of college students.

The rain intensifies. When the surfers march into the waves, I follow closely behind. The break is far off, best seen from the newly-constructed holiday homes and hotels scattering the cliffs. I relay back and forth between sets, trying to prevent the water from creeping past the soles of my shoes. Students take off on the whitewash, one or two at a time. Occasionally I see a flash of colour alongside them – the eggshell blue of Una's board, or the hot pink of Maia's – but it's hard to tell who's who from the shore.

This small detail may indicate something larger, even universal, about Irish surfing. According to Dr. Frederique Carey-Penot, an Associate Professor of English at Rennes 2 University, semi-anonymity in the water has contributed to a culture of acceptance in the lineup. 'When everyone is wearing a wetsuit, the gender differences tend to be erased a bit,' she says.

Dr. Carey-Penot has made a career of studying Ireland's burgeoning surf scene. In particular, she focuses on the community's cultural expressions; amalgamations of stories, images, and myths that she calls *surflore*. Her origin story as a sea-émigré sounds mythical when she describes it to me over the phone – as a grad student in France, she visited the west coast of Ireland on a solo trip and decided to stay.

When I ask her about the downstream effects of groups like Rossi Rippers, she cites her ethnographic research. 'If a woman shows up on the lineup [...] it can have a pacifying effect. They can tone down the rivalry, though that's a bit stereotypical.'

Dr. Carey-Penot's husband is an Irish big-wave surfer – called a *charger* by those in the know. She mentions that surf sessions with her girlfriends have been crucial to broadening her understanding. The scholar and surfer is reluctant to squarely call surfing a sport: 'It's a cultural practice, and a sport.'

At one point or another, all of the women I've interviewed agree: there's something special, singular even, about surfing along the Wild Atlantic Way. The island's harsh climate, known for its capricious winds and rugged geography, fosters mutual respect between those brave enough to paddle out. In other words, a personal warmth has emerged to account for the cold, a sentiment that seems to cross gender lines. The volatility of the waves contribute to a sense of gratitude when the right kind do roll in.

The sun begins to set on the beach, sending shimmering tracts of purple and orange across the water. As the tide recedes, tiny wedge shells are obscured under layers of sand. I wave to Maia and Una one last time, and say goodbye to the squad as their chaperones drive away from the car park, towards town. When I arrive at The Sandhouse Hotel, chilled and hungry, I find the barroom brimming with Sunday rugby fans – I have to duck and weave just to get inside. The staff are slinging pints and toasties. There's a fire going, but good luck hearing the crackling wood over the noise of the televised match.

I clear a pint with my coat and hat still on. While the hotel is no longer owned by the Britton family, the bar itself is covered in memorabilia. It's the closest thing to a surf museum you'll find outside of Ulster. Posters, illustrations, and framed photo-collages line all four walls. I spot a photograph of Zoe, looking cheery with a surfboard underneath her arm; and a poster for the Rossnowlagh Intercounties Surfing Contest, illustrated by Una's uncle. It depicts a larger-than-life Queen Maeve, sitting on a decorated throne at the foot of the Derryveagh Mountains. Between her battle armor, her clothing is adorned with Celtic knots. She's surrounded by arrows, shields, and – of course – a quiver of surfboards.

After a few warm hours, I leave. The car park outside the beach is mostly vacant. It's dark. I can't see the waves anymore, but I can hear them flattening on the Strand. The Brittons' bench picks up small spots of moonlight, as if the split-tailed marble board were made of wakeless water. Soon enough, the weather will soften again, bringing more curious newcomers to the shore. According to superstition, a rainy February is a good omen, a sure sign of a sunny summer to come.

As I drive back towards Dublin, and watch the cliffs of Coolmore slip out of sight, I'm reminded of something Dr. Carey-Penot told me. 'Being a surfer – in Ireland or elsewhere – isn't about having this lifestyle. It's about having done this journey, and brought something back to land.' ▪