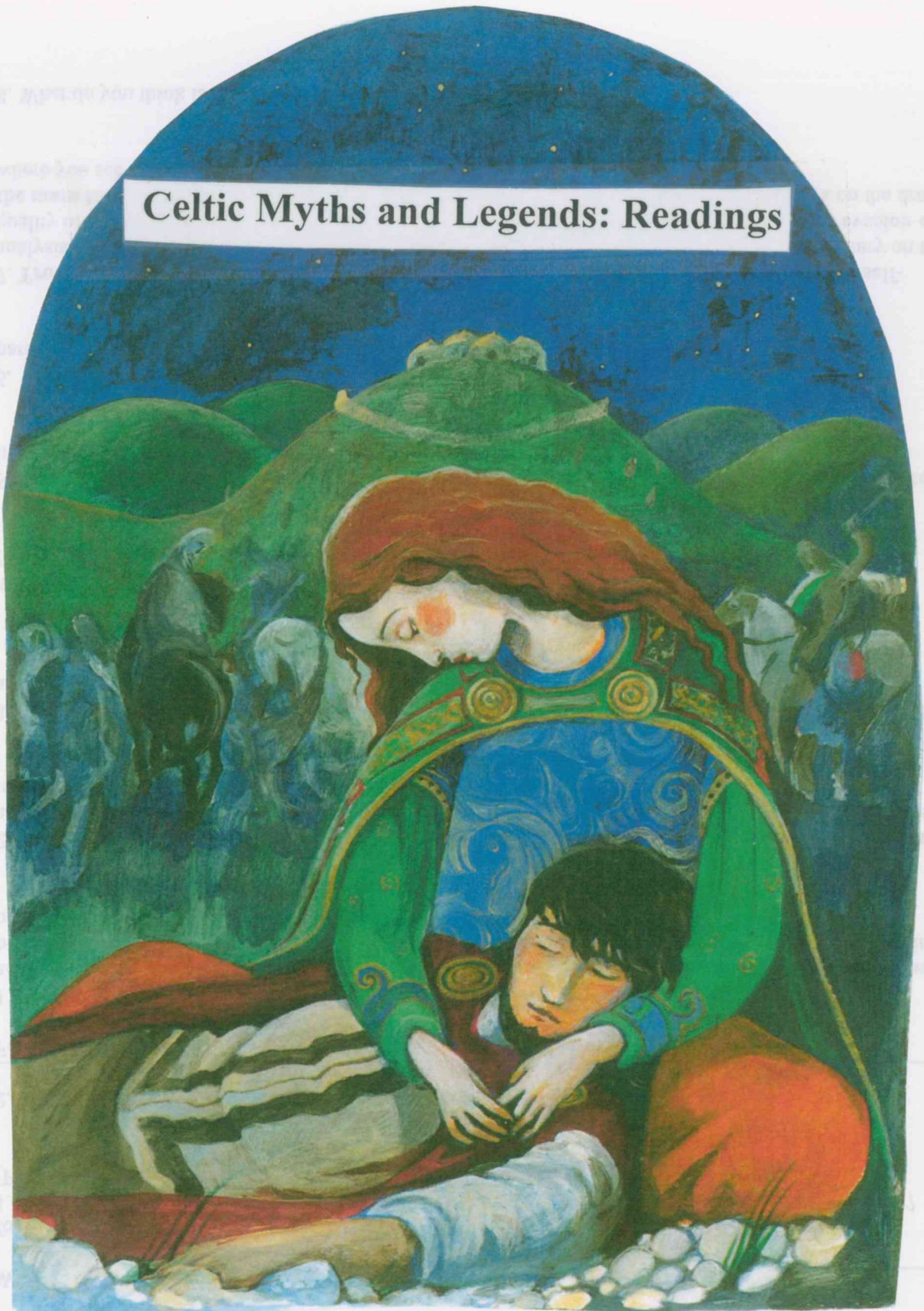


Celtic Myths and Legends: Readings



# Introduction to Celtic Myths

**T**HE CELTS LEFT A RICH LEGACY of myths, legends, customs and folklore, which are among the oldest and most enduring in Europe, though they did not form an empire and their kingdoms comprised a wide variety of countries and cultures. Perhaps because of this their identity remains controversial, and our image of them is reworked by each new generation of Celtic scholars. The mystery of the Celts arises from the fact that they left no written accounts of themselves. Consequently, our knowledge of them is based on indirect evidence provided by archaeology, linguistics and Classical commentaries.

## The Mystery of the Celts

Celtic material culture emerged in Central and Western Europe in the first millennium BC. It is first encountered in the artefacts of the Halstatt period (700–400 BC), so-named after an important archaeological site in upper Austria. The origins of the culture are much earlier, however, in the later Bronze Age settlements of non-Mediterranean Europe and probably even earlier still in the first Neolithic farming communities c. 4000 BC. The La Tène period (fifth century BC to the Roman occupation c. AD 45), which is named after a site on the shores of Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland, represents the full-flowering of the culture. Finds have been made over much of Europe from northern France to Romania and from Poland to the Po Valley. This evidence portrays a heroic and hierarchical society in which war, feasting and bodily adornment were important. In many respects this confirms the picture of the Celts painted by Classical writers from the sixth century BC onwards.

Hecataeus of Miletus and Herotodus, writing in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, recognized a group of peoples to the north of the Greek port of Massalia (Marseilles) as having sufficient cultural features in common to justify a collective name, 'Keltoi'. By the fourth century BC commentators had accepted the Celts as being among the great Barbarian peoples of the world, along with the Scythians, and Libyans; they were said to occupy a large swathe of Western Europe from Iberia to the Upper Danube. Later, Mediterranean writers such as Livy and Polybius report that in the fourth and third centuries BC Celtic tribes spread south into Italy and east to Greece and Asia Minor, where they settled as the Galatians. The same writers record heavy defeats for the Celts by the Romans towards the end of the third century BC and

the subsequent occupation of their heartlands in Gaul by the mid-first century BC. Nowhere do the ancients refer to Britain as a Celtic land and debate continues over the precision with which the label 'Celt' was applied by Classical writers.

Without their own accounts it is impossible to say whether the Iron Age tribes of Europe, including Britain, saw themselves as collectively 'Celtic'. It is true to say, however, that Caesar recognized similarities between Britain and Gaul, and there is ample evidence of the La Tène culture in the British Isles. In the absence of archaeological evidence to show a migration of peoples from Gaul to Britain, it seems likely that it was the culture which spread; the indigenous peoples simply became Celtic through social contact and trade. Thus, when we refer to 'the Celts' we are not referring to an ethnic group but a culture adopted across non-Mediterranean Europe between the sixth century BC and the fifth century AD. It is ironic that the Irish and Welsh literature to which we owe so much of our understanding of Celtic mythology originated among peoples who may not have seen themselves as Celts.

## Gods and Heroes

The Celts were polytheistic. The names of over 200 gods have been recorded. It is likely that individual deities went under several titles, so there were probably fewer than this. The scene remains complex, however, and attempts to reduce the Celtic pantheon to a coherent system have met with varying degrees of success.

The Celts had gods for all of the important aspects of their lives: warfare, hunting, fertility, healing, good harvests and so on. Much of the difficulty in classifying them arises from the fact that very few were recognized universally. In much greater numbers were local, tribal and possibly family deities. Our knowledge of the Celtic pantheon is based on the interpretations of contemporary observers, later vernacular literature (mainly from Ireland and Wales) and archaeological finds.

Very little iconography in the form of wood or stone sculptures has survived from before the Roman conquests, although a vast amount of perishable material must have existed. The earliest archaeological evidence from this period is from Provence and Central Europe. At Roquepertuse and Holtzerlingen, Celtic deities were represented in human form as early as the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Roman influence witnessed the production of many more permanent representations of the gods; dedicatory inscriptions reveal a huge array of native god names.

Caesar identified Celtic gods with what he saw as their Roman equivalents, probably to render them more comprehensible to a Roman readership. He said of the Gauls that the god they revered the most was Mercury and, next to him, Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva. Lucan (AD 39–65), a famous Roman poet, named three Celtic deities: Teutates (god of the tribe), Taranis (thunder) and Esus (multi-skilled). Other commentators identify Teutates with Mercury, Esus with Mars and Taranis with Dispatēr (the all-father). Inscriptions on altars and monuments found across the Roman Empire, however, identify Teutates with Mars, Esus with Mercury and Taranis with Jupiter.

It is to Christian monks that we owe the survival of the ancient oral traditions of the pagan Celts and a more lucid insight into the nature of their deities. Very little was committed to paper before the monks began writing down Irish tales in the sixth century AD. The earliest written Welsh material dates from the twelfth century. Informative though they might be, however, the stories are influenced by Romano-Christian thinking and no doubt the monks censored the worst excesses of heathenism.

The stories are collected in sequences which follow the exploits of heroes, legendary kings and mythical characters from their unusual forms of conception and birth to their remarkable deaths. Along the way we learn of their expeditions to the otherworld, their loves and their battles. Many of the Irish legends are contained in three such collections. The first, known as the *Mythological Cycle* or *Book of Invasions*, records the imagined early history of Ireland. The second, the *Ulster Cycle*, tells of Cú Chulainn, a hero with superhuman strength and magical powers. The third is the story of another hero, Finn Mac Cumhaill, his son Ossian and their warriors, the Fianna. This is known as the *Fenian Cycle*.

The pagan character of the mythology found in Irish literature is very clear. The Welsh tales, collected mainly in the *Mabinogion*, are much later (fourteenth century) and are contaminated more by time and changing literary fashions.

### **Saints and Survivals**

The religious practices of the Celts survived well into the Christian era. This is shown by resolutions passed at Church councils in the sixth century AD and by the edicts of Charlemagne (AD 789) against the worshippers of stones, trees and springs. Powerless to suppress the old beliefs, Christianity assimilated aspects of paganism.

This appropriation accounts for the large number of saints rooted in Celtic gods and heroes, the springs dedicated to saints or to the Virgin and the sanctuaries built on sacred mounds. Indeed, the Christian religion is a rich source for the study of Celtic spirituality.

From AD 432, St Patrick established a form of Christianity in Ireland to suit a society that was still tribal. Rural monasteries, where monks followed the teachings of their founders, varied from the urban system of churches and Bishops, which was favoured by Rome. This was a much more familiar approach for the Celts, whose structures centred on the family, the clan and powerful local leaders. This form spread to other Celtic countries until the Celtic and Roman Churches met at the Synod of Whitby (AD 664) where the Roman approach prevailed. Thereafter, many of the teachings favoured in Ireland and Britain were forced underground.

The Celtic church was distinctive in many ways which betrayed its ancient roots: its affinity with nature in all its aspects, for example; its respect for the seasonal festivals; the equality it afforded women; and the active participation of the congregation during worship.

The Christian church adapted stories of Celtic divinities as miraculous events in the lives of the saints. Many reflect the Celtic sympathy with nature and the ability of the gods to assume the shape of animals. St Ciaran, for example, trained a fox to carry his psalter; St Kevin had his psalter returned by an otter when he dropped it in a lake; and St Columba subdued the Loch Ness Monster. St Patrick was attributed the most miracles, many of which arise from his struggle with the druids; it was said he could take the form of a deer.

The four main religious festivals of the Celts that were absorbed into the Christian calendar were Samain, Imbolc, Beltaine and Lughnasa. Samain (1 November) marked the end of the agricultural year and the beginning of the next. It was a time for important communal rituals, meetings and sacrifices, as well as being a period when spirits from the otherworld became visible to men. Under Christianity this celebration became Harvest Festival and All Souls Day. The eve of the festival, known today as All Hallows Eve or Halloween, was particularly dangerous.

Imbolc (1 February) was sacred to the fertility goddess, Brigit, and it marked the coming into milk of the ewes and the time for moving them to upland pastures. It was subsequently taken over by the Christians as the feast of St Brigid.

At Beltaine (1 May), people lit bonfires in honour of Belenus, a god of life and death. The festival was seen as a purification or a fresh start. It is likely, too, that the fires were used to fumigate cattle before they

were moved to the summer pastures. Under Christianity it became the feast of St John the Baptist.

Finally, there was the festival of Lughnasa (1 August), which the Christians renamed Lammás. It honoured the sun god, Lugh.

## Recurring Themes

The myths of the Celts, found in Irish, Welsh and Continental vernacular literature, have inspired the imagination of poets and storytellers from the twelfth century to the present day. Their archetypal themes and imagery, though cloaked in novel forms by each new generation, never lose their potency.

No Celtic creation myth has survived, although Caesar, among other ancient commentators, testifies that they did have one. The nearest we have is a collection of stories in the Book of Invasions (twelfth century), which provide a mythical history of Ireland from the Flood to the coming of the Gaels (Celts).

Love is a central theme in Celtic mythology; love between deities and between gods and humans. The love triangle is a recurring variation, often involving a young couple and an unwanted suitor or an older husband. The outcome is often tragic. Typical of this genre are

the Welsh story of Pwll and Rhiannon and the Irish tales of Diarmaid and Grainne, and Deirdre and Naoise.

Sometimes the triangle involves the young woman's father, who is often represented as a giant. In these stories the hero is frequently set seemingly impossible tasks to complete before winning the daughter's hand. A primary example is the Welsh tale of Culhwch and Olwen. Here Culhwch seeks the help of Arthur and his band of warriors to complete a list of tasks which culminate in a hunt for the monstrous boar, Twrch Trwyth.

Another theme is that of sacral kingship and sovereignty, in which the coupling of the king and the goddess of fertility ensures prosperity in the land. The goddess sometimes appears as a hag who turns into a beautiful young woman following the ritual.

Magic is an essential feature of Celtic myths. It is commonly used as a means of escape, as in the case of Diarmaid and Grainne who evade Finn's huntsmen for years using a cloak of invisibility, borrowed from Óengus, a love god. A typical form of magic found in many of the myths is the Celtic deities' ability to transform themselves or others into a variety of creatures. For example, Midir, the Irish lord of the

otherworld, turns himself and the beautiful Etain into swans to escape from the palace of Óengus. The skill is also commonly used to deceive and punish.


Cú Roi and Sir Bartelek are transformed into giants for the beheading game, to make them unrecognizable to Cúchulainn and Gawain. When Math returns home to discover that his foot-maid has been raped by his nephews, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, he punishes them by turning them into a succession of animals, one male and one female, demanding they produce offspring every year.

Love and enchantment are intimately linked in Celtic tales: Oisín is enchanted by Naim's beauty; a love potion is the undoing of Tristan and Iseulte; Diarmaid is enchanted by Grainne; Naoise is enchanted by Deirdre.

Other common themes are the otherworld feast and the feast where dramatic events occur. Such a feast might include a seduction, as in the story of Diarmaid and Grainne, or a dispute, as in the tale of Bricriu's Feast. In the latter, an argument over who should receive the choicest cut of meat leads to the contenders taking part in a game to prove who is the most courageous. This involves their submitting without flinching to beheading. Because he is the only one brave enough to go through with it, the Ulster hero, Cúchulainn, is spared the ordeal and wins 'the champion's portion'.

from Celtic Myths  
eds. Jake Jackson & Laura  
Bulbeck

# The Ulster Cycle: Stories of Cuchulainn of the Red Guard

 **THE ULSTER CYCLE**, also known as the **Red Branch Cycle**, is compiled of tales of Ulster's traditional heroes, chief among whom is Cuchulainn [*Pronounced Koo kbul-in*], arguably the most important war-champion in ancient Irish literature. An account of his birth dating from the ninth century is retold here, although a great many variations exist.

From the age of six, Cuchulainn displays his supernatural ancestry and astounding strength. While still a child, he slays the terrifying hound of Culann. As a mere youth he is sent to train with the Knights of the Red Guard under Scathach and he alone is entrusted with the diabolical weapon known as the Gae Bolg. Later, he single-handedly defends Ulster against Queen Medb [*Pronounced Maev*] while the rest of the province sleeps under the charm of Macha. His most notable exploits spanning his hectic warrior's life up until his early death are recounted here.

Cuchulainn is said to have fallen at the battle of Muirthemne, circa 12 BC. He was finally overcome by his old enemy Lugaid, aided by the monstrous daughters of Calatin. As death approaches, Cuchulainn insists that he be allowed to bind himself upright to a pillar-stone. With his dying breath, he gives a loud, victorious laugh and when Lugaid attempts to behead his corpse, the enemy's right hand is severed as the sword of Cuchulainn falls heavily upon it. The hero's death is avenged by Conall the Victorious, but with the defeat of Cuchulainn, the end is sealed to the valiant reign of the Red Guard Knights in ancient Irish legend. ✦

## THE RITUAL OF WAR

That Conchobar's first action on coming into contact with his enemy is to hold a parley, agree a truce and formally arrange for a battle to be fought later, underscores what seems to us the ritualistic quality of Celtic warfare. This quality is constantly being underlined in the text of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, in which even full pitched battles tend to be narrated as successions of single-combat scenes. Ailill's speech, calling on his heroes of Connacht to prepare themselves for action as Ulster's army approaches, is, in Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation, a veritable poem of proper names:

Rise up, Traigthréan, swift-footed. Summon for me the three called Conaire from Sliab Mis; the three fair ones called Les, in Luachair; the three called Meid from Corpthe Loste; the three named Buidir from the River Buas; the three called Badb from the River Buaidnech; the three called Buaideltach from the River Berba; the three Muredachs from Marga; the three Laegaires from Lec Derg ...

Individual pride; local patriotism: these trump anything we might call a wider "national" interest in the Celtic ethos. Although called a king and queen, Ailill and Medb might be better viewed as leaders of a loose alliance: the limits of their "kingdom" of Connacht are vague and ill-defined. By the same token, indeed, as convenient as the shorthand is, it's strictly speaking anachronistic to refer to a force like theirs or Ulster's as an "army". At least, it is if we expect this to mean the sort of carefully ordered, co-ordinated and regimented mass of men (and, these days, women) we are likely to see engaged in a modern war.

↳ from Celtic Legends, by Michael Kerrigan



As represented  
by US illustrator J.C.  
Leyendecker in 1911,  
Queen Medb is half  
attitude and half allure.

### A Marital Spat

One night as they lay in bed, Ailill and Medb were conversing happily when the king commented upon the queen's good fortune. How lucky she was, he mused contentedly, to have married so powerful and rich a ruler! How fate had smiled upon her, attaching her to so illustrious a lord. Proud Medb couldn't help but bridle: much as she loved her husband, she knew well that he'd been nothing but a bodyguard when she, herself the daughter of a king, had been married to Eochaid Dála, King of Connacht. (Before that she'd briefly been wed to Conchobar, but this unhappy union had left her with a lasting hostility to Ulster.) She had chosen Ailill as her husband because she admired his manly strength and courage more than she did Eochaid's royal status – but he couldn't seriously pull rank on her in this way!

All night they argued and the next day, far from giving up their quarrel, they continued it: now, by the light of day, they could compare their wealth, lining up their possessions in public view. Herds of cattle, horses and pigs and flocks of sheep were driven to the palace on their orders; mountains of jewellery and gold were heaped outside. When everything had been counted up and their respective worths had been calculated, the couple came out exactly matched in wealth.

### Buying a Bull

Except in one thing: Ailill of course had the great white-headed bull, Finnenbach Ai. Rich as she was, Medb had nothing that could quite compare. Determined not to be outdone, she summoned Mac Roth, the royal steward: where could she find a bull as big as her husband's?

she asked him. In Ulster, he said, there was a dark brown bull every bit as fine as – or still better than – Finnenbach Ai. Dáire mac Fiachna had the good fortune to be its owner. Medb immediately resolved that she had to have this bull to better her husband's: Mac Roth must make his way to Ulster straight away, she said. In return for a year's loan of Donn Cuailnge, she'd give him 50 young heifers and a big parcel of the Plain of Ai – plus, perhaps, a richly accoutred chariot. And if it came to it, she was prepared to pay him with a "welcome from her thighs".

Off went Mac Roth's messengers: Dáire was ecstatic when he heard all the things that the Queen of Connacht was offering him – just for the year-long loan of his Donn Cuailnge – and agreed to her terms without hesitation. All

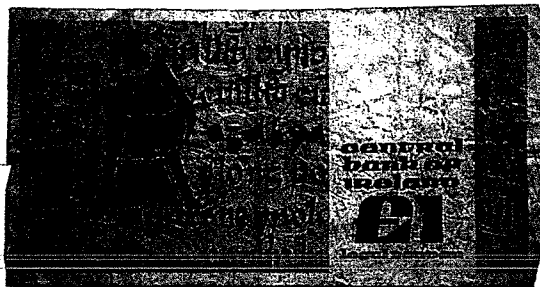
ABOVE: Medb as she appeared on the pre-Euro Punt Éreannach, with Celtic-style lettering in the background.

seemed happy and harmonious until some of Dáire's attendants heard Mac Roth's men commenting that, if Dáire had not agreed, they would simply have come back with an army and taken the bull by force. Dáire wasn't too bothered by this remark, but the suggestion that their lord could not keep what was his without Connacht's say-so seemed to his henchmen to reflect badly on them. Offended, they went to confront Dáire, who now felt obliged to make some sort of stand and sent back word to Medb that his bull was not for her.

### An Army Assembles

Connacht's queen was incandescent when the news reached her in the royal capital at Cruachan. Who did Dáire mac Fiachna think he was? Ailill too was outraged, his quarrel with Medb forgotten in his fury that a minor lord of Ulster should show such defiance to his wife. Now in full agreement, they determined

DÁIRE WAS ECSTATIC WHEN HE HEARD WHAT THE QUEEN WAS OFFERING.



that they would do whatever it took to bring Donn Cuailnge back to their kingdom in the west. Sending out messengers to every corner of the realm, they called up all the men of fighting age in Connacht – and Ulster's exiled warriors, still living on their land. Now in fact the "Sons of Uisliu" were under the leadership of a son of Conchobar: Ulster's king had fathered Cormac Connlongas on his own mother, Ness. Never close to Conchobar, Cormac had been brought up by Fergus mac Róich and had followed his foster-father when he'd left Ulster years before. With their supporters, the Ulstermen were some 3000 strong.

## Forebodings of Blood

"This army has been brought together in my name," Medb observed to her charioteer as they waited at the head of the line for the signal to move off. "On my orders, couples are being prised apart; lovers are leaving – perhaps never to be seen again. Many will be cursing me at this moment." As the charioteer turned his vehicle to catch the best of the sun's rays with their promise of a safe return, he and his mistress both caught sight of a beautiful young woman. Her flaxen hair falling gracefully on to shoulders draped by a mottled cloak, held in place by a glowing golden pin,

Note: After she is forced into this race, Macha cursed the men of Ulster to suffer intense labor pains at their hour of greatest peril, day Queen Maeve's forces attack.

she too was standing in a chariot. Intrigued by her beauty and her poise, Medb asked her name. "Fedelm", she replied. "I am a poet and a prophetess. I come from Connacht, but have been learning my trade in Alba." Pressing her to know if she had "second sight" and could offer

insights into the future, the anxious queen asked how she saw the prospects for her army. "Blood-red", she retorted. "I see a war-host drenched in the red of blood, as though entirely cut down by Cú Chulainn, Ulster's hero." Medb refused to accept this prediction: Fedelm must be mistaken, she reasoned. Even now, she knew,

Conchobar's forces would be completely incapacitated, writhing around on the floor, racked with the labour pangs that Macha had condemned them to.

But Fedelm was firm in her insistence: three times Medb asked her how she saw her army; three times she answered flatly "blood-red". The fourth time she said the same thing too, but then she suddenly burst into a song of prophecy, describing the vision she was seeing of a tall, blond hero wreaking single-handed havoc among Medb's host. He looked, said Fedelm, for all the world like Ulster's celebrated champion, the great Cú Chulainn, and the might of Connacht was collapsing in his path. His comrades might be back in Ulster in the throes of imaginary labour, but

The Irish language



Cú Chulainn was of course specifically exempted from the goddess' curse, and he alone could do the work of a whole army. Slashing about him with four swords in each hand, thrusting before him with a wicked-looking *Gáe Bolg* spear, he stood straight and calm in his chariot, his blood-red cloak trailing in the wind as he hurtled on. "I keep nothing hidden", Fedelm concluded. "Cú Chulainn leaves behind him a trail of mangled corpses and women's tears."

Macha's race







*from an Táin by Colmán Ó Raghallaigh*

### How Setanta Won the Name of Cuchulainn

**W**ITHIN THE COURT OF EMAIN MACHA, there existed an élite group of boy athletes whose outstanding talents filled the King with an overwhelming sense of pride and joy. It had become a regular part of Conchobar's daily routine to watch these boys at their various games and exercises, for nothing brought him greater pleasure than to witness their development into some of the finest sportsmen in Erin. He had named the group the Boy-Corps, and the sons of the most powerful chieftains and princes of the land were among its members, having proven their skill and dexterity in a wide and highly challenging range of sporting events.

*From Celtic Myths, Jackson*

Before Setanta had grown to the age of six, he had already expressed his desire before the King to be enrolled in the Boy-Corps. At first, Conchobar refused to treat the request seriously, since his nephew was a great deal younger than any other member, but the boy persisted, and the King at last agreed to allow him to try his hand. It was decided that he should join in a game of hurling one morning, and when he had dressed himself in the martial uniform of the Boy-Corps, he was presented with a brass hurley almost his own height off the ground.

A team of twelve boys was assembled to play against him and they sneered mockingly at the young lad before them, imagining they would have little difficulty keeping the ball out of his reach. But as soon as the game started up, Setanta dived in among the boys and took hold of the ball, striking it with his hurley and driving it a powerful distance to the other end of the field where it sailed effortlessly through the goal-posts. And after this first onslaught, he made it impossible for his opponents to retrieve the ball from him, so that within a matter of minutes he had scored fifty goals against the twelve of them. The whole corps looked on in utter amazement and the King, who had been eagerly following the game, was flushed with excitement. His nephew's show of prowess was truly astonishing and he began to reproach himself for having originally set out to humour the boy.

'Have Setanta brought before me,' he said to his steward, 'for such an impressive display of heroic strength and impertinent courage deserves a very special reward.'

Now on that particular day, Conchobar had been invited to attend a great feast at the house of Culann, the most esteemed craftsman and smith in the kingdom. A thought had suddenly entered Conchobar's head that it would be a very fitting reward for Setanta to share in such a banquet, for no small boy had ever before accompanied the King and the Knights of the Red Guard on such a prestigious outing. It was indeed a great honour and one Setanta readily acknowledged. He desperately wanted to accept the invitation, but only one thing held him back. He could not suppress the desire of a true sportsman to conclude the game he had begun and pleaded with the King to allow him to do so:

'I have so thoroughly enjoyed the first half of my game with the Boy-Corps,' he told the King, 'that I am loathe to cut it short. I promise to follow when the game is over if you will allow me this great liberty.'

And seeing the excitement and keenness shining in the boy's eyes, Conchobar was more than happy to agree to this request. He instructed

Setanta to follow on before nightfall and gave him directions to the house of Culann. Then he set off for the banquet, eager to relate the morning's stirring events to the rest of Culann's house guests.

It was early evening by the time the royal party arrived at the dwelling place of Culann. A hundred blazing torches guided them towards the walls of the fort and a carpet of fresh green rushes formed a mile-long path leading to the stately entrance. The great hall was already lavishly prepared for the banquet and the sumptuous aroma of fifty suckling pigs turning on the spit filled every room of the house. Culann himself came forward to greet each one of his guests and he bowed respectfully before the King and led him to his place of honour at the centre of the largest table. Once his royal guest had taken his seat, the order was given for the wine to be poured and the laughter and music followed soon afterwards. And when it was almost time for the food to be served, Culann glanced around him one last time to make certain that all his visitors had arrived.

'I think we need wait no longer,' he said to the King. 'My guests are all present and it will now be safe to untie the hound who keeps watch over my home each night. There is not a hound in Erin who could equal mine for fierceness and strength, and even if a hundred men should attempt to do battle with him, every last one would be torn to pieces in his powerful jaws.'

'Release him then, and let him guard this place,' said Conchobar, quite forgetting that his young nephew had not yet joined the party. 'My men are all present and our appetites have been whetted by our long journey here. Let us delay no longer and begin the feasting at once.'

And after the gong had been sounded, a procession of elegantly-clad attendants entered the room carrying gilded trays of roasted viands and freshly harvested fruit and vegetables, which they set down on the table before the King and the hungry warriors of the Red Guard.

It was just at this moment that the young Setanta came to the green of Culann's fort carrying with him the hurley and the ball that had brought him victory against the Boy-Corps. As the boy drew nearer to the entrance of the fort, the hound's ears pricked up warily and it began to growl and bark in such a way as to be heard throughout the entire countryside. The whole company within the great hall heard the animal snarling ferociously and raced outdoors to discover what exactly it was that had disturbed the creature. They saw before them a young boy, who showed little sign of fear as he stood facing the fierce dog with gaping jaws. The child was without any obvious weapon of

defence against the animal, but as it charged at him, he thrust his playing ball, forcefully down its throat causing it to choke for breath. Then he seized the hound by the hind legs and dashed its head against a rock until blood spewed from its mouth and the life had gone out of it.

Those who witnessed this extraordinary confrontation hoisted the lad triumphantly into the air and bore him on their shoulders to where Conchobar and Culann stood waiting. The King, although more than gratified by the boy's demonstration of courage, was also much relieved to know that Setanta was safe. Turning to his host, he began to express his joy, but it was immediately apparent that Culann could share none of Conchobar's happiness. He walked instead towards the body of his dead hound and fell into a mournful silence as he stroked the lifeless form, remembering the loyal and obedient animal who had given its life to protect its master's property. Seeing Culann bent over the body of his faithful dog, Setanta came forward without hesitation and spoke the following words of comfort to him:

'If in all of Erin there is a hound to replace the one you have lost, I will find it, nurture it and place it in your service when it is fit for action. But, in the meantime, I myself will perform the duty of that hound and will guard your land and your possessions with the utmost pride.'

There was not one among the gathering who remained unmoved by this gesture of contrition and friendship. Culann, for his part, was overcome with gratitude and appreciation and declared that Setanta should bear the name of Cuchulainn, 'Culann's Hound', in remembrance of his first great act of valour. And so, at the age of six, the boy Setanta was named Cuchulainn, a name by which he was known and feared until the end of his days.

## The Tragedy of Cuchulainn and Connla

**A**S SOON AS CUCHULAINN had reached the appropriate age to begin his formal training as a Knight of the Red Guard, it was decided at the court of Conchobar mac Nessa that he should depart for the Land of Shadows, where Scathach, the wisest, strongest, most celebrated woman-warrior, had prepared the path of his instruction in the feats of war. The stronghold of Scathach lay in a mysterious land overseas, beyond the bounds of the Plain of Ill-luck. It could only be reached by crossing the Perilous Glen, a journey very

few had survived, for the Glen teemed with the fiercest of goblins lying in wait to devour hopeful young pilgrims. But even if a youth managed to come through the Perilous Glen unharmed, he had then to cross the Bridge of Leaps, underneath which the sea boiled and hissed furiously. This bridge was the highest and narrowest ever built and it spanned the steepest gorge in the western world. Only a handful of people had ever crossed it, but those who did were privileged to become the highest ranking scholars of Scathach and the very finest of Erin's warriors.

Within a week of leaving the court of Emain Macha, Cuchulainn had arrived at the Plain of Ill-luck and although he had already suffered many trials along the way, he knew in his heart that the worst still lay ahead. As he gazed out over the vast stretch of barren land he was obliged to traverse, he grew despondent, for he could see that one half was covered in a porous clay which would certainly cause his feet to stick fast, while the other was overgrown with long, coarse, straw-coloured grass, whose pointed blades were designed to slash a man's limbs to pieces. And as he stood crestfallen, attempting to decide which of the two routes would prove less hazardous, he noticed a young man approaching on horseback from the east. The very appearance of the rider lifted Cuchulainn's spirits, but when he observed that the youth's countenance shone as splendidly as the golden orb of the sun (though he does not reveal himself, this is, of course, Cuchulainn's father, Lugh of the Long Arm), he immediately felt hopeful and reassured once more. The two began to converse together and Cuchulainn enquired of the young man which track he considered the best to follow across the Plain of Ill-luck. The youth pondered the question awhile and then, reaching beneath his mantel, he handed Cuchulainn a leather pouch containing a small golden wheel.

'Roll this before you as you cross the quagmire,' he told Cuchulainn, 'and it will scorch a path in the earth which you may follow safely to the stronghold of Scathach.'

Cuchulainn gratefully received the gift and bid farewell to the youth. And after he had set the wheel in motion, it led him safely, just as the young rider had promised, across the Plain of Ill-luck and through the Perilous Glen until he reached the outskirts of the Land of Shadows.

It was not long before he happened upon a small camp in the heart of the woodlands where the scholars of Scathach, the sons of the noblest princes and warriors of Erin, were busy at their training. He recognized at once his friend Ferdia, son of the Firbolg, Daman, and the two men embraced each other warmly. After Cuchulainn had

told Ferdia all of the latest news from Ulster, he began to question his friend about the great woman-warrior who was set to educate him in arms.

'She dwells on the island beyond the Bridge of Leaps,' Ferdia told him, 'which no man, not even myself, has ever managed to cross. It is said that when we have achieved a certain level of valour, Scathach herself will teach us to cross the bridge, and she will also teach us to thrust the Gae Bolg, a weapon reserved for only the bravest of champions.'

'Then I must prove to her that I am already valorous,' replied Cuchulainn, 'by crossing that bridge without any assistance from her.'

'You are unlikely to succeed,' warned Ferdia, 'for if a man steps on one end of the bridge, the middle rises up and flings him into the waters below where the mouths of sea-monsters lie open, ready to swallow him whole.'

But these words of caution merely fired Cuchulainn's ambition to succeed in his quest. Retiring to a quiet place, he sat down to recover his strength from his long journey and waited anxiously for evening to fall.

The scholars of Scathach had all gathered to watch Cuchulainn attempt to cross the Bridge of Leaps and they began to jeer him loudly when after the third attempt he had failed to reach the far side. The mocking chorus that greeted his failure greatly infuriated the young warrior but prompted him at the same time to put all his strength and ability into one final, desperate leap. And at the fourth leap, which came to be known as 'the hero's salmon-leap', Cuchulainn landed on the ground of the island at the far side of the bridge. Lifting himself off the ground, he strode triumphantly to the fortress of Scathach and beat loudly on the entrance door with the shaft of his spear. Scathach appeared before him, wonder-struck that a boy so young and fresh of face had demonstrated such courage and vigour. She agreed at once to accept him as her pupil, promising to teach him all the feats of war if he would pledge himself to remain under her tuition and guidance for a period not less than a full year and a day.

During the time that Cuchulainn dwelt with Scathach, he grew to become her favourite pupil, for he acquired each new skill with the greatest of ease and approached every additional challenge set him with the utmost enthusiasm. Scathach had never before deemed any of her students good enough to be trained in the use of the Gae Bolg, but she now considered Cuchulainn a champion worthy of this special honour and presented him one morning with the terrible weapon. Then she instructed him on how to use it and explained

that it should be hurled with the foot, and upon entering the enemy it would fill every inch of his body with deadly barbs, killing him almost instantly.

It was while Cuchulainn remained under Scathach's supervision that the Land of Shadows came under attack from the fiercest of tribal warriors, led by the Princess Aife. After several weeks of bloody battle, during which no solution to the conflict could be reached, it was agreed that Scathach and Aife should face each other in single combat. On hearing this news, Cuchulainn expressed the gravest concern and was adamant that he would accompany Scathach to the place where the contest was due to take place. Yet Scathach feared that something untoward might befall her young protégé, and she placed a sleeping potion in Cuchulainn's drink with the power to prevent him waking until she was safely reached her meeting place with Aife. But the potion, which would have lasted twenty-four hours in any other man, held Cuchulainn in a slumber for less than one hour and when he awoke he seized his weapon and went forth to join the war against Aife.

And not only did he slay three of Aife's finest warriors in the blink of an eyelid, he insisted on trading places with Scathach and facing the tribal-leader by himself. But before going into battle against her, he asked Scathach what it was that Aife prized above all other things.

'What she most loves are her two horses, her chariot, and her charioteer,' she informed Cuchulainn. So he set off to meet Aife, forearmed with this knowledge.

The two opponents met on the Path of Feats and entered into a vicious combat there. They had only clashed swords three or four times however, before Aife delivered Cuchulainn a mighty blow, shattering his powerful sword to the hilt and leaving him defenceless. Seeing the damage to his weapon, Cuchulainn at once cried out:

'What a terrible fate that charioteer beyond has met with. Look, his chariot and his two beautiful horses have fallen down the glen.'

And as Aife glanced around, Cuchulainn managed to seize her by the waist, squeezing firmly with his hands until she could hardly breathe and had dropped her sword at his feet. Then he carried her over his shoulder back to the camp of Scathach and flung her on the ground where he placed his knife at her throat.

'Do not take my life from me, Cuchulainn,' Aife begged, 'and I will agree to whatever you demand.'

It was soon settled between Scathach and Cuchulainn that Aife should agree to a lasting peace and, as proof of her commitment, they pronounced that she should bind herself over to remain a full year as

Cuchulainn's hostage in the Land of Shadows. And after nine months, Aife gave birth to a son whom she named Connla, for she and Cuchulainn had grown to become the best of friends and the closest of lovers with the passing of time.

Now sadly, the day arrived for Cuchulainn to depart the Land of Shadows, and knowing that Aife would not accompany him, he spoke the following wish for his son's future:

'I give you this golden ring for our child,' he told Aife. 'And when he has grown so that the ring fits his finger, send him away from here to seek out his father in Erin.'

'Counsel him on my behalf to keep his identity secret,' he added, 'so that he may stand proud on his own merit and never refuse a combat, or turn out of his way for any man.'

Then after he had uttered these words, Cuchulainn took his leave of Aife and made his way back to his own land and his people.

Seven years had passed, during which time Cuchulainn had chosen Emer, daughter of Forgall, one of the finest maidens in Ulster, to become his wife, and the two lived a very happy life together. He rarely thought of Aife and the son he had left behind in the Land of Shadows, for he had also risen to become captain of the House of the Red Branch of Conchobar mac Nessa and was by far the busiest and most respected warrior in the kingdom.

It was at this time, however, that Connla, son of Cuchulainn, set out on his journey to be reunited with his father in Erin, approaching her shores on the precise day that all the great warriors and noble lords of Ulster were assembled for an annual ceremony on the Strand of Footprints. They were very much surprised to see a little boat of bronze appear on the crest of the waves, and in it a small boy clutching a pair of gilded oars, steering his way steadily towards them. The boy seemed not to notice them and every so often he stopped rowing and bent down to pick up a stone from the heap he had collected at the bottom of the boat. Then, putting one of these stones into a sling, he launched a splendid shot at the sea-birds above, bringing the creatures down, stunned, but unharmed, one after another, in a manner far too quick for the naked eye to perceive. The whole party looked on in amazement as the lad performed these wonderful feats, but the King soon grew uncomfortable at the spectacle he witnessed and called Condere, son of Eochaid, to him:

'This boy's arrival here does not bode well for us,' said the King. 'For if grown-up men of his kind were to follow in his wake, they would grind us all to dust. Let someone go to meet him and inform him that he is not welcome on Erin's soil.'

And as the boy came to moor his boat, Condere approached him and delivered Conchobar's message.

'Go and tell your King,' said the boy, 'that even if everyone among you here had the strength of a hundred men, and you all came forward to challenge me, you would not be able to persuade me to turn back from this place.'

Hearing these words, the King grew even more concerned and he called Conall the Victorious to him:

'This lad mocks us,' Conchobar told him, 'and it is now time for a show of force against him.'

So Conall was sent against the boy, but as he approached the lad put a stone in his sling and sent it whizzing with a noise like thunder through the air. It struck Conall on the forehead, knocking him backwards to the ground and before he could even think about rising to his feet, the boy had bound his arms and legs with the strap from his shield. And in this manner, the youth made a mockery of the host of Ulster, challenging man after man to confront him, and succeeding on every occasion to defeat his opponents with little or no effort.

At last, when King Conchobar could suffer this humiliation no longer, he sent a messenger to Dundalk to the house of Cuchulainn requesting that he come and do battle against the young boy whom Conall the Victorious could not even manage to overcome. And hearing that her husband was prepared to meet this challenge, Emer, his wife, went and pleaded with him not to go forward to the Strand of Footprints:

'Do not go against the boy,' she begged Cuchulainn, 'since the great courage he possesses has convinced me that he is Connla, son of Aife. Hear my voice, Cuchulainn, and do not go forward to murder your only child.'

'Even if he were my son,' replied Cuchulainn, 'I would slay him for the honour of Ulster.'

And he ordered his chariot to be yoked without further delay and set off in the direction of the strand.

Soon afterwards, he came upon the young boy sitting in his boat polishing stones and calmly awaiting his next opponent. Cuchulainn strode towards him, demanding to know his name and lineage. But the boy would not reveal his identity or the slightest detail of the land of his birth. Then Cuchulainn lost patience with him and they began to exchange blows. With one daring stroke, the boy cut off a lock of Cuchulainn's hair, and as he watched it fall to the ground, the older warrior became greatly enraged.

'Enough of this child's play,' he shouted and, dragging the boy from the boat, he began to wrestle with him in the water. But the boy's strength was astonishing and he managed twice to push Cuchulainn's

head beneath the waves, almost causing him to drown. And it was on the third occasion that this occurred, when Cuchulainn gasped helplessly for air, that he remembered the Gae Bolg which Scathach had entrusted him with, and he flung it at the boy through the water. At once, the boy loosened his powerful hold and reached agonizingly towards his stomach, where the blood flowed freely from the vast gaping wound the weapon had made there.

'That is a weapon Scathach has not yet taught me to use,' said the boy. 'Carry me now from the water, for I am gravely injured.'

And as Cuchulainn bore the boy in his arms towards the shore he noticed a golden ring on his middle finger.

'It is true then,' he murmured sadly to himself, and set the boy down on the ground before the King and the men of Ulster.

'You see here before you my son,' Cuchulainn announced solemnly, 'the child I have mortally wounded for the good of Ulster.'

'Alas, it is so,' spoke Connla in a feeble voice, 'and I wish with all my heart that I could remain with you to the end of five years. For in that time, I would grow among you and conquer the world before you on every side, so that soon you would rule as far as Rome. But since this cannot be, let me now take my leave of the most famous among you before I die.'

So, one after another, the most courageous knights of the Red Guard were brought before Connla and he placed his arms around the neck of each of them and embraced them affectionately. Then Cuchulainn came forward and his son kissed his father tenderly before drawing his last breath. And as he closed his eyes, a great lament was raised among them and they dug a grave for the boy and set a splendid pillar-stone at its head. Connla, son of Aife, was the only son Cuchulainn ever had and he lived to regret for the rest of his days that he had destroyed so precious a gift.

## On the March [despite the prophecy of carnage]

Medb was not to be diverted, though: off she went at the head of her host. It took some time for so vast an army to start moving. In addition to the Connachta and the Ulster exiles, she had called upon allies from Munster, far to the southwest, while there were 3000 Galeóin warriors from Leinster, in the east, as well. With so many men behind her it was difficult for the queen not to feel confident despite the warnings of Fedelm. That mood of optimism was general, and it lasted until the middle of the second day when the army's rest was rudely interrupted by the yelling of Dubthach Dóelthach, a friend of Fergus. He had also seen a vision, it seemed: he too saw a single warrior barring their way to Ulster backed by the deep waters of Cooley's River Cruind. Medb and Ailill now gave Fergus the lead: the route he chose took them arcing well to the south, and the royal couple wondered if was he trying to give old friends in Ulster time to organize.

Approaching Iraid Cuillen – now Crossakiel, a few miles west of Kells in Co. Meath – they put this concern to him, but he strenuously denied having any treacherous intent. Rather, he insisted, he was trying to find a way of outflanking Cú Chulainn, who he knew would be waiting somewhere along their way, ready to stop their vast army in its tracks.

### Fork-Branch Ford

A heavy snowfall slowed them down, but even so they stole a march on Cú Chulainn, who had been drinking hard and overslept. By the time he woke, all he could see of his enemy were their tracks. This, however, was enough to enable him to estimate their number, pretty much exactly: 18 troops, each of 3000 men, had passed this way. Circling round and cutting across country, Cú Chulainn quickly outflanked and overtook the Connachtmen again. Four of their advance guard appeared and challenged him, but he quickly killed and beheaded them: he felled a forked tree with a single stroke of his sword and set their heads upon its branches. There, where the River Mattock was comparatively shallow, he hurled it like a javelin, and it

reached discreetly for his *Gáe Bolg* and caught it firm in the grasp of one hand even as, in the other, he raised his thrusting spear to strike. Ferdia raised his shield and, as he did so, Cú Chulainn stooped low and swung beneath his tunic to ram the *Gáe Bolg* up his backside. He knew how tough his opponent's bone-hide was and how hopeless it would be to try to penetrate it: this was the only way through to his vital organs, Cú Chulainn realized. Ferdia fell, and as he did so, his killer's sense of triumph and relief gave way to grief, for he remembered how close their brotherhood had been in times gone by. Áth Ferdiad, "Ferdia's Ford", the spot where the fight took place was thenceforth called. Over time, that name was shortened to "Ardee".

### Ulster in Action

While Cú Chulainn recuperated from his wounds, things were starting to happen further north. Only now were the men of Ulster shaking off their "labour" pangs. They mobilized at Emain Macha and marched south in their tens of thousands, Conchobar before them, ready at long last to engage the enemy. Ulster's king summoned Ailill to a meeting, and the men agreed that they would do battle. Next day, the dawn was welcomed by the ghastly figure of the Morrigan, acclaiming the day on which she'd see "ravens chewing at the skin of men's necks, blood gushing out ... carved-up flesh and battle frenzy". Gleelessly impartial, she ended with the complicated cry:

Long live Ulster!  
Down with Ireland!  
Down with Ulster!  
Long live Ireland!

She was to have her way: both sides would win and both would lose when the climactic battle was joined a few hours later. In their tens of thousands, Ireland's bravest warriors clashed.

Great deeds were done: with one stroke of his sword, Fergus in his fury took the tops off three adjacent hills; Medb herself led a charge that came close to breaking through. Connacht was carrying the day, indeed, the warriors of Ulster were on the point of despairing when Cú Chulainn joined the fray and turned the tables. By the time he was finished, the forces of Connacht were finished too, fleeing in disorder from a field deep with their dead.

But Medb was to have one final triumph before she fled the field. Cú Chulainn himself, it's said, though invincible in the face of any normal foe, was in the end defenceless against her machinations. She persuaded Lugaid mac Con Roí, whose father Cú Chulainn had killed, to fling three enchanted spears: the first at Cú Chulainn's charioteer; the second at his peerless horse, bringing his car to an unceremonious stop; then he hurled the third into the hero's belly, spilling all his innards. Even then, Cú Chulainn refused to fall, tying himself to a standing stone so he might remain upright himself, until the treacherous Lugaid at last dispatched him with a poisoned sword.

Ulster's triumph was tempered twice over: not only had her greatest hero effectively been assassinated, but there was the ignominy of having lost the great brown bull. For Donn Cuailnge was being herded before the Connacht army as it went. Connacht's warriors might have won the war, but they'd lost the thing it had been fought for, a further ironic twist in what should have been a heroic tale. And more of these are to follow, for no sooner do Medb and Ailill get back to Cruachan with their Brown Bull of Cooley than he meets the great White-faced Bull, Finnenbach Ai. They fight and, although Donn Cuailnge wins and kills his opponent, he is fatally wounded himself. Rampaging around all of Ireland in his agony, he tears up the country, throwing up hills and gouging out valleys before he dies.

So the final reckoning for the war leaves countless thousands dead, and no one really victorious. This "cattle raid" has left both sides losing one bull. All a tragic waste? So the modern reader sees it, certainly. It is by no means clear, though, that this interpretation would have been available to those first audiences

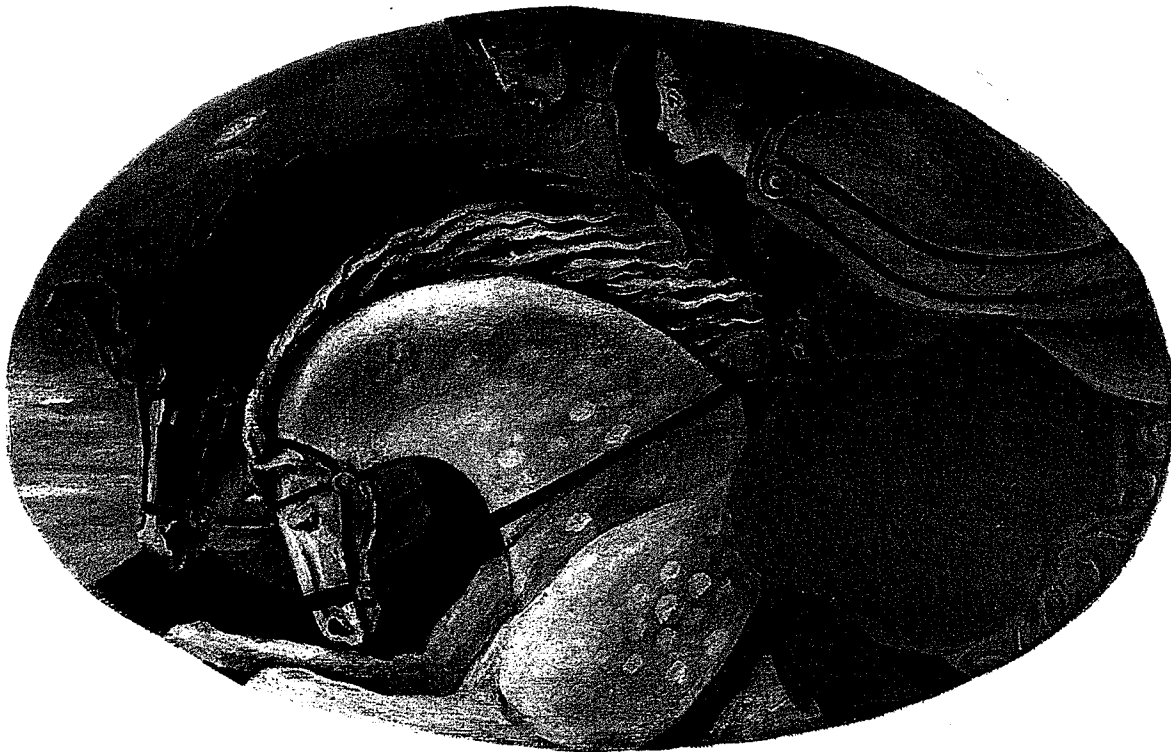
who listened as these stories were resoundingly recited by Celtic bards. Slight as the cause may have been, the deeds of bravery and honour they occasioned were genuinely epic.

Cú Chulainn's death became emblematic of a modern, nationalist "Celtic Revival" in this famous sculpture by Oliver Sheppard, 1911.





# DEIRDRE AND THE SONS OF UISNEACH



## IRISH EMBLEM

There are Irish myths, and then there's Deirdre. Her story has just about everything, from intoxicating beauty through betrayal to star-crossed love and tragic death. More to the point, perhaps, the legendary heroine embodies all those qualities held to be quintessentially "Celtic" in the modern view, while in her destiny that of Ireland may be seen. At the time of the early twentieth-century "Celtic Twilight", indeed, no fewer than five plays were produced with Deirdre's story at the centre. Her life inspired such luminaries as W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and George Russell (or "AE").

Key to her appeal was the deep-running ambiguity that allowed her to be "read" simultaneously as sexual temptress and as damsel in distress; to represent a femininity that could be both sinister and sentimentalized: On the one hand an Irish Helen of Troy, her beauty brought great heroes into conflict – and, ultimately, to a dreadful death; on the other, she was an innocent victim, betrayed and abused. For Synge, it seems, it was the sheer sadness of Deirdre's story that appealed; Yeats's view (surprisingly, in such a mystic) was worldlier. A strand of political allegory in his play establishes Conchobar as the embodiment of a boorish and bullying imperial power – not wholly unlike that of England over the Irish, in his view.

## A Warning of War

Among Conchobar's closest comrades was his storyteller, Fedlimid mac Dail. One night Fedlimid called his king and all his fellow-warriors to a gathering in his quarters. While they drank and laughed and sang, his wife bustled about bringing fresh supplies, awkward in her movements because she was pregnant and near her time. Eventually, as it grew late, she felt tired: it was time for her to slip away discreetly, she decided, and take to her bed while the menfolk continued with their revelry. Such was the uproar that no one noticed as she quietly headed for the door – until, all of a sudden, the infant in her belly shrieked out an ear-splitting scream. Abruptly, the room fell silent: the men sat stunned; their gestures frozen; their looks alarmed. What horrendous sound, they wondered, had that been? Who could possibly have cried out with such terrible feeling? Fedlimid's wife simply stood there, transfixed with fear.

The company gazed at her, terrified. As some semblance of calm returned, her husband called her back to the centre of the room and asked if she had suffered some agonizing fit or spasm. She was unable to say: instead, stammering in her confusion, she begged the Druid Cathbad to explain to her how or why her womb could possibly have issued this appalling cry of anguish. It wasn't an infant who'd yelled out so shockingly, said Cathbad, but an adult and alluring woman with tumbling tresses of golden hair, twisting down beside the temples of her stunning face. Her eyes flashing green; her smile glinting white; her lips bright red; her cheeks gently flushed with the pink of foxglove flowers, she would enchant everyone who saw her with her dazzling looks, and heroes would do battle and wars would be fought on her account. "Deirdre, she will be named", he said, "and beautiful as she may be, she will bring with her only conflict and contention."

Not long after the baby girl was born, and once again Cathbad was called to prophesy. Addressing Deirdre herself this time, he

gave this warning: "Your face and figure will make men weep, and women curl up inside with envy and resentment; your presence will set all Ulster at odds, daughter of Fedlimid. Your face, a flame of beauty, will fire fury throughout the kingdom: heroes will have to go into exile for its sake." He concluded with a promise: "You'll live for ever in your loveliness – but yours is not going to be a happy story. Rather, it will be a tale of wounds, death and bloodshed, and crimes of every kind, and its ending will be a grave in which you lie alone."

At this, a clamour arose: many of those present called for the child to be slaughtered on the spot. How could such a source of danger be allowed to live? But Conchobar overruled them. The girl should be taken away and brought up on his behalf. For the king had decided to keep her for himself. And so it was done: Deirdre grew to girlhood far from Conchobar's court in almost complete seclusion, her only human contact her foster-parents and her nurse Leborcham.

### "Imagine a Man..."

One winter's day as, outside her home, her foster-father flayed a calf, young Deirdre saw a raven swoop down and start to peck at the bloodstained snow. It stirred a thought in her mind she admitted to Leborcham when she came out and joined her. Rather than reading in the raven a sign that things in her life might not end well, the optimistic maiden had seen the bird as an exciting omen. "Imagine a man with those three colours", she mused, "his hair as black as that raven's feathers, his cheeks red as blood and his skin as white as snow!" She would, she insisted, be ill until she met him.

Such a man did exist, her nurse told her, and he was in fact quite close at hand: his name was Naoise and he was the son

of Uisliu, Conchobar's younger brother. Eager to see this young paragon, Deirdre walked out one day as far as Emain: Naoise was standing on the ramparts, singing softly to himself, as she passed by. Thrilled at the sight of her beauty, he looked at her in wonderment but could have no doubt of who this stranger was. This was his uncle's intended, he knew: it was more than his life was worth to get involved with her. But he couldn't help letting slip a single compliment. "That's a handsome heifer", he said – to which the girl herself retorted: "What do you expect? The heifers grow well where there are no bulls to bother them." Naoise responded in kind: "You have the biggest bull in Ulster at your disposal. Aren't you the chosen lover of our great King Conchobar?"

"I'd rather have a younger animal," the girl replied, "are you saying that you're refusing me?" "I am indeed", said Naoise: "You are the king's." But Deirdre wasn't to be turned down: there and then, she seized the man she chose, grabbing him by the ears and pulling him to her, making him cry out in his astonishment and pain. Hearing a disturbance, Naoise's brothers came rushing out to assist him. Seeing their brother smitten, they were worried both on his behalf and Ulster's. Still, they could never conceive of deserting him: they agreed on the spot that they would leave with all their supporters and spirit the lovers away to safety.

## On the Run

So they set off, and spent the months and years that followed on the move, flitting from place to place across the whole of Ireland, constantly harassed by the warbands Conchobar had sent in their pursuit. In time their travels took them across the sea to southwestern Scotland. There they lived beyond civilization, in the empty wastes and beyond the law, as brigands and cattle-raid-ers, taking what they could from outlying settlements as they went. Inevitably, their activities brought them into conflict with the King of Alba, to whose realm this corner of Scotland

then belonged. To avoid a hopeless – and pointless – fight to the death, the Sons of Uisliu made an accommodation with the Scottish ruler, enlisting in his service as mercenaries.

All went well – the Ulstermen seemed finally to have found themselves a sanctuary, and they built themselves a little village, thinking now of staying and settling down. Even now, though, they proceeded with some caution, clustering their huts around the home of Naoise and Deirdre so that their princess should as far as possible be kept from view.

Their wariness proved well-founded but inadequate, unfortunately, for it wasn't long before the lovely Deirdre was observed. When word reached the King of Alba of the Irishwoman's surpassing beauty, he started sending his messengers to pester her. Every day they went to wait on her, promising every imaginable inducement to come and see their king and sleep with him. Every evening they returned with her refusal.

Over time, the king's disappointment turned to anger. No longer welcome allies, the Sons of Uisliu were once more seen as interlopers and Alba's warriors began attacking them again. The hostilities growing in bitterness, the Ulstermen's position became increasingly untenable: they fought bravely, but their spirited

resistance only further infuriated the King of Alba. They were more or less marooned in enemy territory, far from home:

## An Unhappy Homecoming

At last, the King called all his men together from across the entire length and breadth of Alba: he was going to take what he wanted, come what may. He knew that the Sons of Uisliu would fight to the death for Deirdre, but

THEY LIVED BEYOND  
CIVILIZATION, IN THE  
EMPTY WASTES.

no matter, he would kill them all – nothing would stop him from having the Irish beauty for his queen. Hearing rumours of what was afoot, Deirdre called Naoise and his men together: she couldn't let them all be killed on her behalf. Somehow or other, they had to get away.

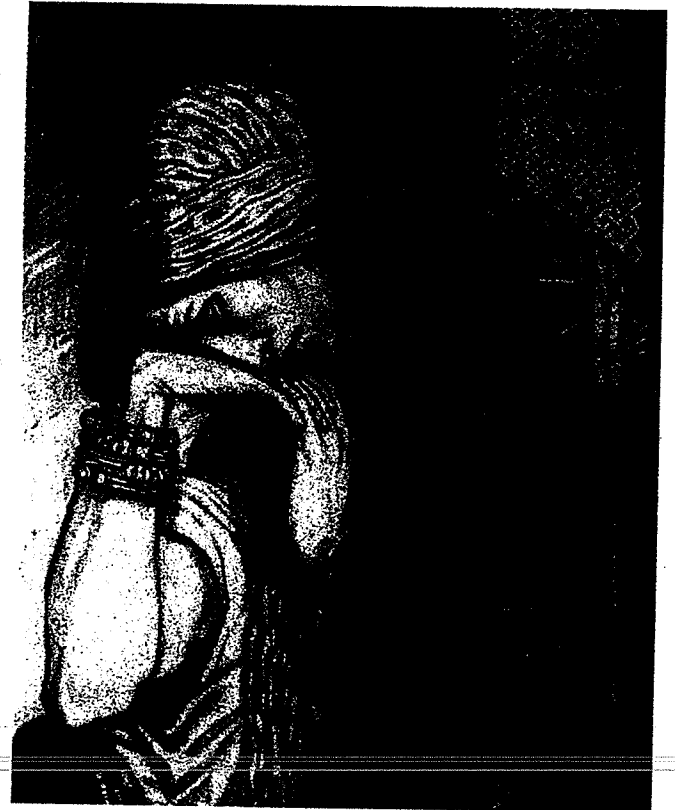
And so once again they fled for their lives, landing up this time on an offshore island – no more than a temporary refuge, that was clear. In the meantime, though, the news of Naoise's troubles had reached Ulster – Conchobar, of course, was not wholly displeased. With appropriate shows of reluctance, he let himself be talked into taking pity on their plight, eventually agreeing to the refugees' return. He made Fergus mac Róich – his former king and rival – his emissary, bearing a message to the Sons of Uisliu promising safe conduct to them if they came in peace. On his way home with them to Emain Macha, however, Fergus was waylaid by another courier from Conchobar, bidding him make a detour to attend a royal feast.

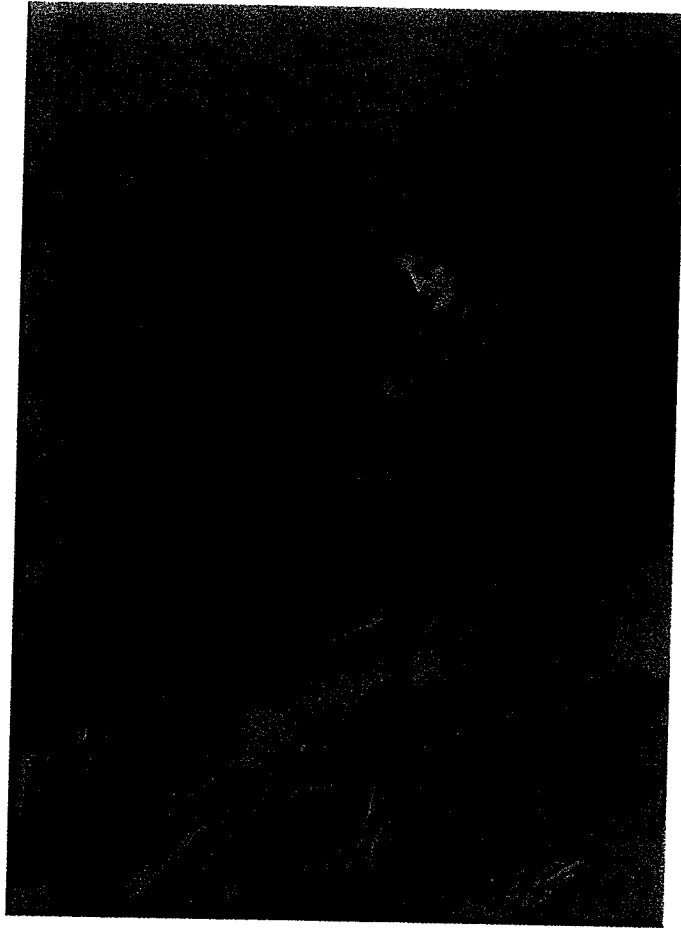
Fergus couldn't with propriety reject such an invitation, so he was forced to leave his guests to continue on their way without him. The former king had served his purpose to the present one now: Fergus' departure left the Sons of Uisliu in a truly perilous position, the guarantee of their safe conduct now gone. [. . .]

Determined now to press ahead with his plan, Conchobar sent a deputation to the Red House to welcome the returners officially.

It was led by Eogan mac Durthact, a minor king who, having fallen out with Conchobar some time before, hoped by helping him now to win his way back to favour. As he spoke to Naoise, addressing him with all apparent respect and honour, he suddenly took his spear and ran him through. Before his startled supporters could react, battle had been joined: Conchobar's minions had snatched the initiative – and the wretched Deirdre. Although Naoise's brothers all fought bravely, they were finally forced to retreat and recoup their strength without her.

Seen here by Scottish artist John Duncan (1866–1945), Deirdre became emblematic of a certain “Celtic” sensibility of suffering.





ABOVE: Clutching  
Naoise's severed head,  
Deirdre sits and rocks,  
beyond all help and  
comfort in a wilderness  
of grief.

constantly, mounting repeated raids into Ulster's borderlands, slaying her sons and driving off her cattle. Fergus mac Róich fought alongside the exiles, furious that his old usurper had taken advantage of his good name and his good faith to work his wiles. Together they made every day a day of tragedy and mourning for Ulster's families, and Conchobar's life a misery.

Exiled anew, they left their native country: this time, though, their travels took them overland westward, across to Connacht, where King Ailill mac Máta and his Queen Medb (or Maeve) held sway. Bitter experience had left them without illusions: they knew well that the generous reception they had from the Connachta was based not on warmth towards them but on enmity to Ulster. But beggars could not be choosers – and, besides, it suited them to have the backing of Ailill in the war they were going to wage themselves with Conchobar. By now 3000 strong, they represented a formidable force, a little Ulster in exile, living autonomously but under the protection of Connacht's king. In the years that followed, they harried their homeland

## Deirdre of the Sorrows

Not, however, quite as miserable as that of his reluctant companion Deirdre, who let an entire year go by without once so much as smiling, we are told. The king sent special gifts and treats of food and drink to coax her into compliance, as well as musicians to serenade her into cheerfulness, but nothing, it quickly became clear, could win her round. How was wine to woo a woman who had sat down to drink with the delightful Naoise?, she asked her waiters. What delicacies could compensate her for the diet of deep love she'd lost? Their airs and reels might entertain the king, she told his musicians, but she had known the lilting music of Naoise's voice, enjoyed the gentle harmony of her life with him.

"I have loved his golden hair," she said, "and his manly stature – standing tall as a tree. No point in my looking out for his fine form now, though, nor awaiting his homecoming. I loved his modest diffidence as much as I did his heroic strength; his gentle decorum as much as I did his burning desire; I loved him in the dawn light, as he rose in the morning, where we camped in the woods. Those blue eyes which made men tremble and women reel with yearning – I loved those too, of course, just as I did the reassuring sound of his singing voice as we made our way through the forest's darkest depths. Without him, I lie sleepless at night and get up only to dawdle through my days: I see no reason to paint my nails or make myself look

beautiful, to smile or even eat. What pleasure can I take in company? In the pomp and ceremony of the court? In the crowds of nobles here? What palace could be grand enough to distract me from my grief?"

Transported by a beauty that was now only enhanced by her air of melancholy, King Conchobar fell for Deirdre deeply and genuinely. As the days and weeks went by, however, and his beloved showed no sign of softening, his love started giving way to rancour. Deirdre didn't care, nor did she fear the king, however high his anger: she wasn't long for this life anyway, she told him. He tried to punish her, asking her what in the world she most hated:

after Conchobar himself, she said, her lover's killer, Eogan mac Durthact. Then, the king said cruelly, he would send her to stay with Eogan: she could look forward to living with Naoise's murderer night and day. The next morning, Eogan mac Durthact was sent for: he left with Deirdre beside him in his chariot. How lucky she was, crowed Conchobar – between him and Eogan, Deirdre was like a lustful ewe with two fine rams to choose from.

Finally provoked from her passivity by that spiteful sneer, she flung herself from the chariot, dashing her head against a rock, and died there and then.

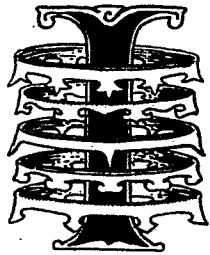
king would not hear of it and said : " Rather let us bind him to us by the bonds of kinship, so that peace may dwell in the land. Send over to him for wife the choice of the three maidens of the fairest form and best repute in Erin, the three daughters of Oilell of Aran, my own three bosom-nurslings."

So the messengers brought word to Lir that Dearth the king would give him a foster-child of his foster-children. Lir thought well of it, and set out next day with fifty chariots from the Hill of the White Field. And he came to the Lake of the Red Eye near Killaloe. And when Lir saw the three daughters of Oilell, Dearth the king said to him : " Take thy choice of the maidens, Lir." " I know not," said Lir, " which is the choicest of them all ; but the eldest of them is the noblest, it is she I had best take." " If so," said Dearth the king, " Ove is the eldest, and she shall be given to thee, if thou willest." So Lir and Ove were married and went back to the Hill of the White Field.

And after this there came to them twins, a son and a daughter, and they gave them for names Fingula and Aod. And two more sons came to them, Fiachra and Conn. When they came Ove died, and Lir mourned bitterly for her, and but for his great love for his children he would have died of his grief. And Dearth the king grieved for Lir and sent to him and said : " We grieve for Ove for thy sake ; but, that our friendship may not be rent asunder, I will give unto thee her sister, Oifa, for a wife." So Lir agreed, and they were united, and he took her with him to his own house. And at first Oifa felt affection and honour for the children of Lir and her sister, and indeed every one who saw the four children could not



## The Fate of the Children of Lir



**T** happened that the five Kings of Ireland met to determine who should have the head kingship over them, and King Lir of the Hill of the White Field expected surely he would be elected. When the nobles went into council together they chose for head king, Dearth, son of Daghdha, because his father had been so great a Druid and he was the eldest of his father's sons. But Lir left the Assembly of the Kings and went home to the Hill of the White Field. The other kings would have followed after Lir to give him wounds of spear and wounds of sword for not yielding obedience to the man to whom they had given the over-lordship. But Dearth the

## Fate of the Children of Lir 3

help giving them the love of his soul. Lir doted upon the children, and they always slept in beds in front of their father, who used to rise at early dawn every morning and lie down among his children. But thereupon the dart of jealousy passed into Oifa on account of this and she came to regard the children with hatred and enmity. One day her chariot was yoked for her and she took with her the four children of Lir in it. Fingula was not willing to go with her on the journey, for she had dreamed a dream in the night warning her against Oifa : but she was not to avoid her fate. And when the chariot came to the Lake of the Oaks, Oifa said to the people : "Kill the four children of Lir and I will give you your own reward of every kind in the world." But they refused and told her it was an evil thought she had. Then she would have raised a sword herself to kill and destroy the children, but her own womanhood and her weakness prevented her ; so she drove the children of Lir into the lake to bathe, and they did as Oifa told them. As soon as they were upon the lake she struck them with a Druid's wand of spells and wizardry and put them into the forms of four beautiful, perfectly white swans, and she sang this song over them :

"Out with you upon the wild waves, children of the king !  
Henceforth your cries shall be with the flocks of birds."

And Fingula answered :

"Thou witch ! we know thee by thy right name !  
Thou mayest drive us from wave to wave,  
But sometimes we shall rest on the headlands ;  
We shall receive relief, but thou punishment.  
Though our bodies may be upon the lake,  
Our minds at least shall fly homewards."

## 4

## Celtic Fairy Tales

And again she spoke : "Assign an end for the ruin and woe which thou hast brought upon us."

Oifa laughed and said : "Never shall ye be free until the woman from the south be united to the man from the north, until Lairgnen of Connaught wed Deoch of Munster ; nor shall any have power to bring you out of these forms. Nine hundred years shall you wander over the lakes and streams of Erin. This only I will grant unto you : that you retain your own speech, and there shall be no music in the world equal to yours, the plaintive music you shall sing." This she said because repentance seized her for the evil she had done.

And then she spake this lay :

"Away from me, ye children of Lir,  
Henceforth the sport of the wild winds  
Until Lairgnen and Deoch come together,  
Until ye are on the north-west of Red Erin.

"A sword of treachery is through the heart of Lir,  
Of Lir the mighty champion,  
Yet though I have driven a sword.  
My victory cuts me to the heart."

Then she turned her steeds and went on to the Hall of Dearg the king. The nobles of the court asked her where were the children of Lir, and Oifa said : "Lir will not trust them to Dearg the king." But Dearg thought in his own mind that the woman had played some treachery upon them, and he accordingly sent messengers to the Hall of the White Field.

Lir asked the messengers : "Wherefore are ye come ?"

"To fetch thy children, Lir," said they.

"Have they not reached you with Oifa ?" said Lir.



"They have not," said the messengers; "and Oifa said it was you would not let the children go with her."

Then was Lir melancholy and sad at heart, hearing these things, for he knew that Oifa had done wrong upon his children, and he set out towards the Lake of the Red Eye. And when the children of Lir saw him coming Fingula sang the lay:

"Welcome the cavalcade of steeds  
Approaching the Lake of the Red Eye,  
A company dread and magical  
Surely seek after us.

"Let us move to the shore, O Aod,  
Fiachra and comely Conn,  
No host under heaven can those horsemen be  
But King Lir with his mighty household."

Now as she said this King Lir had come to the shores of the lake and heard the swans speaking with human voices. And he spake to the swans and asked them who they were. Fingula answered and said: "We are thy own children, ruined by thy wife, sister of our own mother, through her ill mind and her jealousy." "For how long is the spell to be upon you?" said Lir. "None can relieve us till the woman from the south and the man from the north come together, till Lairgnen of Connaught wed Deoch of Munster."

Then Lir and his people raised their shouts of grief, crying, and lamentation, and they stayed by the shore of the lake listening to the wild music of the swans until the swans flew away, and King Lir went on to the Hall of Dearg the king. He told Dearg the king what Oifa had done to his children. And Dearg put his power upon Oifa and bade



CHILDREN OF LIR

her say what shape on earth she would think the worst of all. She said it would be in the form of an air-demon. "It is into that form I shall put you," said Dearg the king, and he struck her with a Druid's wand of spells and wizardry and put her into the form of an air-demon. And she flew away at once, and she is still an air-demon, and shall be so for ever.

But the children of Lir continued to delight the Milesian clans with the very sweet fairy music of their songs, so that no delight was ever heard in Erin to compare with their music until the time came appointed for the leaving the Lake of the Red Eye.

Then Fingula sang this parting lay :

"Farewell to thee, Dearg the king,  
Master of all Druid's lore !  
Farewell to thee, our father dear,  
Lir of the Hill of the White Field !

"We go to pass the appointed time  
Away and apart from the haunts of men  
In the current of the Moyle,  
Our garb shall be bitter and briny,

"Until Deoch come to Lairgnen.  
So come, ye brothers of once ruddy cheeks ;  
Let us depart from this Lake of the Red Eye,  
Let us separate in sorrow from the tribe that has  
loved us."

And after they took to flight, flying highly, lightly, aerially till they reached the Moyle, between Erin and Albain.

The men of Erin were grieved at their leaving, and it was proclaimed throughout Erin that henceforth no swan should be killed. Then they stayed all solitary, all alone, filled with cold and grief and regret, until a thick tempest

came upon them and Fingula said : "Brothers, let us appoint a place to meet again if the power of the winds separate us." And they said : "Let us appoint to meet, O sister, at the Rock of the Seals." Then the waves rose up and the thunder roared, the lightnings flashed, the sweeping tempest passed over the sea, so that the children of Lir were scattered from each other over the great sea. There came, however, a placid calm after the great tempest and Fingula found herself alone, and she said this lay :

"Woe upon me that I am alive !  
My wings are frozen to my sides.  
O beloved three, O beloved three,  
Who hid under the shelter of my feathers,  
Until the dead come back to the living  
I and the three shall never meet again !"

And she flew to the Lake of the Seals and soon saw Conn coming towards her with heavy step and drenched feathers, and Fiachra also, cold and wet and faint, and no word could they tell, so cold and faint were they : but she nestled them under her wings and said : "If Aod could come to us now our happiness would be complete." But soon they saw Aod coming towards them with dry head and preened feathers : Fingula put him under the feathers of her breast, and Fiachra under her right wing, and Conn under her left : and they made this lay :

"Bad was our stepmother with us,  
She played her magic on us,  
Sending us north on the sea  
In the shapes of magical swans.

"Our bath upon the shore's ridge  
Is the foam of the brine-crested tide,  
Our share of the ale feast  
Is the brine of the blue-crested sea."

One day they saw a splendid cavalcade of pure white steeds coming towards them, and when they came near they were the two sons of Dearg the king who had been seeking for them to give them news of Dearg the king and Lir their father. "They are well," they said, "and live together happy in all except that ye are not with them, and for not knowing where ye have gone since the day ye left the Lake of the Red Eye." "Happy are not we," said Fingula, and she sang this song :

"Happy this night the household of Lir,  
Abundant their meat and their wine.  
But the children of Lir—what is their lot?  
For bed-clothes we have our feathers,  
And as for our food and our wine—  
The white sand and the bitter brine;  
Fiachra's bed and Conn's place  
Under the cover of my wings on the Moyle,  
Aod has the shelter of my breast,  
And so side by side we rest."

So the sons of Dearg the king came to the Hall of Lir and told the king the condition of his children.

Then the time came for the children of Lir to fulfil their lot, and they flew in the current of the Moyle to the Bay of Erris, and remained there till the time of their fate, and then they flew to the Hill of the White Field and found all desolate and empty, with nothing but unroofed green raths and forests of nettles—no house, no fire, no dwelling-place. The four came close together, and they raised three shouts of lamentation aloud, and Fingula sang this lay :

"Uchone ! it is bitterness to my heart  
To see my father's place forlorn—  
No hounds, no packs of dogs,  
No women, and no valiant kings

"No drinking-horns, no cups of wood,  
No drinking in its lightsome halls.  
Uchone ! I see the state of this house  
That its lord our father lives no more.

"Much have we suffered in our wandering years,  
By winds buffeted, by cold frozen ;  
Now has come the greatest of our pain—  
There lives no man who knoweth us in the house  
where we were born."

So the children of Lir flew away to the Glory Isle of Brandan the saint, and they settled upon the Lake of the Birds until the holy Patrick came to Erin and the holy Mac Howg came to Glory Isle.

And the first night he came to the island the children of Lir heard the voice of his bell ringing for matins, so that they started and leaped about in terror at hearing it ; and her brothers left Fingula alone. "What is it, beloved brothers?" said she. "We know not what faint, fearful voice it is we have heard." Then Fingula recited this lay :

"Listen to the Cleric's bell,  
Poise your wings and raise  
Thanks to God for his coming,  
Be grateful that you hear him,

"He shall free you from pain,  
And bring you from the rocks and stones.  
Ye comely children of Lir  
Listen to the bell of the Cleric."

And Mac Howg came down to the brink of the shore and said to them : "Are ye the children of Lir?" "We are indeed," said they. "Thanks be to God!" said the saint ; "it is for your sakes I have come to this Isle beyond every other island in Erin. Come ye to land now and put your trust in me." So they came to land, and he made

for them chains of bright white silver, and put a chain between Aod and Fingula and a chain between Conn and Fiachra.

It happened at this time that Lairgnen was prince of Connaught and he was to wed Deoch the daughter of the king of Munster. She had heard the account of the birds and she became filled with love and affection for them, and she said she would not wed till she had the wondrous birds of Glory Isle. Lairgnen sent for them to the Saint Mac Howg. But the Saint would not give them, and both Lairgnen and Deoch went to Glory Isle. And Lairgnen went to seize the birds from the altar: but as soon as he had laid hands on them their feathery coats fell off, and the three sons of Lir became three withered bony old men, and Fingula, a lean withered old woman without blood or flesh. Lairgnen started at this and left the place hastily, but Fingula chanted this lay:

“Come and baptise us, O Cleric,  
Clear away our stains!  
This day I see our grave—  
Fiachra and Conn on each side,  
And in my lap, between my two arms,  
Place Aod, my beauteous brother.”

After this lay, the children of Lir were baptised. And they died, and were buried as Fingula had said, Fiachra and Conn on either side, and Aod before her face. A cairn was raised for them, and on it their names were written in runes. And that is the fate of the children of Lir.

# TÍR NA N-ÓG

Far away, in the land of Tír na n-Óg, there lived a king. Every seven years there was a race from the fort gates to the top of a steep hill. First to reach the throne on the hilltop was made king. Three times he had won the race, but now he was getting nervous.

One day he sent for the chief druid.

"I am worried that someone else will win the next race," said the king. "Then I would be king no longer."

"Don't worry," replied the chief druid, "you are easily the fastest runner. The only person who will ever defeat you is the man your daughter will marry."

"What?" roared the king.

He thought of his only daughter, Niamh, who was so beautiful that every man who saw her fell madly in love with her. It was only a matter of time before she married. The king was furious.

"She will never marry!" he roared. "You must cast a spell on her that will make her ugly and disgusting."



"I cannot do such a thing," answered the chief druid, "I have known Niamh since she was born."

"And so have I," snarled the king. "But not even my own daughter will cause me to lose my crown!"

Then, snatching the chief druid's magic stick, he strode into the garden. With one touch his daughter's head became a pig's!

"Now," raged the king, "no one will ever marry you and I will rule for ever."

Poor Niamh! She ran to her room, screaming and sobbing. She could not believe that her father had done such a thing. What would become of her? Would she ever be an ordinary girl again?

One morning the chief druid came to visit her.

"Oh, Niamh," he said, "if only I could undo the harm your father has done!"

"Then help me, please!" cried Niamh. "Surely you can do something."

"There is only one way to get rid of this wicked spell," the chief druid explained.

"You must marry one of the sons of Fionn Mac Cumhail. If you succeed, the pig's head will disappear."

"But who would ever marry me as I am?" cried Niamh.

"I'm sorry," said the druid, "there is nothing else I can do."

All that day, Niamh thought of what the chief druid had said. At last she made up her mind. When darkness came she dressed herself in a

long hooded cloak. Then, taking her white horse, she set off for Ireland. Over the sea went the wonderful white horse, his hooves scarcely touching the water. Dawn mist shimmered as they reached the shore.

It did not take Niamh long to find Fionn Mac Cumhail and his sons. The forests rang with the shouts of their hunting and the nights echoed with their songs. One of Fionn's sons was named Oisín. He was strong and handsome, swift on his feet and fearless in battle. But he was also kind and gentle. Niamh watched from a distance as he rescued a trapped fawn.

'That is the only man I would marry,' she thought. 'But he is so handsome! Every woman in Ireland must be in love with him. What chance have I?'

But Niamh was desperate. Silently she followed Oisín everywhere, keeping in the shadows and never showing her face. One evening, after a good day's hunting, the Fianna went home. Oisín was left alone. He had so much to carry that he could not manage it all. Niamh darted out from the trees.

"Let me help you," she said. The sinking sun rested on her pig's head, and she almost turned and ran.

But Oisín just said, "Thank you, I have too much to carry alone."

They walked a long way. Oisín told her the names of the flowers and birds. At last they stopped to rest. The day was hot and, as Niamh took off her cloak, Oisín looked at her.



"You are very beautiful," he said, "except for the pig's head. How did it happen?"

Slowly, sadly, Niamh told him her story. Tears ran down her ugly face as she remembered her father's treachery.

"The only way I can become completely human is by marrying one of the sons of Fionn Mac Cumhail," she said.

"Is that all it takes?" laughed Oisín. "That's no problem! I am Oisín, son of Fionn, and I will marry you myself."

They were married at once. Gradually the pig's head disappeared and there was the real Niamh – eyes green as the sea, clouds of golden hair hanging to her waist. A band of diamonds glittered on her forehead and her dress shimmered with pearls. Oisín could not speak.

Out of the shadows came Niamh's faithful horse. Silver tassels hung from the polished saddle, beads of rubies dangled from the reins. But Oisín scarcely noticed. He could not take his eyes off this beautiful girl.

"I will never leave you," he said. "I will follow you to the ends of the earth."

"Then get up on my white horse," replied Niamh, "and come with me to Tír na n-Óg. There you will never grow old. You will be young and handsome for ever and have everything you could ask for. There the days sparkle with sunlight and the nights are never cold."

In a daze of love, Oisín mounted the horse. At once they set off, over mountains, rivers and rocks. Soon they came to the ocean. The white horse never stopped, his feet scarcely touching the waves as they crossed. Oisín barely noticed the wonderful places they passed: the water cities, the palaces of light. His face was buried in Niamh's gorgeous hair as it billowed around her. He no longer remembered who he was or what he had left behind ...



When they reached Tír na n-Óg, the king was overjoyed. Many and many a time he had wept for the evil he had brought on his daughter. Now, when he saw her, he begged her forgiveness.

"All my kingdom is yours," he said. "You and your husband will rule for ever."

So Oisín and Niamh began their life together in Tír na n-Óg. They fished in crystal waters, went swimming in warm lakes. They raced their horses on the sparkling beach, feasted on honey and fruit. Oisín made songs for Niamh as they wandered under the stars.

They were the happiest of lovers and Oisín had all he could wish for.

But though Oisín had forgotten his past life, it sometimes came back in his dreams. Then he was with Fionn, his father, and all his brothers and friends. They laughed and joked or hunted with reckless speed. Oisín would wake up then and cry out in grief, for all the loved faces had vanished and were lost in his dreams.

Early one morning Oisín said to Niamh, "It's no good, each day I remember more and more. I must go back to Ireland to see my father and friends."

"There's nothing to go back for," Niamh said. "You have been in Tír na n-Óg for three centuries. Your father and friends are all dead and gone."

"Nonsense!" laughed Oisín. "I've only been here a few years. I must go, Niamh, just for a day. Then I will return and never leave you again."

"Very well," Niamh said, "since I love you I will let you go. Take my white horse, but be very careful. You must not get off the horse. If you do, you will never see me or Tír na n-Óg again."



Then she kissed him tenderly, but her eyes were full of shadows ...

The white horse took Oisín across the sea as before. But though it pranced as lightly as ever, Oisín felt no joy. Clouds smothered the horizon, thunder echoed and died. At last the horse scrambled ashore. It was raining but Oisín didn't care. He thought of his father and friends – how surprised they would be to see him!

Suddenly he paused. Where were the woods he had hunted in? And the river – where were the stepping-stones? A bridge stretched over it, people were coming and going. How puny they looked, and how they stared at him! It was very strange.

“Where can I find Fionn Mac Cumhail?” he asked a girl. But the girl shook her head.

“Never heard of him,” she said.

Puzzled and upset, Oisín rode further.

“Where are Fionn Mac Cumhail and his warriors, the Fianna?” he asked a group of men.

They looked at one another and shrugged. Then one old man spoke. "Fionn and the Fianna? My grandfather used to talk about them. But they're all dead and gone this three hundred years."

Three hundred years! Oisín remembered what Niamh had said. Could it be true? He would go to the Hill of Allen where Fionn had his fort – surely he'd see them there! But the fort was in ruins. Weeds and nettles grew up between the stones.

Oisín was heartbroken. He could not believe that his father and friends were dead.

"I'll go to Tara," he thought, "to the High King himself. Surely there, someone will tell me the truth." He turned the patient horse around and headed north.



Beside the road some men were trying to lift a stone.

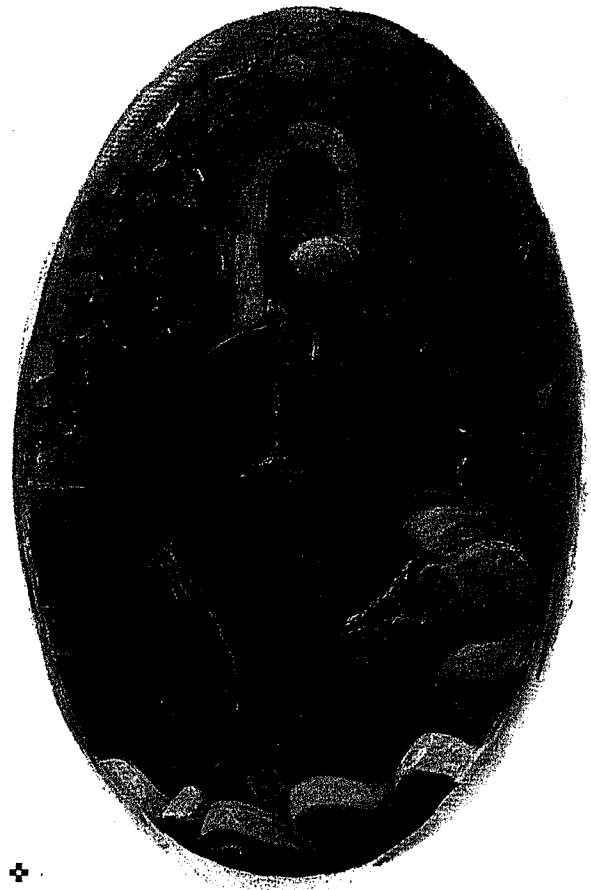
"They're so weak!" thought Oisín. "Not even six together can lift it, but I could do it with one hand."

He leaned from the saddle and tossed the stone easily into the cart. The men gasped. But instantly there was a snap! The stirrup broke and Oisín tumbled off the horse. As he hit the ground, Niamh's warning was screaming in his ears – but it was too late. The proud, handsome warrior disappeared

and Oisín became a withered old man. The white horse tossed his head and galloped away.

Someone rushed from a nearby hut. It was the holy man, Patrick. Lifting Oisín up in his arms, he carried him inside. For days he nursed him, while Oisín told him of Fionn and the Fianna and the days of long ago.

Then Oisín died.



It was the end of the Fianna, the last great band of heroes and poets. And maybe, too, it was the end of Tír na n-Óg, for Niamh of the golden hair was never seen again ...