

Ancient Irish Legends



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Gill & Macmillan

TO TERRY

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INTRODUCTION

Great tales from Irish mythology can be enjoyed without any background information on their origins. Indeed, some readers may choose to skip this introduction and begin reading the first story. For those who prefer a little preliminary knowledge, the following note is offered.

Old Irish was a Celtic language. Only Latin and Greek predated its literature. Its corpus reflected a mythology written probably as early as the mid-seventh century, but it existed in oral form long before that. Later scholars categorised its sagas and romances as follows:

1. The Mythological Cycle
2. The Red Branch (or Ulster) Cycle
3. The Cycle of Kings
4. The Fenian Cycle

The Mythological Cycle contains sagas of early invaders up to the Milesians and of pre-Christian gods. The Tuatha Dé Danaan (tribes of the Celtic goddess Dana), said to have inhabited Ireland before the arrival of the Celts, feature here. Christian monks chronicled the tales, and therefore acts of godly powers became wondrous escapades of charismatic heroes and heroines. Such euhemerism is common in all cycles.

The celebrated Red Branch Knights, of whom Cuchullain was the most famous, were guardians of Ulster. They billeted at Eamhain Macha, seat of the Ulster king Conor (Conchobhar) Mac Nessa, near Armagh. Mythology depicts them as upright, brave and heroic warriors. *An Táin Bó Cuailgne* tells of the cattle raid for the Brown Bull of Ulster

(Donn Cuailng) by the Connaght king and queen, Ailill and Maeve. It is the centrepiece of the cycle and is Irish mythology's nearest approach to an epic work like the *Iliad*.

The Cycle of Kings, in particular, mixes myth with fact. It contains tales of Irish rulers from 300 B.C. to 700 A.D.

The Fenian Cycle is quite straightforward. Fionn Mac Cumhaill, by receiving his father's magic spear, became leader of the Fianna, who acted as bodyguards to the High Kings resident at Tara (Teamhair) in County Meath. Schoolboys in Irish playgrounds once knew all the qualifications necessary for joining this august body and strove with little success to match the bodyguards. The trials included taking a thorn out of a bare foot while running, bending under a stick held at knee-height without slowing, and jumping one's own height. Members were called Fenians and, in either English or Irish, that title has been adopted by assorted political movements in Irish history. These include a republican organisation, the Fenian Brotherhood, founded in New York by John O'Mahony in 1858; a republican youth movement (Na Fianna Éireann), founded in Dublin in 1902 by Countess Markievicz; a political party (Fianna Fáil, founded by Eamon de Valera and others in 1926); and Fianna Uladh (Soldiers of Ulster), a political wing of a splinter group from the IRA, founded in 1953. Some Unionists in Northern Ireland call their Nationalist opponents 'Fenians'. The term Ossianic (after Fionn's son) is often given to the cycle.



Like its Greek counterpart, Irish mythology uses music and literature as means of communication. It inspired the harper and composer Turlough Carolan and composers in Britain, Australia, Germany and the USA. While both traditional and more modern folk songs are often sad laments, the prose in mythological tales is usually spirited, lively and full of proud and noble deeds. It tells the main stories (*príomh-scéil*), concerned with great adventures, military actions, voyages, romances, banquets and tragedies. Lesser stories (*fo-scéil*) relate dreams, chases, deportation, and geological and physical phenomena. Ireland's ancient legislation, the Brehon Laws, laid down strict rules and qualifications for bards. Only the top graduates from bardic colleges who had studied for up to twelve years received permission to recite. When, in the 17th century, the English suppressed these institutions, the Irish *seanchaí* (storyteller) emerged. The tradition survived, but sadly, in this television age, the art is often abused and presented as bucolic buffoonery.

Sources of Irish myth are plentiful. The oldest surviving volume is the *Book of the Dun Cow* (Leabhar na hUidhre), an 11th/12th-century volume written at Clonmacnois, County Offaly. Monks chose this title, tradition says, when they wrote it on vellum from the hide of Saint Ciaran's dark cow. Because it uses 6th- and 8th-century Irish, it is most likely a transcript of earlier documents. Like the 14th-century *Book of Lecan*, it contains versions of *An Táin Bó Cuailgne*. Bishop Fionn McGorman compiled *The Book of Leinster* (Leabhar Laighneach, also called Leabhar na Nuachonghbála); some call it *The Book of Glendalough*, after the County Wicklow monastery where the prelate wrote it in the 12th century. Another source, Rawlinson Manuscript B502, takes its name from a Bodleian Library reference. Some scholars claim that it too originated from Clonmacnois.

Apart from early sources, *Béaloides*, the journal of the Folklore Society of Ireland, and manuscript sources of the Department of Folklore at University College, Dublin record

many tales handed down orally. Writers like William Carleton, Padraic Colum, Aubrey de Vere, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, P.W. Joyce, Patrick Kennedy, Kuno Meyer, Eugene O'Curry, John O'Donovan, Standish O'Grady, T.F. O'Rahilly, T.W. Rolleston, J.M. Synge, Lady Wilde and W.B. Yeats have presented ancient myth and fable in prose, poetic and dramatic forms. Even today, the characters in Brian Friel's play *Wonderful Tennessee* reflect upon another Hy-Brasil or Tír na nÓg — a strange, mystical somewhere inspired by ancient myth and fantasy.

There has always been prevarication among scholars when Ireland's mythology comes under discussion. A consensus favours the theory that historical fact forms its basis. This is particularly true in the case of certain characters whose escapades have been romanticised. Whatever the scholarly interpretation, great tales from Irish mythology continue to intrigue and entertain.

My selection is a personal one. It does not include a set number of stories from a given cycle. I retell the legends in my own words, hoping to entertain rather than educate.