

A large, ancient stone archway, possibly a dolmen or a natural rock formation, dominates the foreground. The arch is constructed from several large, dark grey, weathered stones. The top stone is particularly massive and rounded, with a small pile of stones resting on its peak. The archway frames a view of a lush green landscape with rolling hills in the distance under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is serene and evokes a sense of history and nature.

# READING IRELAND

THE LITTLE MAGAZINE

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## Subscribe

*Reading Ireland* is published three times a year and is available to subscribers at a cost of \$40 for four issues. The aim of the magazine is to provide in-depth analysis of Irish Literature, past and present, along with opening a window onto the best of contemporary Irish poetry, prose, drama and culture.

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\*The cover image is a photograph of the Proleek Dolmen which is situated in the grounds of Ballymascanlon Hotel on the legendary Cooley Peninsula in County Louth, Ireland.

# Introduction



Illustration by Louis Le Brocquy for Thomas Kinsella's translation of The *Táin* curtsey of Ballymascannon Hotel, County Louth.  
Photo credit: Dermot Leavy.

Welcome to the spring 2017 issue of *Reading Ireland*. This issue is focused on Thomas Kinsella's groundbreaking translation of the early Irish epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), and the mythological hero Cúchulainn who is at the center of the *Táin*.<sup>1</sup> The *Táin* is considered to be the earliest vernacular epic in western literature and it is a cornerstone of the Irish cultural inheritance and tradition. In the surviving early Irish literature four groups of stories or mythological cycles dominate. These cycles are as follows:

1. Mythological stories relating to the Tuatha Dé Danann ('the Tribes of the Goddess Danu'), an ancient divine race said to have inhabited Ireland before the coming of the Celts;
2. The Ulster cycle, dealing with the exploits of King Conchobor and the champions of the Red Branch, chief of whom is Cúchulainn, the Hound of Ulster.
3. The Fenian cycle, stories of Finn mac Cumhaill, his son Oisín, and other warriors of the *fianna*.
4. A group of stories centered on various kings said to have reigned between the third century B.C. and the eighth century A.D.<sup>2</sup>

2

The *Táin* is the central tale in the Ulster Cycle. The story recounts how Queen Medb of Connacht invaded King Conchobor's province of Ulster by launching a cattle-raid in Cooley near the town of Dundalk in County Louth. Her objective was to steal the most prized possession of the king, the *Donn Cúailnge*, the Brown Bull of Cooley, and it is the king's youthful champion, Cúchulainn (the Hound of Ulster), who defends Ulster from Queen Medb's army.

Kinsella's 1969 translation, which remains the definitive translation for scholars, is based on the text of two medieval manuscripts which contain between them the sole surviving parts of the earliest version of the story, which is dated to

the eight century: *Lebor na bUidre* (the Book of the Dun Cow), which was compiled in the twelfth century at the monastery of Clonmacnoise, and the fourteenth century manuscript, the *Yellow Book of Lecan*. A different but complete version, dated to the twelfth century, survives in *The Book of Leinster*. However, as Kinsella points out in his introduction, the origins of the *Táin* are far more ancient than these manuscripts:

The language of the earliest form of the story is dated to the eight century, but some of the verse passages may be two centuries older, and it is held by most Celtic scholars that the Ulster cycle, with the rest of early Irish literature, must have had a long oral existence before it received a literary shape, and a few traces of Christian colour, at the hands of the monastic scribes.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the central story of the *Táin*, Kinsella includes a number of pre-tales, or *remscéla*, which he selected “for their contribution to an understanding of the plot and the motivations of the *Táin*.” Over ten years in the making, Kinsella’s translation aims to provide accurate readings of the original texts while reflecting what one critic characterizes as “the alien tone and the primitive, native incoherence of the original.”<sup>4</sup> In his introduction, Kinsella explains how he undertook this monumental work to correct “the romanticized, fairy tale, versified, dramatized and bowdlerized versions of the Ulster cycle.” Kinsella’s achievement is to make accessible the ancient Gaelic culture described in the world of the *Táin* by creating a readable text for a modern audience while simultaneously preserving the integrity of the original story. Another distinctive feature of Kinsella’s *Táin* are the stark black and white brush drawings created by renowned Irish artist Louis Le Brocqy (1916- 2012) to illustrate the poet’s translation. One of Le Brocqy’s drawings included in their collaboration, “The Massing of the Army,” is now considered one of the greatest Irish graphic works of the twentieth century.

We begin this issue with Kinsella’s “*The Route of The Táin*,” a poem in the Irish *dinnseanchas* tradition, which in contemporary Irish poetry often involves a collective cultural memory of a specific place. Sometimes referred to as “the lore of place,” *dinnseanchas* has been described by one critic as “a kind of archaeological aesthetic, a poetics prompting genealogical understanding.”<sup>5</sup> Like many of Kinsella’s long poems this poem concerns a journey undertaken by the poet. The opening lines locate Kinsella and Dr. Gene Haley, who worked with Kinsella on the topographical aspects of the *Táin*, in County Louth, near Ravensdale. Kinsella, Haley, and their companions have set out to celebrate his translation by following the route of the *Táin*. In the poem, scenes from the *Táin* are superimposed onto the landscape in which Kinsella and his fellow travelers find themselves, and the ancient past is always close by: “Before us/the route of *The Táin*, over men’s dust, / toward these hills that seemed to grow / darker as we drove nearer.”

Next, we are privileged to include a guide to the most notable places on the route of the *Táin* which was prepared by Kinsella around the time that his translation was first published by Oxford University Press in 1969. This guide has not been in public circulation for many years and we are grateful to the poet for agreeing to share this rare material with *Reading Ireland*.

For a commentary on Kinsella’s translation we turned to Galway based Connemara poet Mary O’ Malley, whose work is finely attuned to the nuances of language and to the struggles between modernity and tradition in Irish culture. O’Malley’s essay on Kinsella’s translation, which she characterizes as “magisterial, rigourous, a work of repossession and composition, rather than re-invention,” highlights Kinsella’s imaginative absorption of the lost language of Irish as he returns this literary inheritance to the Irish people. As a poet also known for reworking classical myths involving women, we are also delighted to include two of O’ Malley’s poems which interrogate tropes of Irish mythology, “Dido, Grainne, Brid,” and “Bean Sidhe.”

While the story of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* may be fictional, the topographical settings and the route of the story reflect an early medieval reality. The stories in the *Táin* were greatly influenced by the concept of *dindsenchus* and many of the locations mentioned in the story exist in present day Ireland. Given the importance of landscape, it seems appropriate to

include two essays which discuss the topographical and genealogical features of the *Táin*. First, Professor Paul Gosling retraces the route of the *Táin* in County Louth, where much of the central action of the *Táin* takes place.<sup>6</sup> Next, Brendan McSherry examines the physical landscape of County Louth and the Ulster Border Region and assesses the role of geology in the history and politics of Ireland. Both Gosling and McSherry offer a fascinating perspective on the area of Ireland that is the central location for the action of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

Transitioning to a specific focus on the mythic figure of Cúchulainn, we are delighted to include Paul Muldoon's poem, "A Mayfly," which retells the story of the conception of Cúchulainn. Muldoon's distinctive style and linguistic skill are evident in the poem, which is accompanied by Adam Wyeth's perceptive reading delineating the poet's broad associative references. On a recent trip back to Northern Ireland Muldoon was photographed by Bobbie Hanvey, and we are grateful for permission to include Hanvey's work in the magazine. More of Hanvey's work can be seen in the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives located in the John J. Burns Library, Boston College: [www.bc.edu/sites/libraries/hanvey/index.html](http://www.bc.edu/sites/libraries/hanvey/index.html)

Throughout his life W.B. Yeats was fascinated with the figure of Cúchulainn, writing numerous poems and five plays about this mythic figure. We include in this issue "Cuchulain Comforted," an elegy for both the poet and his mythic alter-ego that Yeats wrote just two weeks before he died on January 28th 1939. The poem contemplates the fate of Cúchulainn

in the afterlife; a fate that is diametrically opposed to his dramatic battle filled earthly existence.

Next, Joyce East reviews *Standish O'Grady's Cuculain: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Professors Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, this new study considers the two volume edition of O'Grady's *History of Ireland* (1878, 1880), focusing on O'Grady's imaginative re-telling of the myth of Cúchulainn, along with critical essays on O'Grady's history. As Castle notes in his introduction, "O'Grady's historical vision was meant to appeal to all of Ireland, but it was focused through the extraordinary exploits of a singular hero, one whose self sufficiency, bravery, and self-sacrifice provided revivalist and nationalist writers with a standard of heroic chivalry."

We are pleased to include a review of Caitríona O'Reilly's most recent poetry collection *Geis*. The word "geis" is a word from Irish mythology meaning a supernatural taboo or injunction on behavior. In this volume O'Reilly draws on Irish mythology to craft a body of work that is both wondrous and disturbing. The influence of Celtic mythology in contemporary Irish poetry is a vast subject that we cannot do justice to in a single issue of *Reading Ireland*. However, for readers interested in the subject Wyeth's study, *The Hidden World of Poetry: Unravelling Celtic Mythology in Contemporary Irish Poetry* is an excellent place to begin. Taking as his starting point a single poem by a specific writer, Wyeth analyzes the work of impressive range of Irish poets including Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Paul Durcan, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Mary O'Malley, Paula Meehan and Paul Muldoon.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to a new publication, *Laoch na Laochra*, a retelling of the Cúchulainn stories from the Ulster Cycle written in Ulster Irish dialect by Réamonn Ó Ciaráin. The book is beautifully illustrated by Armagh artist and musician, Dara Vallely, who has made available to *Reading Ireland* a gallery of images which were commissioned for the text and are now on exhibition in Ireland.

Adrienne Leavy, editor.  
February 2017

1. There are a variety of different spellings of Cúchulainn on both English and Irish. Throughout the magazine, the preferred spelling used by individual authors and contributors will be honored. In the general commentary, the editor defers to Kinsella's spelling in the *Táin*: "Cúchulainn."
2. Thomas Kinsella, Introduction to the *Táin* ix.
3. Kinsella, *The Táin* ix.
4. Donatella Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella* New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996.
5. Julia C. Obert. "Space and Trace: Thomas Kinsella's Postcolonial Place-lore" in *New Hibernia Review* Volume 13. No. 4. Winter 2009, pp 77-93.
6. Gosling has just recently published a second guide, *The route of Táin Bó Cúailnge* in counties Roscommon and Longford, which is available from Archaeology Ireland.

# Poem: “*The Route of The Táin*”

by Thomas Kinsella

Gene sat on a rock, dangling our map.  
The others were gone over the next crest,  
further astray. We ourselves, irritated,  
were beginning to turn down toward the river  
back to the car, the way we should have come.

We should have trusted our book.  
After they tried a crossing, and this river too  
‘rose against them’ and bore off  
a hundred of their charioteers toward the sea  
*They had to move along the river Colptha  
up to its source.*

There:  
where the main branch sharpens away gloomily  
to a gash in the hill opposite.

*then to Bélat Ailiúin*  
by that pathway  
climbing back and forth out of the valley  
over to Ravensdale.

Scattering in irritation. We who had set out  
so cheerfully to celebrate our book;  
cheerfully as we made and remade it  
through a waste of hours, content to ‘enrich the present  
honouring the past’, each to his own just function.  
Wandering off, ill-sorted,  
like any beasts of the field,  
one snout honking disconsolate,  
another burrowing in its pleasures.

When not far above us a red fox  
ran at full stretch out of the bracken  
and panted across the hillside toward the next ridge.  
Where he vanished – a faint savage sharpness  
out of the earth – an inlet of the sea  
shone in the distance at the mouth of the valley  
beyond Omeath: grey waters crawled with light.

For a heartbeat, in alien certainty,  
we exchanged looks. We should have known it by now  
– the process, the whole tedious enabling ritual.  
Flux brought to fullness; saturated;  
the clouding over; dissatisfaction  
spreading slowly like an ache;  
something reduced shivering suddenly  
into meaning along new boundaries;

through a forest,  
by a salt-dark shore,  
by a standing stone on a dark plain,  
by a ford running blood,  
and along this gloomy pass, with someone ahead  
calling and waving on the crest  
against a heaven of dismantling cloud,  
transfixed by the same figure (stopped, pointing)  
on the rampart at Cruachan, where it began.

The morning sunlight pouring on us all  
as we scattered over the mounds  
disputing over useless old books,  
assembled in cheerful speculation  
around a prone block, *Miosgán Medba*  
– Queen Medb's *turd...*? And rattled out maps,  
Joking together in growing illness  
or age or fat. Before us  
the route of *The Táin*, over men's dust,  
toward these hills that seemed to grow  
darker as we drove nearer.

*Reading Ireland* would like to thank Thomas Kinsella and Wake Forest University Press  
for their kind permission to re-print *The Route of The Táin* from *Thomas Kinsella: Collected  
Poems* (Wake Forest University Press 2006).

To purchase this collection please visit [www.wakeforestuniversitypress.com](http://www.wakeforestuniversitypress.com)

# The Táin

The *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, the 'Cattle-Raid of Cooley'—or **The Táin** (pronounced 'toyn') as it is familiarly called—is the masterpiece of Irish saga literature. It tells of the invasion of King Conchobor's province of Ulster by the armies of the 'men of Ireland' under the leadership of Queen Medb (Maeve) of Connacht. The principal motive for the invasion is Medb's pursuit of the great Brown Bull of Cooley, and Ulster's borders are defended (for the most part single-handed) by the hero Cúchulainn, the Hound of Ulster.

The story—the earliest vernacular epic in western literature—is more than twelve centuries old, and comes down to us in a few medieval manuscripts which survived, almost miraculously, the ravages of Irish history. **Lebor na hUidre**, or 'The Book of the Dun Cow' (now in the Royal Irish Academy) and **The Yellow Book of Lecan**, in Trinity College Library, contain between them the sole surviving parts of the earliest version of the tale, which is dated to the eighth century. A different but complete version, dated to the twelfth century, survives in **The Book of Leinster**, also in Trinity College Library.

In 1969 poet Thomas Kinsella published a translation of **The Táin**, which was greeted as 'the book of the decade', a version, according to **The Times Literary Supplement**, 'made splendid and exciting by the words of a poet, and reaching for all those effects of grandeur, heroic excess, fantasy, high emotion, frequent rhetoric and occasional bluntness achieved by the Táin.'

The prose tales of the Ulster cycle, of which **The Táin** is the central epic, introduce us to a brutal, aristocratic Iron-Age culture, where honour is jealously guarded and poetry highly valued. The stories are violent, beautiful and grotesque, but despite their occasional extravagance, the best of them keep a firm grasp on psychological and natural reality.

It is one of the surprises of **The Táin**, in fact, that the most ancient version, which is the one mainly used by Thomas Kinsella, allows us still to follow on the ground, with fair certainty, the route taken by Queen Medb's armies, and to find the sites of battles and single combats, the ford where the famous 'Boyhood Deeds' of Cúchulainn were recounted, the Brown Bull's hiding-place in the 'Black Cauldron', and so on.

Thomas Kinsella has prepared, especially for our readers, a short guide to the most notable places on the route of **The Táin**, and walked the terrain with our photographer to make a visual record. To follow the route, reading the story along the way, is to experience in a unique way an ancient Irish masterpiece—and enjoy, incidentally, some of the loveliest and least frequented parts of the country.

*Thomas Kinsella's translation of **The Táin** is published by Oxford University Press, in association with The Dolmen Press, Dublin, and is available in paperback at £1.25.*

*(A version in German will be published shortly by Heimeran Verlag, Munich and Aufbau Verlag, DER.)*







*Poet-translator Thomas Kinsella in the mountain pass above Bálut Alluin in the Carlingford (Cualgne) peninsula.*

Place-names occupy a remarkable place in *The Táin*, yet I had reached a very late stage in the translation without taking much notice of them. I had been assured by more than one authority that it would be useless to try to make sense of them; apart from a few certain identifications the rest was a hopeless muddle. I mentioned this to Professor John V. Kelleher of Harvard University at a meeting in 1968, and he had other ideas. He thought it would be a pity to give up on such an important matter. He has spent many years extracting real information from the confusion of the old Annals and was sure something similar could be done with **The Táin's** place-names. He had in fact already done a lot of work on the topography of the Ulster stories, and he introduced me to Dr Gene C. Haley, then a student of his, who was researching the subject for a doctorate.

In the year that followed I found a great deal of excitement in tackling this new aspect. The work, with the generous help of these two scholars, led to the preparation of a set of maps which I believe add a new and valuable dimension to our appreciation of the ancient story. These maps by no means adequately represent Kelleher's and Haley's work (which is still in progress) but they give enough information to follow the movements of the story. The route generally follows the modern main roads—which seems reasonable when you think about it: it would naturally follow the lie of the land and its contours.

The strange events of the *Táin* may be pure fantasy or they may have some basis in fact—it is impossible to know. But even if they never happened, we know fairly accurately where they didn't.

*Thomas Kinsella*



Cruachan (Rathcroghan), site of the royal palace of Connacht. (p. 58)



The Shannon near Termonbarry, where the armies crossed. (P. 67)



Gránaire (Granard). (P. 66)

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The Táin

- 58 **Cruachan**, on Ai Plain. Rathcroghan, 3 ml north-west of Tulsk, Co Roscommon. Historically recognised as the royal palace of Connacht, where the story begins, it now comprises a large rath surrounded by smaller raths and places of interest, including **Rath na dTarbh**, Fort of the Bulls, due west; **Reilig na Rígh**, the Royal Cemetery,  $\frac{1}{4}$  ml south; **Daithi's Stone**, on a tumulus north of Reilig na Rígh, marking the grave of the last pagan king of Ireland, who was killed by a flash of lightning; and **Uaimh Chruachain**, the Cave of Cruachan in the adjacent townland of Glenballythomas, said to be an entrance to the Otherworld.
- 63/4 **the itinerary**. *The events of The Táin do not exactly follow this itinerary. Place-names are dealt with in this guide as they occur in the narrative.*
- 65 **Cúil Silinne**. The parish of Kilcooley: the church is 2 ml south-east of Tulsk, north of the Strokestown road. The armies' first halt, scene of the dispute about the Leinster warriors, the Gaileoin, whose outstanding prowess among her troops made Medb uneasy.
- Carrin Lake**. Ardakillan Lake, 1 ml south-east of the church.
- 67 **Móin Coltna**. A bog on the west bank of the Shannon before Termonbarry, where the armies crossed the river.
- Trego**, the Plain of Spears. East of the Shannon as far as Longford town. An overnight halt, where the War-Spirit Nemain assailed them and upset their night's sleep.
- 68 **Gránaire**. The town of Granard in Longford. An overnight halt on high ground.
- 70 **Iraire Cuilleinn**. Crossakeel in County Meath. Another halt on high ground and the scene of Cúchulainn's first threat to the armies. Crossakeel is an undistinguished village now, but (like Granard) it gives a good sense of the armies' journey westward across the plains of Ireland.
- 71 **Fid Dúin**. A forest then standing south of Crossakeel. The route deviates here from the main road (for reasons given in the story) and proceeds southward through Kilskeer, then northward to Kells.
- Slechta**. Kilskeer, where the armies cut down the forest before the chariots.
- 72 **Cúil Sibrille/Cenannos**. Kells (Ceanannus Mór). An overnight halt, and scene of Cúchulainn's reckoning of the armies.
- 73 **Ath Gabla**, Ford of the Forked Branch. A ford (now a bridge) over the Mattock River at Kellystown. The route from Kells follows the main road to Slane, then T2 northward about 3 ml, then eastward to the Mattock. An overnight halt. Scene of Cúchulainn's first bloody encounter with the armies; they are told of his 'Boyhood Deeds'.



page ref. in  
**The Táin**

- 92 **Mag Muceda**, the Pig-Keepers' Plain. A district about 3½ ml north-west of Drogheda in County Louth. Best reached through Tullyallen, then north to T25. Here Cúchulainn left a warning sign for Medb's armies.

**NB:** At this point, or from Slane, the opportunity should be taken to visit the unique Bronze Age megalithic sites of Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, south on the river Boyne. Many of the sagas, though not **The Táin** itself, associate Newgrange with the famous Brug na Bóinne, dwelling-place of the river-goddess Boann, after whom the Boyne is named.

- 93 **Belach nAne**, the Pass where they Drove. Northward, on the old road through Timullen to what was to become the monastic site of Monasterboice.

**NB:** Visit the site of the monastery, with notable Celtic crosses.

- 96 **Méthe Tog**, Squirrel Neck, and **Méthe nEuin**, Bird Neck. Two spits of land at the mouth of the Fane River. Where Cúchulainn's slingshot killed a squirrel and a bird on Medb's shoulders.

- 97 **The River Níth**. The Castletown River, which empties into Dundalk Bay at Dundalk in a wide estuary.

**Ath Lethan**, the Broad Ford. Dundalk Bay. Until 1905 it was possible to cross the Bay at low tide, from the headland east of Dundalk to Rockmarshall on the Carlingford (Cuailgne) peninsula. There are many points about the hills in Cuailgne from which a visitor can assess his present chances. An army anxious to stay out of slingshot range of Cúchulainn in the Cuailgne hills would certainly need to take such a route.

**NB:** From this point onward the route is best followed using the 1<sup>st</sup> Ordnance Survey Maps nos. 70 and 71.

**Ath Carpat**, Chariot Ford. Beside the bridge in Dundalk. Named from the many chariots shattered in the fighting.

- 98 **Breg Plain**. The plain between the Liffey and the Boyne. Obviously a mistake in the text.

- 100 **Saili Imdorchi**, the Dark Seas. The marshes east of Dundalk south of the rivermouth.

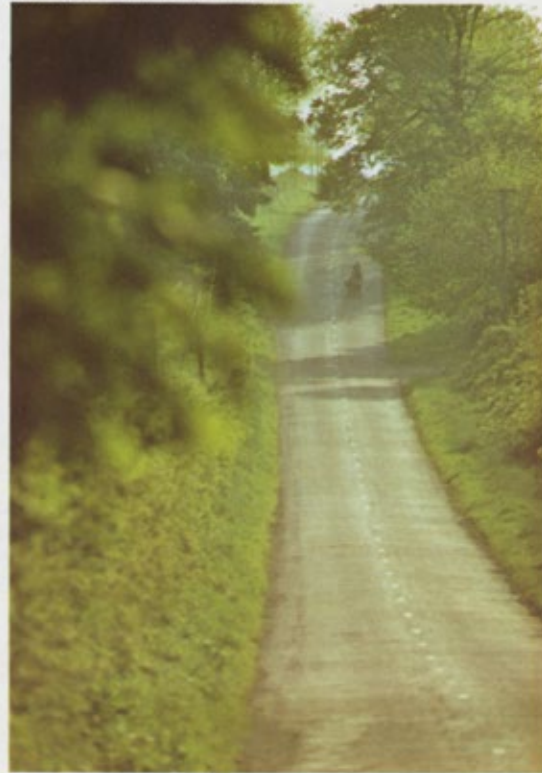
'they reached **Cuailgne**'. At Rockmarshall.

**Sliabh Cuinciu**, Cuinciu Mountain. Slievenaglogh, the Stony Mountain, overlooking Rockmarshall from the north-east.

**Réid Locha**, Lochu's Level Ground. The low-lying land between Slievenaglogh and the Bay.

**Finnabair Chuailgne**. A big overgrown rath just beyond the Bush, a railway halt (now disused) on the Carlingford road. The armies' headquarters while they raided the surrounding territory. The place-name Finnabair should not be confused with the name of Medb's daughter (cognate with Guinevere).

The road to Iraid Cuillenn (Crossakeel). (P. 70)



Ath Gabla, the ford on the river Mattock. (P. 73)





Ath Lethan, the Broad Ford, Dundalk Bay. (P. 97)



Finnabair Chuailgne, a rath near the Bush, locally known as 'the List'. (P. 100)



Dubchoire, the Black Cauldron, in the valley above Ballymakellett. (P. 101)

page ref. in  
The Táin

101 **Dubchoire**, the Black Cauldron, in **Glenn Gat**, Valley of the Osiers. Glenn Gat is the valley above Ballymakellett (on the road north-west from Rockmarshall to Ravensdale). Dubchoire is set into the northern slope of Glenn Gat and can be reached by a small road north of the bridge in Ballymakellett. Dubchoire is where the Brown Bull was kept hidden. The effect, though undramatic, is one of total seclusion. Viewed from the mountains above (later on the route) the name Black Cauldron takes on more meaning.

**NB:** Further up on the same access-road there is a comprehensive view of the significant area, and southward to Murtheimne Plain stretching as far as the Boyne. If you are taking the route in order, a visit to Dubchoire can be left until later.

**Sliab Cuilleinn**. Slieve Gullion, a mountain to the northwest. 'They headed for that place, ravaging Cuailgne as they went, but couldn't find the bull there.'

the **River Cronn**. The Big River. This river 'rose against' the Connacht armies.

102 **Bernas Bó Cuailgne**, the Cattle-Gap. Windy Gap. Here the armies, having been blocked by the river and forced to pass around by its marshy source, tore up the earth as a mark of dishonour to Ulster.

**Glenn Dáilimda**. The valley leading down to Omeath. The upper section is named Tullagh-omeath. An overnight halt.

the **River Colptha**. The river running down the valley to Omeath. This river, too, 'rose against' them and bore off a hundred of their charioteers toward the sea.

**Cluain Carpat**, the Chariot-Meadow. In the lower section of the valley.

'then to **Bélat Ailiúin**', The Pass of the Islands. This is the most strenuous part of the route to follow—and one of the most rewarding. It marks the turning-point of the armies' journey. Climb the Tullaghomeath valley along the southern slope toward the ridge between Clermont Cairn and Carnavaddy. The view from the top is impressive; the 'Black Cauldron' can be seen to the south. Once over the ridge, the best route is down the northern slope by the turf road which is reached a few hundred yards to the north. This road follows an ancient trail, and leads down to Ravensdale, where the Flurry River and its tributaries form a series of small islands—Bélat Ailiúin.

**NB:** If you are travelling by car it won't be practicable to follow the route in this way (unless there are two cars available, when one can be parked at the outset on the road at Ravensdale). The best thing is to explore Tullaghomeath, then drive back through the Bush to Rockmarshall and take the turn to Ravensdale.

**Liasa Liac**, the Calves' Stone-shelters. Somewhere near Ballymakellett.

**Glenn Gatlaig**. Same as Glenn Gat. See note on Dubchoire (page 101).

**Druim Féne**, the Armies' Ridge. Possibly Dromena, a low ridge west of the Ravensdale road.

102/114 The narrative here offers an alternative version of how the armies went from Finnabair Chuailgne to Druim Féne. It has no real topographical interest.



# Carlingford (Cuailgne) Peninsula



*The Windy Gap, starting point for the ascent over the pass to Béal Aliuin. (P. 102)*

page ref. in  
**The Táin**

- 114 **Ochaine.** Trumpet Hill, a conspicuous wooded height dominating Dromena to the west, and the area generally. From here Cúchulainn harassed the armies with his sling. From this point onward the armies are retreating out of Ulster.
- 116 **Delga.** The site of Cúchulainn's own fort, a mile west of Dundalk. Also called Dún Delgan, Delga Fort, giving rise to the anglicised name of the modern town.
- 125 **Cuib.** The level country north from Newry to Lough Neagh and east to Dundrum. Medb raided this district searching for the Brown Bull. the **Midluachair Road.** The passage between Dundalk and Newry. Counted among the five great ancient roads of Ireland.
- Dun Sobairce.** Dunseverick, 12 mls north of Coleraine, County Derry, in the ancient territory of Dál Riada. (See pages 126/7). This is almost certainly a mistake in the text for Dun Lethglaise, Downpatrick, Co. Down, associated with Celtchar Mac Uthidir. (See the incident concerning his wife on page 126.)
- 126 **Ath Buide,** Buide's Ford. On the Flurry River, a mile west of Trumpet Hill. Where Cúchulainn killed Buide Mac Báin, leader of the troop who finally captured the Bull.
- Ath Tolam Sét,** Ford of the Overwhelming Gift; **Umarrith,** where the Copper (Javelin) Came to Rest; **Nathcoirpthe . . .** the trees named after him; etc. All uncertain. The latter group are places named after those killed by Cúchulainn in Cuib, and are presumably within a few miles of Newry.
- Focherd.** (See also page 138). The area around Faughart Hill. Faughart was later the site of a famous monastery and is said to be St Brigid's birthplace. Edward the Bruce was killed in battle at Faughart in 1318 and is said to be buried there.



*(Above and below)  
On the Ravensdale side, one picks up a 'Green road' leading down to the valley—to Béal Aliuin. (P. 102)*





Ochaine, Trumpet Hill, is the wooded height in the distance. (P. 114)



Above and below: two views near the Windy Gap. Apart from *The Táin*, this is very attractive and undiscovered country to explore.

page ref. in  
**The Táin**

- 127 **Dál Riada.** See note to Dun Sobairce, page 125 (above).
- 135 the mainland of **Tarteisc.** The land north of Dundalk Harbour, including Faughart Hill. It was at Tarteisc Ford that Cúchulainn was harassed by the war-goddess in the form of an eel, then a she-wolf, then a hornless red heifer. He defeated her but a great weariness fell on him.
- 138 the hill **Ard Aigneach.** An earlier name for Faughart Hill, where Medb asked for a meeting with Cúchulainn to arrange a truce and ambushed him with fourteen men, all of whom he killed.
- 140 **Ath Cét Cuile,** the Ford of the Crime of One Hundred. On the Castletown River at St John's Bridge. Where Cúchulainn killed a hundred men.
- 141 **Breslech Mór,** place of the Great Carnage. The district south of Dundalk through which the Fane River flows. Scene of Cúchulainn's great war-spasm and onslaught on Medb's armies. In the later tale of the death of Cúchulainn, Breslech Mór is the place of the hero's last battle. Cloghfarmore (the Big Man's Stone), south of the Dundalk/Louth road approaching Knockbridge, is said to be the pillar-stone Cúchulainn strapped himself to as he was dying.
- the gravemound in **Lerga.** Knockbridge. Where Cúchulainn slept for three days and three nights before the Great Carnage.
- 144 **Lia Toll,** the Pierced Standing-stone. Possibly Cloghfarmore. Where the Ulster boy-troop died.
- 163 **Imroll Belaig Eóin,** the Miscast at Bird Pass. Possibly in the townland of Rathroal north of Stephenstown Bridge on the Fane River. Where two friends killed each other by mistake.







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- 222 **Gáirech** and **Irgairech**. The hill at Garhy, on the south side of the Mullingar/Moate road, and a similar hill on the opposite side of the road. Scene of the Last Battle.
- 223 **Cuillenn**. Probably Iraid Cuillenn.  
**Delind**. The river Deel in Westmeath.  
**Assal**. The plain north-east from Mullingar to Delvin.  
**Tuath Bressi**. Uncertain.
- 225 **Slemain Mide**. Slanemore, County Westmeath.
- 239 **Fedan Chollna**. Where Cúchulainn lay wounded. There is actually no such place. The scribe has capitalised a phrase meaning a bier or stretcher.



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The Táin

- 248 **'the three bald-topped hills of Meath'**. Possibly the three low hills in Meeldrum townland four miles south of Garhy. Where Fergus released his fury with three sword-strokes. ('Mael-druim' means 'bare ridge'.)
- 251 **Ath Luain**. Ford of the Loins. Athlone. Where Medb's armies cross the Shannon back into their own province.  
**the Bald-Topped Hills**. Probably covered over by the town of Athlone. Where Cúchulainn answered Fergus's feat at Garhy.  
**Tarbga**. Bull-grief or Bull-strife. Possibly the hill at Emmoo, 2½ mls north-east of Roscommon town, where the battle of the two bulls begins. **The Táin** ends with this battle between The Brown Bull of Cuailgne—the original cause of the war—and Fuinbennach, The White-Horned Bull of Connacht.
- 252 **Sliab nAdarcha**, Mountain of the Horn. Possibly the southern peak of Slieve Bawn, 5½ mls to the north. The rest of the names on the final page are of places passed by The Brown Bull as he goes about Ireland mortally wounded, with the mangled remains of Fuinbennach hanging from his horns. Apart from the names already identified—and **Tromma**, or Liver, which is probably the Boyne River between Navan and Slane—they cannot be identified with any certainty.

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The battle was over. Medb said to Fergus:  
'We have had shame and shambles here today, Fergus.'  
'We followed the rump of a misguiding woman,' Fergus said.  
'It is the usual thing for a herd led by a mare to be strayed and destroyed.'



*Focherd or Ard Aignech, Faughart, near Aghnaskeagh. (Pps. 126 and 138)*



*Mag Clochair, perhaps. 'Stony plains' are not difficult to find in this area. (P. 218)*



*Ath Firdia, Ferdia's ford. Ardee town. The English spelling of Ardee disguises the old Irish name, still used. (Pps. 68-205)*

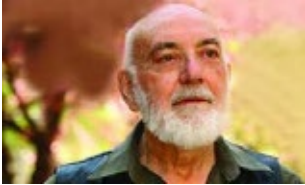
(A small number of place-names have not to date been identified with certainty: these are omitted from the guide)

page ref. in  
**The Táin**

- 164 **Ard in Dírma**, the Armies' Height. Uncertain.  
**Muid Loga/Lugmod**. Louth village.  
**Ath Dá Ferta**, Ford of the Two Grave-mounds. On the Fane River at Knockbridge. Where the armies killed the Ulster warrior Aengus.
- 165 **Grellach Dollaid**. A swamp (now drained) upstream on the Fane River.  
**Crích Rois**. A territory comprising the eastern part of County Monaghan and the western part of County Louth, south of the Fane. Where the armies set up camp on their retreat.
- 166 the swamp of **Fuiliarnn**, Blood-Iron. Probably Ardee Bog. Where Cúchulainn killed Gaile Dána, with his nephew and twenty-seven sons. It was in revenge for this that Cúchulainn is finally killed.
- 168/205 **Ath Firdia**, Ferdia's Ford, on the River Dee. Ardee. Scene of the last and greatest single-combat on **The Táin**, when Cúchulainn fights and kills his own foster-brother Ferdia.
- 206 **Imorach Smiormrach**, the Bath of Marrow-Mash. Smarmore. Where Cethern recuperates from his wounds, steeping in a bath of marrow.
- 215 **Glenn Domain**, the Deep Valley. Running east and west south of Collon, County Louth. Scene of a battle between the seven kings to whom Finnabair was promised. Seven hundred men died.  
**Finnabair Slébe**, Finnabair in the Mountains. Possibly Mount Oriel about a mile north-west of Collon. Where Finnabair died of shame because of her deceit.  
**Ath Feidli**. Possibly on the Keeran River south of Smarmore. Where the aged warrior Ilech died.
- 216 **Tailtiu**. Teltown. Scene of the battle of the charioteers. Tailtiu was one of the three great gathering-places of ancient Ireland.
- 218 **Mag Clochair**, the Stony Plain. South-west of Faughart Hill in Louth. Scene of a fight, with showers of stones, between Munremur and Cúroi. (This scene is out of place here and relates to the episodes at Faughart.)
- 221 **Iraird Cuillenn**. Crossakeel, County Meath. The first halt of the risen Ulster armies on their march in pursuit of Medb.  
**Airthir Midi Ford/Ath Féne**; the Ford in East Meath/Warriors' Ford. Somewhere on the Brosna River near Mullingar, in County Westmeath. Where King Conchobor and Celchar mac Uthidir make a raid on the retreating armies and bring back eight score heads to Iraird Cuillenn.



# Thomas Kinsella



## Bio

Thomas Kinsella was born in Dublin in 1928. His first major collection, *Another September* (1958) was endorsed by the Poetry Society in Britain and subsequent collections garnered great critical acclaim in Ireland and England including the Denis Devlin Memorial Award. In 1965 Kinsella abandoned a promising career in the Department of Finance and moved with his wife Eleanor to the United States, where he was writer-in-residence at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale for three years. Kinsella subsequently accepted an invitation from Temple University in Philadelphia in 1970 to join the faculty as Professor of English, a position he held for the next twenty years.

Kinsella's move to the United States corresponded loosely with a departure from his early formalism, a move that was signaled in his influential collection, *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968). Since then, he has continued to publish innovative and challenging poetry that reflect his lifelong preoccupation with both eliciting order, and imposing order, on the direct experience of life. Psychic exploration through the prism of Jungian archetypes and psychoanalysis along with an interest in Irish history and mythology are also major themes in Kinsella's work. Representative examples are *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1972), *One* (1974), *Song of the Night and Other Poems* (1978), and *Songs of the Psyche* (1985). The city of Dublin provides an important setting for many sequences, especially *St Catherine's Clock* (1987), *Personal Places* (1990), *Poems from Center City* (1990), *Open Court* (1991) and *The Pen Shop* (1997). Eleanor Kinsella is a central presence in much of Kinsella's poetry, particularly in *Wormwood* (1966) and *The Familiar* (1999).

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In 1972 Kinsella founded The Peppercanister Press, which enabled him to publish new work in pamphlet form that could be revised or edited before being reissued in trade editions. Peppercanister continues to publish all his new work, the most recent titles being *Fat Master* (2011) and *Love Joy Peace* (2011). These latest Peppercanisters were collected with the three previous *Peppercanisters*, *Marginal Economy* (2006), *Man of War* (2007) and *Belief and Unbelief* (2007) into the volume *Late Poems* which was published by Carcanet in 2013. Kinsella's *Collected Poems* (2006) were published in Europe by Carcanet and in North America by Wake Forest University Press. His *Selected Poems* were also published by Wake Forest in 2010.

In addition to his own work, Kinsella has devoted a considerable portion of his career to translating Gaelic literature, most notably with his 1969 translation of the Irish epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the anthology *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981), which he co-authored with Seán Ó Tuama. Among his most influential critical interventions is his examination of the contemporary Irish writer's relationship with the dual heritage of Gaelic and English literature, *The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland* (1995). Kinsella is also the editor of *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986).

In 2007 Kinsella was awarded the Freedom of the City of Dublin in recognition of his contribution to Irish literature.

# Essay: A Beautiful Rigour – Thomas Kinsella’s *Táin*

by Mary O’ Malley

Thomas Kinsella’s is a poet of great restraint and intensity. Much of his poetry is forged by an intelligence and a philosophical exactness, never avoiding the long arc of history nor the anabasis of the self, that epic journey from the coast to the interior of the human experience begun with ‘Nightwalker’ and continuing, with a late renewal with vigour and intensity which has not abated.

Even in his early formally traditional verses, there is no forcing. The rhymes move with an ease and grace that has been described more than once as Audenesque. His break with strict form was made well after he had mastered the craft.

It is hard not to compare the body of his work to that of a composer – his beloved Bach comes easily to mind. He has a composers reach and the individual poems seem to me to be part of a greater whole, individual songs and movements in a symphony that is both aural and written. He has perfect pitch and a purity of tone that is almost unique among his Irish contemporaries.

His immersion in the bardic forms, the very different sounds and constraints of Gaelic verse, has served him, and his readers, well and must have added to his surefootedness in the vertical regions he traversed in the Peppercanister Poems such as *Notes From the Land of The Dead*, published in 1969, the same year as the Dolmen edition of *The Táin, Songs of the Night and Song of the Psyche*, and continuing through to his great raft of ‘Later Poems.’ Many of the poems are concerned with mapping: Dublin’s lanes and streets and canals, and the deeper, psychic cartography of that city. Crucial to this latter is the many ways in which a culture represents itself to itself, of which language is one of the most crucial.

A man with a firm grasp of the dual tradition that Irish poets inherit, no poet was more aware than Kinsella of the cultural and psychological implications for a people of the loss of their language. He was in a position to view the situation both before and after the ending of the bardic era, to know that to a greater or lesser degree, Ireland lost its ability to accurately read its own epics and engage with its own culture when the language was lost and gaelic culture declined and broke up. Kinsella dates this at the famine, and certainly that was the last and worst of several deep rifts, chronicled in verse by Dáibhí O’ Bruadair and Aogán Ó Rathaille. Whenever we date the end of Gaelic culture, his translations of Aogán Ó Rathaille brought to a wide audience the last of the bardic poets in a version worthy of the original and faithful to its strengths. *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981), is one of the great literary works of repossession, scholarly, businesslike and an invaluable reference for poet and non-poet alike. It gives us a way back to ourselves in our own language, a code whereby we might find a route alongside and underneath the beauty and mistiness of the Celtic Twilight.

The *Táin* was published twelve years before ‘Poems of the Dispossessed’. It was magisterial, rigorous, a work of repossession and composition, rather than re-invention. The task was daunting, archaeological in its reconstruction, a great dig. Before Kinsella there were translations, in part, of parts, of conflicting and incomplete primary texts. Not as sparse as Sappho’s fragments, but fragmented nonetheless – the manuscripts annotated, scrubbed out and overwritten, revised and incomplete. In other words, they had all the flaws of any great oral poem written down, reconstructed, perhaps by committee and in a world still Gaelic and culturally healthy, but one which nevertheless had accommodated Christianity and must pay it some lip service in collating the great manuscripts.

There had, of course, been translations and recensions before. Kinsella deals with those fairly in his introduction : He refers the reader to the introduction to Cecile O’Rahilly’s version published by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in 1967 ‘ for a great deal of detailed information on the *Táin* and its background .’

Lady Gregory’s ‘Cuchulain of Muirthemne’ spares the people of Kiltartan, and Yeats, ‘ a good deal I thought you would not care about...’. She meant urination, sex and slaughter, all told in workaday detail in the original Irish. Victorian sensibility has little use in a reading of Chaucer, much less in a reading of the ‘earthy’ treatment of all natural bodily functions, and of birth and killing and mutilation, that is a feature of early and middle Irish.

Then there was the 1904 translation by Winifred Farady, which the poet tells us ‘is incomplete and difficult to read with any pleasure, partly because it transmits the flaws of the text (‘The Book of Leinster’) so accurately.’

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The *Táin* survived in Irish in a 12th C manuscript, ‘The Book of the Dun Cow’ compiled at Clonmacnoise and in ‘The Yellow Book of Lecan’ from the 14th C . Those are the two main manuscripts used by Kinsella, but the origins of the Ulster cycle, it is agreed by most Celtic scholars, are in an oral tradition from at least four centuries earlier, and the ‘poetic’ or ‘prophetic’ speech of the indented passages may date from two centuries earlier again. Such considerations based on linguistic evidence is the meat and drink of scholarly debate, but of mainly academic interest to the translator, except when they are backed up by useful information about form and custom.

It is in those indented passages that at the poetry happens, in the heightened or prophetic speech, oracular, mysterious and brilliant. Kinsella made no attempt to reconstruct in those passages, and the resulting poems are the powerful links that give the narrative an internal drive. I have valued them since I first read them as a young girl, and did not yet know the power of incantation.

Kinsella went for the first chapter of The *Táin* to the Book of Leinster, since that section serves as a starting point for the movement of armies across the country along the route of the cattle drive, and provides a strong motive for the action, Maeve’s desire not to be bested by her husband in riches and status. So The *Táin* starts with a man and a woman in bed, boasting. It is unlikely to end well.

Thomas Kinsella spent fifteen years, off and on, working on his translation, gathering, choosing, shaping, excising for clarity; he rendered the stories with precision and restored what had often been prettified in translation to its original vigour.

In doing so, he provided us with a necessary and clarifying counterpoint to the Celtic Twilight use of the myth cycles in treating with cultural identity. Before Kinsella, there were fragments of the cycle, successful in places, full of inaccuracies, accrustations and obfuscations.

Kinsella's ear for Irish is as pitch perfect as it is in English, his panoptic vision takes in the whole available manuscript, its various recensions, and he makes his choices decisively and with unerring accuracy. He explains clearly in his introduction why he has chosen to begin with the pillow talk section and even without this information, there is an internal structural logic to that beginning, a locating of the start of the action, that is psychologically as well as physically accurate. In other words, it is right. There is a beautiful rigour in the finished work, one that reflects the temperature and tone of the Irish language – this rendering is perhaps Kinsella's greatest achievement in 'The *Táin*' as it works on the level of deep linguistic memory and therefore on the imagination.

I am not qualified to comment on the old Irish texts but I am acquainted enough to know the dangers and some pitfalls: the stylistic accrustations, the riddles rendered entirely meaningless by the passing of time, the linguistic changes and the mishearings and imaginings in writing them down in the first place. And that is before we even begin to consider the rosc and reitoric wars, the scholarly disputes deserving of their own little digressions and recensions.

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Thomas Kinsella took an unruly and repetitive bundle of textual scraps and forged it into a clean whole, complete with digressions but never so many as to confuse the reader or to obfuscate the internal sharpness of the story.

It is as if he took in the assembled materials and arranged the narrative into a pattern discerned by his ear and eye, and sculpted the whole into a map of Ireland, the armies moving to and fro across the plains, focusing on individuals who would move the story along and in so doing, give names to the places where great deeds were done:

'I have lived in important places...' Kavanagh 'Epic'.

Along with the mapping that was central to the epic's dinnseanchas and placenaming, the topography of the *Táin* still recognisable today, Kinsella provided us with a psychic cartography of a broken world, and gave us, in restoring the epic with such literary precision, a map with which we might find our way to the rigour and darkness of the original, a link to the sounds and symbols of our culture in the language that sang its praise and told its stories. Kinsella's *Táin* transmits something of the austerity of the Irish, prickly and black as the contorted blackthorn bush, with its sudden explosions of bright blossom. It was in this language the bards expressed what we were, and in rendering it into English Kinsella has bent the language to his purpose and kept it, somehow, in the vernacular.

His *Táin* is a far cry from the mist and twilight of Yeats' genius visions, closer in tone to the earned truth of his late, great flowering.

He has, as Heaney recognised, given a gift to world literature but he has given those poets who worked in the light of the dual tradition of Irish and English, a way back. And this, for a people as well as a writer, is crucial to the way forward.

Louis le Brocuy's drawings accompanying the text capture the almost Japanese impersonality of the text. I see that my copy was a gift, in 1981, signed 'On leaving home again'. I have carried it with me on my various journeyings since.

Mary O'Malley



# Mary O' Malley



## Bio

Mary O'Malley was born in Connemara in Ireland, and educated at University College Galway . She lived in Lisbon for eight years and taught at the Universidade Nova there. She served on the council of Poetry Ireland and was on the Committee of the Cuirt International Poetry Festival for eight years. She was the author of its educational programme.

She taught on the MA programmes for Writing and Education in the Arts at NUI Galway for ten years, held the Chair of Irish Studies at Villanova University in 2013, and has held Residencies in Paris, Tarragona, New York, NUI Galway, as well as in Derry, Belfast and Mayo.

She has been active in Environmental education for twenty years with a specific interest in the Sea and Bogland.

She has published seven books of poetry, the most recent '*Valparaiso*' arising out of her Residency on the national marine research ship. '*Playing The Octopus*' is her latest book of poems, Carcanet (2016).

She is working on a memoir of childhood, as well as essays on place.

She is a member of Aosdana and has won a number of awards for her poetry. She writes for RTE Radio and broadcasts her work regularly. She was the 2016 Arts Council Writer –in-Residence at University of Limerick.

## Two Poems by Mary O' Malley

### *Dido, Grainne, Brid*

Some believe you do not choose the myth  
it fastens to you at birth and come the day,  
you recognize it, own or deny  
as here in a room in the Fifth  
where priests were made  
and unmade she enters, Dido  
from the river, to help.

Her trick  
of getting territory not through marriage,  
but with bull's hide and mathematical brilliance  
reminds me of Brid, our spring saint,  
our virgin politician and that Grainne  
who saddled power and broke it,  
had the man, the child, the grief and did not,  
that we know of, complain.

*Reading Ireland* would like to thank Mary O' Malley and Carcanet for their kind permission to re-print "Dido, Grainne, Brid" from *Valparaiso* (Carcanet Press, 2012). To purchase this collection please visit [www.carcanet.co.uk](http://www.carcanet.co.uk)

### *Bean Sidhe*

She wants you for herself,  
and will have you, even as your lips  
rasp a line across my hips.  
When your mouth  
whispers its open invocation  
it is she who takes it in,  
the swell of womb, wound, oh...  
she will bleed me dry,  
take your seed into her, grow  
ripe. I see her cold green eyes  
narrow as you enter me. Jealous.  
I do not fear sleep in your arms:  
I can not win. She will take the words  
out of your dead mouth.

*Reading Ireland* would like to thank Mary O' Malley and Carcanet for their kind permission to re-print "Bean Sidhe" from *The Boning Hall* (Carcanet 2002). To purchase this collection please visit [www.carcanet.co.uk](http://www.carcanet.co.uk)

# “The route of Táin Bó Cúailnge in County Louth”

by Paul Gosling

Archaeology  
IRELAND  
Heritage Guide No. 69



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**The route of  
*Táin Bó Cúailnge*  
in County Louth**

## Retracing the route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in Louth

Much of the core action of the *Táin* takes place in Louth (Map 1). This is reflected in the route, which traverses the county from north to south. Entering via the Boyne Valley, Medb's forces approached Cooley (Cúailnge) along the coast. This was the homeland of Donn Cúailnge (the Brown Bull of Cooley), whom they eventually capture. Harried by the Ulster warrior Cúchulainn, they retreat through mid-Louth and exit the county via Ardee. Given that they had set out from Roscommon, one might have expected a more northerly approach to Cooley, not to mention a more direct return route. Some historians have posited that the cattle-raiders were skirting the boundaries of Ulster, which at the time may have extended to the River Boyne. Others have argued that it reflects the development of the *Táin* as a literary epic. In the earliest outlines of the story, Medb appears as queen of Tara and the cattle-raiders originate from Meath rather than Roscommon.

**River Mattock:** Medb's forces entered the modern county of Louth via the Boyne Valley, fording the River Mattock at its junction with the Devlin. The winding course of the Mattock forms a historic boundary, dividing Meath from Louth. In the *Táin*, this crossing-point is named Áth nGabra—Fork Ford—after Cúchulainn fixed a forked branch on which human heads were impaled in the middle of the stream.

**Barmeath:** The texts are vague as to the path taken by Medb through south and mid-Louth on the journey to Cooley. What can be argued is that once you cross the Mattock you are unlikely to recross it if heading north. Medb's forces probably tracked north-eastwards to Annagassan along an old routeway which is still traceable from Mellifont across the hills around Monasterboice and Fieldstown to Drumshallon and Rokeby. Very little lore survives about this part of the route but one place-name that provides a clue is Barmeath, 3.5km east of Dunleer. Though it does not feature in the text versions of the *Táin*, the OS Letters of 1836 record a local tradition that the name Barmeath is derived from 'beairne Méadhbha, i.e. Meva's Gap'.



**Annagassan:** Áth na gCasán lies at the confluence of the rivers Glyde and Dee at the point where they enter the Irish Sea (Pl. 1). Known in medieval times as Linn Duachaill, it was the site of an early monastery and its strategic location made it attractive to the Vikings in the ninth century. Linn Duachaill is not mentioned in the *Táin* but Queen Medb's forces are likely to have crossed here and tracked northwards along the coast. The Down Survey barony map (c. 1657) marks this old routeway as 'strand and highway'. It was conceivably part of the Slige Midlúachra, 'the northern road' from Tara, which passed through Louth to Emain Macha in County Armagh.

**Lurgangreen:** Much of the coastal plain east of the M1 motorway was once an extensive salt-marsh stretching from Castle Bellingham to Blackrock, so the shore would have provided a straight and firm strip of land (*lurga*) the whole way to the River Fane at Lurgangreen, just south of Blackrock. The Fane does not appear to be named in the *Táin* but Haley equates the ford at its mouth with Áth Srethe.

Above: **Map 1—The route of Queen Medb's forces in Louth was first worked out in detail by the American scholar Gene Haley and the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella and published in 1970. A number of refinements to it are presented here, principally in south Louth (Mattock to Barmeath) and Cooley (see Map 2)** (basemap: NASA 2000).



Left: **Pl. 1—Annagassan (Áth na gCasán)** was the site of an early medieval monastery and later a Viking settlement. Medb's forces are likely to have crossed here and followed the coastal highway northwards to Cooley.

Below: **Pl. 2—Castletown Mount or Cúchulainn's Castle** is an Anglo-Norman motte-castle on the western outskirts of Dundalk. In the *Táin* it features as Delga, from where Cúchulainn monitors the movements of Medb's forces. It is a multi-period site, with a prehistoric standing stone in an adjacent field and an early medieval souterrain beneath the motte.

**Bothar Maol** (Map 2) is a partially abandoned byroad connecting the Dublin road out of Dundalk with the coast road to Blackrock village. From its east-west trajectory and situation overlooking the former coastal marshlands (the Loakers), it appears to have been a medieval routeway. The residents of Bothar Maol nurture a vivid tradition that Medb followed this route to the coast on her way to Cooley.

**Dundalk Bay:** It was Haley and Kinsella who first identified Áth Lethan as being located at the mouth of the Castletown River. The tidal sand-flats of Dundalk Bay are, in effect, the Broad Ford, which allowed Medb to bypass the inland route via Toberona. The texts of the *Táin* do not mention the crossing but it is clearly inferred by local lore and has been fleshed out by antiquarian imagination: 'Meave and her host passed over the head of the tideway by the light of torches'.

**The Plain of Cooley** is designated as Réid Lócha in the *Táin*, literally the 'plain of the lakes'. The appropriateness of this label becomes apparent when one considers that there are more than twenty small lakes on the gently undulating coastal plain between Rockmarshall and Carlingford.

**Slievenaglogh:** Cúchulainn killed Medb's handmaid with a slingshot from Cuinciu as she fetched water. Cuinciu is labelled 'sliab' (a mountain) and could be an old name for Slievenaglogh (OD 310m) or the unnamed summit above (north of) Bush on the opposite side of Glenmore, both of which command the coastal plain.

**Cooley Point:** Queen Medb made her encampment or 'dúnud' at Finnabair Chúailnge, using it as a base from which to ravage the peninsula in search of the bull. Kinsella equated the camp with a fine ringfort at Rath, north-east of Bush. Haley interprets the name as 'the Fair Brow of Cooley' but there is an alternative reading of *findubair* as 'a place by white water'. This is particularly apposite, for it suggests a coastal location. Cooley Point seems to provide the best fit on the basis of its name, its location and the white water that breaks on the headland.

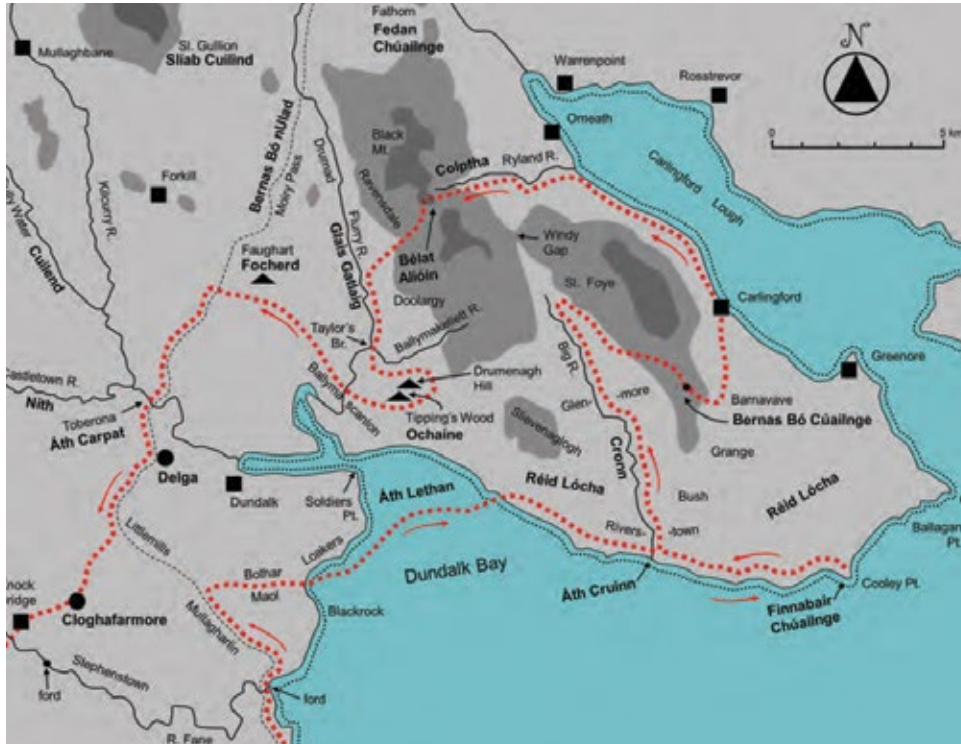
**Big River:** The most significant topographical feature encountered by Medb's forces on the plain of Cooley was undoubtedly the Big River, known in the *Táin* as the Cronn. The raiders appear to have forded this river without incident on their way into Cooley, but when they tried to recross it 'rose up against them as high as the tops of the trees' and drowned the warrior called Úalu. The fording-point (Áth Cruinn) was probably close to the river mouth, south of Riverstown.

**Barnavave:** Having failed to cross the Cronn, Medb's forces tracked up Glenmore to the river source. The story relates that 'they would have gone between its source and the mountain only that Medb would not allow it [preferring] that they should go across the mountain so that the track they made might remain there for ever as an insult to the men of Ulster. So they ... dug up the earth in front of them (to make a pass through the mountain) which was called Bernas Bó Cúailnge.' The gap is still there, right on the summit of Barnavave Mountain (Pl. 3).

**Ryland River:** Having come through the newly cut gap, the army must have descended to the shores of Carlingford Lough on or about the site of the present town of Carlingford. From here they evidently negotiated the narrow coastal strip between Slieve Foye and the lough towards Omeath. When next we hear of them they have reached the Colptha, now the Ryland or Essmore River. Here 'they heedlessly tried to cross ... but it rose in flood against them and carried off to sea a hundred of their chariot-warriors'. Like the Big River, the Ryland is prone to spates—in the 1920s it badly damaged a railway bridge at its mouth.

**Black Mountain (Clermont Cairn):** Medb's forces worked their way upriver to Clermont Pass. From there they 'went round the river ... to its source at Bélat Alióin and spent the night at Liasa Liac ... between Cúailnge and Conaille'. The name *bélat* means a 'crossway, pass, frontier' and suggests that they crossed Black Mountain via the Cadger's Pad, an upland track once used by the fishmongers to transport produce from Omeath to Dundalk. Thus they would have descended the flank of Annaverna along the small stream that flows via Ravensdale Bridge.





Left: **Map 2—The route through Cooley** is a simplification of what was in effect an occupation of the peninsula by Queen Medb's forces. The map is based on that by Haley and Kinsella in 1970 but contains a number of revisions. The ford of Áth Carpat is repositioned, the traverse of Áth Lethan is plotted in detail, Bernas Bó Cúailnge is correctly identified, and a more plausible location for Finnabair Chúailnge (Medb's encampment) is provided.

Below: **Pl. 3—Looking south from Slieve Foye** towards the summit of Bamavave Mountain (350m), with the plain of Cooley in the background. Most academic writers have equated Bernas Bó Cúailnge with the Windy Gap at the head of Glenmore, but this ignores what the OS maps, farmers and hill-walkers have known for generations: that Bamavave (Medb's Gap) is the Bernas Bó Cúailnge (Gap of the Cows of Cooley) of the *Táin*. The dramatic but entirely natural fault-line on its summit is visible only from a couple of points on the lowlands, most notably from the village of Grange (Map 2).

**Ravensdale and the River Flurry:** Medb's forces now found themselves in Glenn Gatlaig, which we know today as Ravensdale. Here a third river—the River Flurry *alias* Glais Gatlaig—rose in flood against them. Haley and Kinsella equate Glais Gatlaig with the Ballymakellett River, thus making Glenn Gatlaig the steep-sided ravine above The Lumpers public house. It is much more likely to be the Flurry, which rises near Camlough and debouches into Dundalk Bay at Ballymascanlan.

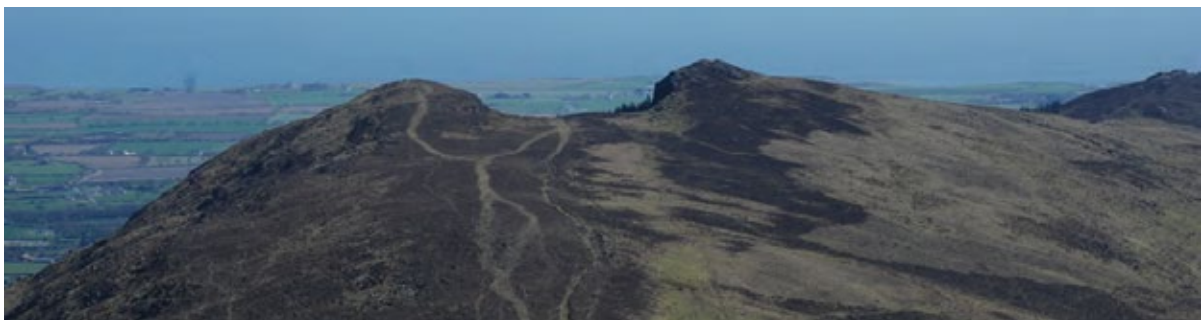
**Dubchaire Glinne Gaitt:** At one point the narrative informs us that Donn Cúailnge 'with sixty heifers ... is now in Dubchaire'. Haley and Kinsella equate it with 'Gleandurrougha', the small, secluded valley on Doolargy Mountain, at the head of which is Lissachigell.

**Drumenagh Hill and Tipping's Wood:** Having forded the Flurry, the raiders camped at Druim Féne. This is Drumenagh Hill (108m), a small but steep-sided knob of rock just south of The Lumpers public house, from whence it is best viewed. From most points of the compass, however, it is obscured by Tipping's Wood (142m),

whose wooded profile is more widely recognisable. Known as Ochaíne in the *Táin*, it witnesses the youthful Cúchulainn donning a false beard in order to draw the warrior Nadcranntail into combat before skewering him from head to anus with his spear. Medb's forces have now passed from Cúailnge into Conaille Muirthemne, Donn Cúailnge is captive, and they are commencing the homeward leg of their journey.

**Faughart:** After leaving Ochaíne, the army must have recrossed the Flurry River, probably at Ballymascanlan, for we next find them at Faughart Hill (OD 113m), a low but strategic summit in the local landscape. Crowned by an Anglo-Norman motte-castle, it is also graced by early ecclesiastical remains dedicated to St Brigid. Under the name Focherd it features no fewer than four times in the *Táin*, on each occasion as the scene of combats fought by Cúchulainn.

**Castletown Mount:** From Faughart, Medb's forces followed the Slige Midlúachra southwards and crossed the Castletown River (Níth) via Áth Carpat at Toberona (Map 2). This ford is overlooked





by Castletown Mount *alias* Dún Dealgan *alias* Delga (Pl. 2), held in local tradition to be Cúchulainn's foster-home. Continuing southwards, the cattle-raiders likely followed what is now the Greyacre Road, part of an old routeway skirting Dundalk on the west.

**Knockbridge:** Medb pitches camp at Breslach Mór in Mag Muirthemne, where many of her warriors are slaughtered by Cúchulainn. Haley and Kinsella place this battle site east of Knockbridge. Crossing the River Fane, they are confronted by the Ulster hero Óengus Mac Óenlaimhe Gaibe at Louth village (Lugmod). Single-handedly, he drives them back north to Áth da Fherta. This ford is generally placed on the Fane at Knock Bridge (Map 2) but could also have been upstream at Castlering or downstream at Sorrel Ford in Stephenstown.

**Tallanstown:** Proceeding towards Ardee, Medb's forces must have crossed the River Glyde at some point. The most likely fords are those at Tallanstown and Mapastown (Map 1). Both locations are graced with Anglo-Norman motte-castles, indicating that they were of strategic value in the late twelfth century, and probably long before.

**Ardee *alias* Áth Fhir Diad** is the scene of the great single-combat and literary set piece of the *Táin*, the four-day fight between Cúchulainn and his childhood friend Ferdia. Once again the location is not arbitrary, for Áth Fhir Diad features in the Irish annals as a place of combat where dynastic families and armies recurrently fought and died.

**Hurlstone:** After the death of Ferdia, Medb's forces retreat south-westwards from Ardee and camp at Smarmore (Imorach Smirorach). Close by, in the townland of Hurlstone, the Ulster warrior Cethern 'rushed at the pillar stone [bearing Ailill's crown] and drove his sword through it and his fist after the sword. Hence the place-name Lia Toll in Crích Rois.' The holed stone survives to this day (Pl. 4).

**White Mountain:** The last act of the *Táin* in Louth occurs at White Mountain, south-east of Smarmore. Here Finnabair, the much-abused daughter of Queen Medb, dies of shame after the battle of Glen Domain. Her name is preserved in the upland stream known as White Mountain Water (Finnabair Sléibe). Crossing into Meath, Medb's forces track south-west to the great sacred site of Tailtiu (Teltown) on the Blackwater.

## What is *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?

*Táin Bó Cúailnge* is the story of a cattle-raid reputed to have taken place during winter sometime around the time of Christ. Set in a rural, tribal and pagan Ireland, it is peopled with fearless warriors, haughty queens and kings and prize bulls (cover photo). It is often ranked alongside Ireland's greatest literary classics and frequently described as 'epic literature'. This sobriquet arises from its comparison to the heroic tales of Greece, and recent scholarship suggests that the stimulus for its composition was the translation of *Togail Troí* (Destruction of Troy) into Irish in the tenth century. The more traditional 'nativist' view sees the *Táin* as originating, fully formed, from oral tradition to be set down on vellum in the seventh century. What is clear is that *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is not unique but forms part of a small group of *tána bó* (cattle-raiding stories), themselves part of the Ulster Cycle, one of four great categories of medieval Irish literature. This cycle comprises c. 50 stories, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* being acknowledged as the central tale.

*Táin Bó Cúailnge* is preserved in a number of medieval manuscripts, of which the Book of the Dun Cow (*Lebor na hUidre*, c. 1100) and the Book of Leinster (c. 1200) are the best known. A number of versions or 'recensions' of the story exist, that known as Recension I being the richest from a topographical viewpoint. By the early 1800s *Táin Bó Cúailnge* had fallen out of popular memory but was revived at the turn of the twentieth century through a series of classic translations and retellings, of which Lady Gregory's *Cuchulainn of Muirthemne* (1902) is perhaps the most memorable.

## Tracing the route

The route of the *Táin* is often spoken about as if it was a specific path or track across Ireland. The various cycling and walking routes developed by the tourism agencies—the *Táin* Trail, the *Táin* Way—add to this impression of certainty. In reality, retracing the route of Queen Medb's forces is a somewhat illogical undertaking. For the *Táin* is a story about a cattle-raid that never took place 2,000 years ago! The medieval texts provide no map—only sequential lists of c. 70 obscure place-names, supposedly extending from Roscommon to Louth. Moreover, these lists are at variance with the main text of the story and do not cover the homeward journey, which saw Medb's forces returning to the west via Kells, Mullingar and Athlone.





But retracing the steps of a fictional army led by a mythical queen is an engrossing exercise which has stirred the minds of scholars and poets from Standish Hayes O’Grady to Thomas Kinsella (Map 3). In pursuing it, the researcher must embrace many areas of scholarship, particularly the long-neglected study of Ireland’s medieval routeways. The texts of the *Táin* are key, for those who composed the story deliberately rooted it in place-lore and plotted it through specific landscapes. Many of the set pieces were clearly inspired by particular place-names, land forms and individual monuments. By rereading the texts, examining old road networks, identifying river fords, climbing hills and taking note of community lore, it is possible to imagine in detail the footfalls of Queen Medb on her bull-quest.

## Reading and walking

*Táin Bó Cúailnge* is available in various on-line and print formats. Cecile O’Rahilly’s editions of the story as it is preserved in the Book of the Dun Cow (1976) and the Book of Leinster (1967) are regarded as the most authoritative (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies). The translations by Thomas Kinsella (Oxford University

Opposite page., top left: **Pl. 4**—This standing stone in Hurlstone, 3.5km south-west of Ardee, features in the *Táin* as Lia Toll. It measures 1.7m in height, and the centrally placed hole is c. 25cm in diameter.

Bottom right: **Pl. 5**—‘Cloghafarmore’ is an impressive prehistoric standing stone at Rathiddy, near Knockbridge (Map 2). Tradition holds that Cúchulainn died here shortly after the completion of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

This page, above: **Map 3**—The route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Standish Hayes O’Grady drew the first detailed reconstruction of the route in 1898 and it was not surpassed until 1970, when Thomas Kinsella and Gene Haley published their maps. Analysis suggests that the composers of the *Táin* plotted Queen Medb’s forces along existing road networks and across real river fords (basemap: NASA 2000).

Press, 1970) and Ciaran Carson (Penguin, 2007) are more lyrical. Gene Haley, who provided the detail for the route maps in Kinsella’s translation, has a website—‘Places in the Táin’—devoted to the place-names (<http://genehaleybc.wordpress.com>). A series of research papers on the topography of the *Táin* by Paul Gosling are being published in the *County Louth Archaeological and Historical Journal*. This guide is based on a detailed assessment of the whole route in the journal *Emania*, Vol. 22 (2015).

The *Táin* can be enjoyed not only in the armchair but also on foot or by bike or car via the Táin Trail, the Táin Way and the Táin March walking festival ([www.tainmarch.net](http://www.tainmarch.net)). The interpretative centres at Rathcroghan, Tulsk, Co. Roscommon, and Navan, Co. Armagh, provide in-depth information on two of the major sites. In Louth, *Táin*-related displays and events are hosted by the County Museum in Dundalk and by An tIonad Táin Bó Cuailnge at Stephenstown Pond, Knockbridge.

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An Chomhairle Oldhreachta  
The Heritage Council



# Paul Gosling



## **Bio**

Paul Gosling lectures full-time on built heritage in the Department of Heritage and Tourism on the Galway Campus of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. He is a professional archaeologist and a member of the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland. His research interests are focused on archaeological survey and his published work includes inventories and papers on the field monuments of Co. Galway and Clare Island, Co. Mayo, as well as the topography of a number of towns. He is currently researching the placename and route aspects of the medieval epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (The Cattle raid of Cooley). His recent publications include 'The Route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Revisited' in the journal *EMANIA: Bulletin of the Navan Research Group* (2014) and 'The Route of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in counties Roscommon and Longford' *Archaeology Ireland* Heritage Guide No. 75 (December 2016).

# Geology's Role in the Making of Places: More Than Just Stage Setting.

By Brendan McSherry, Heritage Officer with Louth County Council, Ireland



Figs 1 and 2: Portal tomb (Neolithic) and Wedge Tomb (Bronze Age) at Proleek in County Louth

## *Part One: Early History*

### **An Introduction to the Island of Ireland**

Ireland is a north-west European island lying in the North Atlantic Ocean. It is the third largest island in Europe and the 19th largest in the world. Formerly part of the British state, the island has been divided between two states since the early 1920s, when most of the country became independent and a smaller part, physically closest to Britain, remained under British rule. Relations between these states have ranged between cool and moderately hostile for most of this time, although there has been considerable rapprochement in recent years.

It is proposed that evidence from both archaeology and history shows that Ireland's East Border Region has often been a "Borderland," over thousands of years, through many different cultures and types of society. This liminality may arise partly from the area's unique and globally important geology and associated landscapes, although variations in soil types and climate are also shown to be important. At the heart of the East Border Region is the only upland area between the two largest cities on the island of Ireland. As efforts to build peace and cooperation on the island of Ireland continue, the area's shared geological heritage may have a contribution to make to peace.

### **Ireland was different**

Most of Western Europe, as well as the whole Mediterranean world, became part of the Roman Empire around 2,000 years ago but Ireland was never incorporated into the Roman State. The native Irish never developed their own State, central government, currency, markets or towns. Consequently, when Germanic barbarians invaded the empire causing the collapse of Roman civilisation in Western Europe, Irish society survived relatively unscathed.

The Roman state religion, Christianity, was brought to Ireland at around the time that the empire itself was collapsing but it was adapted to suit the rural Irish culture. It brought literacy to Ireland, based on the Latin alphabet, initially written as "Ogham" on standing stones and then as manuscripts on calf skin. The Christian church became focussed on rural monasteries rather than the urban centres that remained central to religious administration in Mainland Europe (as there were no such urban centres in Ireland). The monasteries came to fulfil many but not all of the functions of towns in Romanised Europe. These monasteries became the centre of not just religion but education, academic learning and even the economy in Ireland.

While the Irish church remained orthodox in religious practice, it was effectively separate from the church of the former Roman Empire and is sometimes known as the 'Celtic church' as it spread to other lands where people spoke Celtic languages, as well as into northern England.



Fig 3: High Cross and Round Tower at Monasterboice (Tentative World Heritage Site), County Louth.

Many of these monasteries are now being proposed as World Heritage Sites, such as Monasterboice in my county of Louth. Monks from Irish monasteries were involved in conserving the Roman religion, literature and culture and then returning it to Britain and mainland Europe. This period is known as Ireland's Golden Era and Ireland's contribution to the conservation and restoration of Europe's lost culture led to one of the monasteries being referred to as 'the Light of the World'. Sadly this cultural flowering was destroyed by raiding pirates from Scandinavia, the Vikings, who also invaded many other parts of northern and even southern Italy.

### **An Táin Bó Cúailnge – a 'Window on the Iron Age'?**

Christianity brought literacy to Ireland, in the native Irish language, as well as in Latin. Medieval Christian monks wrote down ancient oral stories that had already been passed down by word of mouth for centuries. The most famous of these stories 'An Táin Bo Cúailnge' is a story about cattle-raiding. Most of the action of the story takes place in County Louth, which is why we have chosen for ourselves the epithet 'Land of Legends'. Louth was, and remains, a borderland. Most of the action of the Táin takes place in my county, as an attacking force arrives from the south-west and is eventually driven off by an army from the northern province of the country.

In the native Irish culture, wealth was reckoned in cattle and slaves, not coins. Instead of bank robberies or territorial wars, tribes and kingdoms robbed each other's cattle (and children to make into slaves), in great Cattle-raids. Archaeology has shown that people lived in round wooden houses in round wooden enclosures in which cattle could be kept safe from robbers and wolves. The internal space in these forts is known as a 'lios', while the circular enclosure is known as a 'ring-fort' in English or a 'ráth' in Irish. Ring-forts built of stone are known as 'caisil' in Irish or Cashels in English. It is estimated that there are more than 60,000 of the ring-forts surviving in the Irish countryside today.

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Fig 4: Viking re-enactors from Denmark at the Annagassan Viking Festival, Annagassan, County Louth, Ireland.

In the story of the Cattle Raid of Cooley, a Queen of one province desires to steal the great bull of the Northern province of Ulster. The story follows their exploits in trying to steal the bull, while a young champion of Ulster Cú Chulainn, tries to defend it single-handedly as his people have been struck down by a magical curse.

Ireland is unique in Western Europe in that the landscape is scattered with medieval (as well as much older) monuments, in some places it has been said that we have a mediaeval landscape. This remarkable survival can be put down to the relative absence of arable farming, especially ploughing. Irish farming has been long dominated by cattle farming, largely because this suits the climate and also because of the disturbed nature of society in the past, with frequent wars and famines and due to the relatively low population density.

### European High Medieval Culture Colonises Ireland

European civilisation picked up again some time before the year 1000, with the development of the high medieval culture. This was a literate, Christian civilization, the heartland of which was among the Germanic tribes which had conquered north-western parts of the former Roman Empire. The culture depended very much upon the Roman church for its legitimacy and authority, highlighted when the Pope, the head bishop of the Roman Church, crowned the Germanic prince, later known as Karl der Grosse or Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor at a religious service on Christmas Day 800 AD. Viking invaders of northern France, known as



Figs 5 and 6: Soil map of Ireland, with the heavy line separating the Ocean west from the drier south and east and also the area of English and European settlement in the Middle Ages.

the Northman, became the Christian Normans, a people distinguished by their pious religiosity and by their propensity for violent conquest and occupation of land, where they salved their consciences by building churches and abbeys. This aggressive Christian culture was spread from France to England in 1066. A century later English and mainland European people invaded and occupied Ireland.

### Native Culture Versus 'European': the Role of Climate

The highly organised European Christian culture invaded Ireland in the period 1169 to 1171, with the full support of and at the behest of the Pope, rapidly conquered most of the island. At one point these Anglo-Norman invaders (English-born descendents of French-speaking Vikings) controlled around two thirds of the island but they were never able to fully conquer it, perhaps for ecological and climatic reasons. Another reason the medieval English (European) culture was unable to conquer the whole of Ireland may be because the English agricultural economy was adapted to northern mainland Europe (and southern and eastern England). The main grain was wheat, with barley and rye also playing roles.



Fig 7: The English fortress of Castle Roche on the borderland of County Louth, facing the natives

In contrast, the native culture relied more on oats than wheat. However, it was primarily a dairying culture, with much of the people's food being derived from cattle and their milk. People drank milk, sometimes with cattle blood mixed in with it, as well as large quantities of curds, yogurt and cheese, both hard and soft. This may be a case of adaptation by the native Irish culture to a cooler, wetter climate, which proved less amenable to the standard European agricultural economy. The retreat of English (European) culture and the advance of native Irish culture after the mid 1300s may have been due in part to the climatic deterioration.

In the fourteenth century there was a major climatic deterioration, which contributed to famine and plague across Europe, accompanied by major population decreases. In the 1300s, 1400s and 1500s the area controlled by the English (mainland European) civilisation in Ireland retreated to a small area on the east coast. Traditional native culture recovered lost ground and became dominant in most of the north and west of the country.

The native Irish culture re-established control of most of the country, so that in the late 1500s, only a small area on the east coast (the area closest to England) remained under English control. Outside this minor English colony the descendants of the Norman invaders came to be culturally indistinguishable from the native Irish.

The English built a fence around the area they controlled, a few counties around the capital Dublin. The area within this came to be known as 'The Pale'. My area, county Louth, was on the northern edge of this colonial area and is rich in associated remains, such as castles and walled towns. The English controlled area was limited to the north by the mountains of south Ulster (our upland area) and the Drumlins belt to the north-west.

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This was a troubled border, plagued by constant warfare. Castleroché is an excellent example of fortress built by the English on this border between the 'english' and 'irish' parts of Ireland, looking out to the north and west from which Irish attacks would come. It also acted as a base for English attacks into the native-ruled areas to the north-west. It is very similar to another castle built by the same family in north-west England, facing towards and defending settled English land from the similarly unconquered Celtic inhabitants of Wales.

Around 1600, as the English were imitating the Spanish conquest of the Americas by establishing their colonies in Virginia (in what is now the USA), they were also conquering Ireland. Ultimately they conquered the most hostile, most Irish part of Ireland, Ulster, beginning the 'modern' period in Irish history. Following many years' bitter fighting, genocide and starvation, the most northerly and westerly parts of Ireland were finally conquered and the native kings fled abroad. The English brought in colonists from Britain, many of whom came from Scotland, which climatologically is more like Ireland than is most of England, to develop colonies in the most Northerly province of Ulster and the descendants of these people have dominated the Northern Province for the past 400 years. This has created a major cultural divide between Ulster and the rest of the country, formalised by a political, 'international' border for 90 years.

## ***PART TWO - A Geological Border?***

### **Ulster is different**

The northernmost part of Ireland was traditionally 'different' from the rest of the island. For nearly a century it has been in a different State from the rest of the country but there appear, from the archaeological evidence, to have been differences between the north and the rest of the country for thousands of years.

This is evident in the distribution of monuments built by the earliest farmers (Neolithic) and up into the Bronze Age. Part of the difference might be because Ulster is colder or wetter, or because it is closer to Britain (Scotland), but part of the difference is perhaps due to the physical separation between Ulster and the rest of Ireland.



Fig 8: Distribution of court tombs in Ireland



Fig 9: Distribution of passage tombs in Ireland

In the East Border Region, three contiguous upland areas obstruct movement between the North and the rest of the country. Ancient routeways had to pass through narrow gaps in the low but steep hills. Even today the rail and the new road links wind their way through narrow passes. This area is known as 'the Gap of the North.'

However, the major obstacle separating Ulster from the rest of Ireland is the 'Drumlin Belt'. Drumlins are low rounded hills of clay created under the Ice Sheet. The word is derived from the Irish language word for a small ridge, 'Droimnín.' These low, clay hills impede movement of both water and people. Between the ridges wetlands and lakes form. For centuries these acted as a defence in depth and made moving across the countryside, especially in wet winters, very difficult. People who live within the Drumlin Belt are often regarded as insular by other Irish people.

In the Middle Ages colonists from England and Mainland Europe retained control of the best grain-growing farmland in the east and south-east of the country. The English crown retained direct political control only of the Pale an area based on Dublin, the centre of colonial rule in

Ireland and a few counties around it. This English controlled area ran up to the boundaries of Ulster, where it ended. Along the line of the Pale a wooden fence was erected on top of an earthen embankment. Towns along the line of the Pale were fortified and walled, as were other 'English' towns in Ireland (the native Irish culture, focussed as it was on cattle as material wealth, never developed a need for fixed, permanent markets and their attendant towns). So during the middle Ages, we have a defended boundary between the 'English' part of Ireland, to the south, and the Irish part, to the North. Castles, forts, walled towns guarded the boundary (the Pale), with low mountains towering over the plain.

All this changed in the seventeenth century with the English conquest and colonisation of the northern part of Ireland. From being the most Gaelic, Irish part of Ireland, the North, Ulster became the most Culturally English or British part of Ireland. It also became the only province of Ireland in which a majority of the population supported the separatist, Protestant, reformed Christian churches. In the rest of Ireland a majority of the population remained Roman Catholic. With the loss of the Irish language in the nineteenth century, the conflict and rivalry in Ireland came, increasingly to be seen as Roman Catholic Irish versus Protestant Irish, rather than culturally Irish (Gaelic) versus culturally English. Almost all the land was owned by rich landlords, descendants of English or other 'British' colonists. The 'native Irish' were poor and marginalised, landless peasants dependent upon the potato to enable them to feed themselves and their family, while most agricultural produce was sold to raise cash to pay rent to the landlords.

The introduction of the potato wrought great changes in Irish society. It permitted a huge growth in the population of landless peasants, followed by a collapse in population in the mid-nineteenth century when potato blight destroyed the crop. This led to the development of several typical cultural features of nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland, such as large scale emigration, deep Roman Catholic religiosity among the peasantry, land reform and owner-occupation of (small) farms, a deep tie to the ownership of land, sectarian rivalry, hatred of and violent resistance to British imperial rule.

## *Part Three – the Geology of the Carlingford Lough Region*

### **Introduction**

Carlingford Lough is an inlet of the sea on the east coast of Ireland, approximately half-way between the two state capitals (Dublin and Belfast). This inlet of the sea is almost surrounded by uplands, including the highest mountain in the northern half of Ireland, Slieve Donard (850m), which makes it very scenic and popular with walkers and other tourists, from both jurisdictions. Historically, access through these uplands was difficult, with much traffic proceeding by river (later canal) and by sea, rather than overland. The presence of this upland area is, to some degree, responsible for the separation of Ulster, to the north, from the rest of Ireland, to the south. The border between the two states runs through the lough itself and through and between the upland areas. These uplands are formed by four igneous plutons, which are described below.



Fig. 10: Looking down the Narrow water towards Carlingford Lough

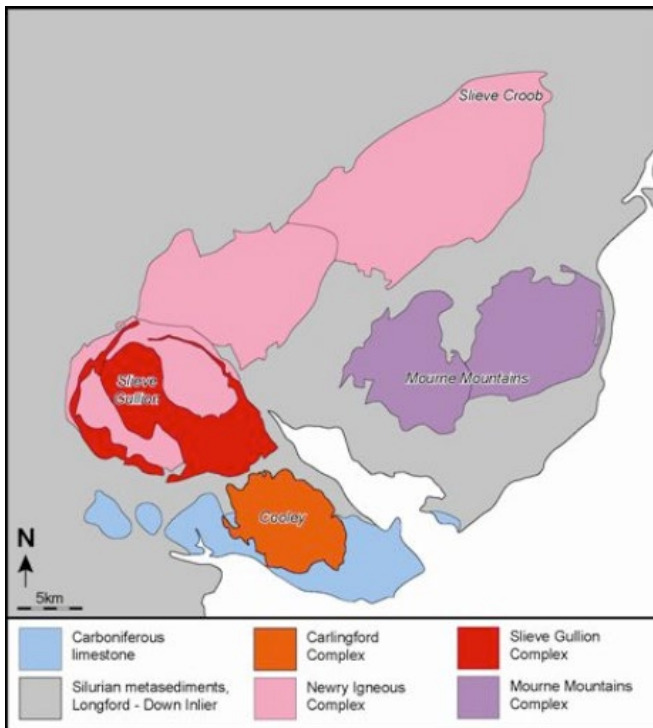


Fig. 11: Geolical sketch map of the area

### **The Newry Granite**

The Newry Granite is a Caledonian intrusion, some 400 million years old. It was intruded, at depth, during the Caledonian orogeny, related to the closing of the Iapetus Ocean as the ocean floor was subducted, i.e. at a destructive plate margin. It shows the standard Caledonian trend North-north-east to south-south-west. It has three major plutons. The north-easterly one forms Slieve Croob. The youngest and most south-south-easterly pluton remained an area of weakness and was intruded again during the Palaeogene, to form the Ring of Gullion.

### **The Ring of Gullion**

The other three upland areas in our region were formed at a constructive plate margin, as the North Atlantic opened during the early Palaeogene. Elsewhere in the north of Ireland at this time basalts pooled and cooled slowly forming vertical contraction joints that give rise to spectacular basalt columns. Similar columns occur across the sea in western Scotland. Legend explains these as the remaining foundations of a road constructed between Ireland and Scotland by ancient giants. The occurrence on the north Antrim coast is known as the Giant's Causeway and is a World Heritage Site.

In the south of County Armagh is found the Ring of Gullion, one of the earliest Ring Dyke Complexes to be scientifically studied. It consists of part of the base of a giant volcano, surrounded





Fig. 12: The Ring of Gullion

by a ring dyke, a circular intrusion along lines of weakness created by subsidence caused by the weights of the volcano.

### The Cooley Peninsula

Part of the Ring of Gullion crosses the political border into County Louth and onto the Cooley Peninsula. The geological features of the Cooley Peninsula are not as clear and straightforward as the Ring of Gullion. There is a variety of intrusive and metamorphic rocks. The most interesting rock type found in this area is gabbro, which gives rise to very rugged and crinkly, dark coloured mountains. There are also granite, basalts and intrusive cone sheets and their associated metamorphic rocks, such as hornfelsed shales and metamorphosed limestone, or 'skarn'.

### The Mourne granites

The Mourne Mountains have also been studied for more than a century and their method of emplacement has been the subject of scientific controversy many times. It is now recognised that there were five major intrusive episodes. The Mournes were the first area where the now standard system for naming granites was developed.

### Glacial traces

This area has been heavily glaciated and still shows the signs of this. Several of the higher mountains have corries or cwms (both Celtic words). There are also interesting drift sediments deriving from the glaciation or its ending. One of the major features of the border area is



Fig. 13: Distribution of glacial landforms



Fig. 14: Traditional provinces (regional kingdoms)

drumlins (also an Irish word). These are rounded, elongated ridges of glacially-eroded material, moulded and aligned by the passage of ice over the sediment that it had eroded as it passed over the countryside.

The channel that separates county Down to the east from counties Armagh and Louth to the west is also glacial in origin. It was formed as the outflow from a very much larger glacial Lough Neagh. Glacial meltwater ponded in this large lake and was unable to flow north, along the current route of the River Bann, by the presence of ice to the north. The water level in the lake would have risen until it was high enough for water to run southwards from Lough Neagh and into what is now Carlingford Lough. This glacial meltwater channel has been used as a major transportation route for centuries, including by an early canal built in the eighteenth century. The Dublin-Belfast railway runs along the same route.

## Part Four – Reintegrating the People and the Landscape

### War and Partition and more war.

During and after the First World War (1914 to 1918) the Irish rose in arms against British rule. In an effort to end this Irish War of Independence, the British Empire offered Ireland ‘Home Rule’ on the basis of two states, one for six counties in the North-East and one for the rest of the country. This was accepted by Pro-British (Protestant) elements in the North but not by the majority of people in the country. ‘Northern Ireland’ came into being in June 1921. The Irish separatists (Nationalists, Republicans) continued fighting the British forces and, following a truce, were offered not full independence as a Republic but the same ‘Dominion’ status as Canada, Australia or New Zealand, full self-rule within the British Empire, which a majority accepted. This acceptance of a status short of full independence as a republic led to a Civil War among Irish republicans. This newly independent Dominion was called the Irish Free State and came into being on 6th December 1922. The (then) recently-formed ‘Northern Ireland’ was permitted to opt out of the Irish Free State, which it promptly did. This meant that our region was partitioned by an international boundary.

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Figs 15, 16, 17: British military fortification on the hilltops of South Armagh (1970s to early 2000s) Increasing cooperation across the Border

Following Partition this ancient internal boundary became a customs boundary. The border caused major economic dislocation and different rates of taxation on goods has made smuggling a lucrative business, even today, where it concentrates on diesel (cheaper in the south than the north) and on tobacco and alcohol (cheaper in the north). Smuggling was especially prevalent during the Second World War (1939 to 1945), when the Irish state was neutral. Because of the opposition to its existence by the majority of Irish people and of the Irish government it also became a defended and militarised border. The British army continued to maintain a garrison in the North and to deploy armed force on the Border during the regular campaigns by the guerrilla forces of the Irish Republican Army. In the late 1960s, inspired by the US Civil Rights movement, Irish nationalist elements in Northern Ireland began campaigning for political reform. A suspicious and paranoid Northern Ireland regional government, and later the British government, sought to suppress the reform movement, often violently. This led eventually to a campaign of armed resistance in the form of a guerrilla war, between the forces of the British state and Irish Republican groupings. This period of insurrection is usually known as 'The Troubles' and lasted from 1969 to 1994. The border area, where the border snaked through hills and mountains was hotly contested. Geology students and tourists stopped visiting it. The area was not a good place to go wandering about. The Troubles led to a period of serious economic stagnation for both sides of the Border.

### **Increasing Cooperation across the Border**

In 1994 the leading Irish Republican guerrilla organisation, the IRA, declared a ceasefire. After some time, negotiations were opened with the British, with pro-British elements in the North and with the Irish government. These resulted in a peace settlement known as the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Ever since then the authorities on either side of the border have been trying to undo the damage caused by war and partition and more war and to develop their areas both socially and economically.

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### **Towards a cross-border Geopark**

We see great benefit in developing a regional, cross-border Geotourism project. We believe that ours is one of the most scenic and attractive areas in Ireland and that the reason its tourism potential has not been achieved is due to the conflict and partition. My own council and our neighbours to the North have signed an internationally recognised agreement to cooperate and have also developed a Twin City Strategy for the two administrative centres. This included a proposal for a cross-border or trans-frontier National Park. Local landowners are very anxious about this proposal and see it as the government trying to take over control of their land. It might instead be easier, less controversial and just as effective to develop a cross-border tourism project highlighting the area's unique geology and attractive landscapes. If we can overcome the distrust of the local farmers, we might be able to obtain their support to apply for European and indeed Global Geopark status. The Councils either side of the Border are committed to cooperating with one another for mutual benefit. They also cooperate with locally-based voluntary bodies and with national agencies like the two geological surveys and tourism agencies to drive the area's economic development. We have applied for and are hoping to obtain European Union funding to try to develop a cross-border Geotourism project and, if local people want it, to apply for Geopark status.

Our area is very scenic, very interesting and very attractive. It is also much more accessible than most of the other coastal upland areas in Ireland. It lies between and roughly equidistant from the two capitals in Ireland. Around three million people live within an hour's drive of our area, almost half the population of Ireland.

We think we can use geo-tourism and wider landscape tourism to increase the number of people visiting, staying in and spending money in our area. We hope to obtain EU funding to improve visitor facilities and infrastructure, such as car parks and signage, to educate local people about geology, to run events and to promote the area generally.

The border in Ireland runs through our area, i.e. it is a borderland, because of its hills and sea lough and so, ultimately, because of its geology. It has suffered economically and socially because of this border. It is also a beautiful and interesting place, again because of its geology. We hope to take the geology and the landscape of our area and turn it from being a problem to being our greatest resource for the economic development of our new cross-border region.

# Brenden McSherry



## Bio

Brendan McSherry is the county heritage officer with Louth County Council. Brendan grew up in county Down (the next county 'up'), in an area rich in abandoned quarries and mines, hills, forests, rocky crags and bird-dark seashores, inspiring a lifelong interest in the relationship of people and wildlife to the rocks that lie unseen below their feet.

Graduating in geology, Brendan did a management course and then went off to work in the oil industry. After four years spent working in Ireland, the UK, Spain, Denmark, Morocco, Chad, Gabon and the Congo, Brendan decided to quit the oil industry and become an 'environmentalist'. From 1990 until 2002 Brendan worked in the voluntary sector, in nature conservation, environmental and community development charities (for pay though).

Brendan became the first heritage officer with South Tipperary County Council, then moved on to Kerry, finally ending up in Louth. He now lives close to Carlingford, looking across the eponymous lough, to where his beloved Mountains of Mourne, the magical background to his childhood wanderings, 'Sweep down to the Sea'. Behind his house are the Carlingford or Cooley mountains beyond which is Britain's border in Ireland.

# “A Mayfly”

by Paul Muldoon



Photo copyright Bobbie Hanvey

A mayfly taking off from a spike of mullein  
would blunder into Deichtine’s mouth to become Cú Chulainn,  
Cú Chulainn who had it within him to steer clear  
of a battlefield on the shaft of his own spear,  
his own spear from which he managed to augur  
the fate of that part-time cataloguer,  
that cataloguer who might yet transcend the crush  
as its own tumult transcends the thrush,  
the thrush that’s known to have tipped off avalanches  
from the larch’s lowest branches,  
the lowest branches of the larch  
that model themselves after a triumphal arch,  
a triumphal arch made of the femora  
of a woman who’s even now filed under *Ephemera*.

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*Reading Ireland* would like to thank Paul Muldoon, Faber and Faber Limited and Farrar, Straus and Giroux for their kind permission to re-print “A Mayfly” from *Maggot* by Paul Muldoon (Faber and Faber 2010), Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2010).

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# Paul Muldoon



Photo copyright Bobbie Hanvey

## Bio

Paul Muldoon was born in County Armagh in Northern Ireland, in 1951. His first collection, *New Weather* (1973), was published by Faber and Faber when he was in his early twenties. Muldoon's collection, *The Annals of Chile* (1994), won the T.S. Eliot Prize in 1994. His 2002 collection *Moy, Sand and Gravel*, won both the Griffin and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2003. His most recent collection, *Selected Poems 1968-2014*, was published in 2016 by Faber and Faber and Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

From 1999-2004 Muldoon was the Oxford Professor of Poetry and he has been the Poetry Editor at *The New Yorker* since 2007. Currently he is The Howard G. B. Clarke '21 Professor in the Humanities at Princeton.

For more information on Muldoon's work visit [www.paulmuldoon.net](http://www.paulmuldoon.net)

# Close Reading of “A Mayfly”

by Adam Wyeth

This poem comes from Muldoon’s 2010 collection, *Maggot*. The poem is a sonnet, using rhyming couplets, but Muldoon also adds his own constraint. At the end of each couplet, each end-word is repeated and begins the following couplet, creating a kind of relay device. This mirrors the subject of the poem. Repetition and linking similar sounding words has become a popular trait of Muldoon’s. The couplets in this poem imply an erotic coupling, while the pattern and partnering of repeated words suggests that like is all about relationship, repetition and replication.

The word ‘mayfly’ comes from ‘*Ephemera*’ (because of its short-lived life), which originally comes from the Greek, ‘*ephemeros*’ that means ‘lasting only a day.’ These key words, which open and close the poem, suggest how everything is connected and related. End-rhymes and internal rhymes with word-repetition weave their way through the body of the poem like a DNA spiral.

The first part of the poem refers to the conception of Cú Chulainn, Celtic mythology’s most famous and celebrated hero in Ireland. A teenage champion, he is often referred to as ‘the Irish Achilles’ for his short but glorious life. Various stories tell of his birth, death and other adventures. He is the central character of the epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, in which he single-handedly defends the Ulaid against an invasion launched by Queen Medbh of Connacht. When Cú Chulainn becomes enraged in battle, he undergoes a ‘*ríastra*’ or ‘distortion,’ a kind of battle-frenzy which transforms him into an unrecognizable monster who knows neither friend nor foe, similar to The Incredible Hulk.

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The most familiar version of Deichtine’s conception of Cú Chulainn is that, while grieving the loss of a foster-son, she drinks some water from which a tiny mayfly passes into her mouth; the creature then becomes Cú Chulainn. Although she was married to Sulatam, the sun-god Lugh is considered to be his father. Robert Graves notes in *The White Goddess* that Lugh was incarnate in Cú Chulainn, flying into Deichtine’s mouth in the form of a mayfly. This idea is picked up in the third line when Cú Chulainn ‘had it within him,’ suggesting both the warrior spirit of Lugh, and also his magical powers of prophesy. Lugh was king of the Tuatha Dé Danann and led them into their second battle, called *Magh Tuiredh* or *Moytura*, a major saga text of the mythological cycle.

Cú Chulainn was almost undefeatable in battle due to the magical ‘shaft of his own spear’ which sang for the blood of his enemies. (Lugh’s magical weapon was also a spear). The spear is a symbol of inspiration and love in poetry, similar to the cupid’s arrow. John Keats said, writing of his muse and love, Fanny Brawne: ‘...everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.’



The poem's contrast of mythology (Cú Chulainn's magical conception) and fact ('the femora / of a woman...filed under *Ephemera*') touches on Cú Chulainn's mythopoeia, exploring the idea of whether mythology is built out of fact or vice versa. Was Cú Chulainn once a living man who gathered the attributes of gods over time, or was he an ancient deity like Lugh, stripped of some of his divinity to make him more akin to human worshippers?

The word 'augur' means a sign or omen that something is about to happen. Originally, in the classical world it referred to a religious official whose main role was to interpret the will of the gods by studying the flight of birds; druids also divined the future this way. 'Augur' also brings to mind Shakespeare's most famous protagonist, *Hamlet*. (Again, both characters die young and by the sword). In the final act, Hamlet decides to 'defy augury,' finally taking action by sword-fighting Laertes, knowing 'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow...' In the previous scene Hamlet suggests an augury when he says, 'The cat will mew and the dog will have his day.' This, by chance, has resonance to Cú Chulainn's name. As a young child Cú Chulainn first displayed his strength after slaying a fierce guard-dog in self-defence who was owned by Cullan. In apology to the owner, he promised to guard his gate until the dog was replaced, thus earning the name, Cú Chulainn, meaning 'Cullan's Hound' in Irish.

While 'fate' is generally referred to as 'destiny' or 'chance,' its initial meaning comes from 'the Fates'(in Greek and Roman mythology), the three goddesses who presided over the birth and life of humans. Celtic gods and goddesses had a similar function. The People of Sídh (pronounced 'shee') from early Irish Celtic mythology, were later referred to as 'the fair people,' and sometimes called 'fey' after 'the Fates.'

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Cú Chulainn was a wild warrior and a great lover. His heart (or 'the shaft of his own spear'), often led him into sticky situations. Like the mayfly that lives to re-produce, Cú Chulainn's life is fast-paced and passionate. The druid Cathbadh prophesized that Cú Chulainn's life would be short-lived, but also that his name would live on in everyone's mouth (as the mayfly 'would blunder into Deichtine's mouth').

The 'cataloguer' is the record keeper. In Ireland the cataloguers were the learned poets, the highest ranking of which were called *Ollúna* (meaning 'chief poets.' In modern Ireland *Ollamh* [singular] now refers to a professor in Ireland). In ancient Ireland, *Olluná* were walking encyclopedias, learned in history, chronology, antiquities and the genealogies of Ireland. As the closest person to the king, *Olluná* knew all the rights, etiquette, duties and tributes of the kings of Ireland. Through the 'cataloguer,' then, even the mayfly 'transcends the crush' of time. (In more recent history, Cú Chulainn became the symbol of Irish Republicanism. A bronze sculpture of the dying champion stands in the Dublin General Post Office, commemorating the Easter rising of 1916).

Trailing behind the initial definition of 'crush' is its connotation of an intense infatuation, picking up again on Cú Chulainn's promiscuity and short-life. As with any poem, when reading closely one must pay particular attention to the etymology of words, but with

Muldoon we must be constantly on our toes. These things are not done for mere show; every word serves the purpose of the poem. The word 'crush' comes from Old French via Middle English, meaning 'gnash teeth,' an oblique reference here to Cú Chulainn's battle-frenzy. During his monstrous transformation, Cú Chulainn is described as having gnashing teeth that showered sparks.

Keeping in mind the erotic undertone of the piece, we can see that in fact the whole poem is an analogy of reproduction and the continuation of life. The 'mayfly' then becomes a seed, or more precisely, a 'sperm' ejaculated ('taking off') from the phallic 'spike' and feminine 'mullein' (a type of flower) and entering the womb ('mouth'), Deichtine. The word 'shaft' is full of erotic overtones, as is 'tumult,' carrying the connotations of climax. (It also has the same root meaning as tumescent from *tumere*, 'to swell'). Behind the analogy's veil, a real birth is being suggested; picking up on an incestuous conception; and the question of whether Cú Chulainn came from history or mythology.

The 'thrush,' as a divine messenger in Celtic mythology, picks up on 'augur.' The 'thrush' may also refer to the start of the story about Cú Chulainn's birth, where a flock of birds descends on Emain Macha and eats all the grass. Deichtine and the Ulstermen chase after the birds, which eventually leads to Cú Chulainn's magical conception. ("Tipped off" also becomes a pun on the word 'tip-off'; receiving a piece of confidential information, alluding to the auguries of birds).

Continuing the symbolism of reproduction, 'the larch's lowest branches' symbolize the nether regions. (The 'branches' also pick up on the family tree, the poet being 'the cataloguer' of genealogy). The larch is essentially a mountain tree. The 'lowest branches' meet together a few years after planting: 'that model themselves after a triumphal arch.' As well as its sexual suggestion, 'arch' also means someone who is self-consciously teasing and playful, a nod here to Muldoon's own mischievous style.

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The word 'arch' also conjures the entrance to the underworld in Celtic mythology. Here, we pick up again on The People of Sídh. The underworld was often thought to be in the Sídh-mounds, or fairy-forts, which archeologically are some of the world's oldest burial chambers. The largest and best preserved lies in Newgrange, County Meath, the entrance of which is a square archway that is elaborately ornamented with a spiral pattern. As well as the mounds containing the bodies of the deceased, they also housed objects (*Ephemera*). In some versions of mythology, Newgrange is where Cú Chulainn was conceived. Etymologically, the word 'arch' comes from the word 'bow,' which relates to 'femora,' meaning the bone of the thigh or upper hind limb.

This 'model' of the 'femora' echoes another ancient Irish custom. Evidence shows that the ancient Celts presented models of diseased limbs to deities at various healing shrines, with the idea that the gods and goddesses would heal the limbs presented. This diseased limb ('femora') picks up on an earlier word 'thrush.' As well as 'thrush' meaning a songbird it is also a common infection that occurs in the female genital area. In another version of Cú Chulainn's birth, Deichtine's brother, Conchobar Mac Nessa (the amorous King of the *Uliad*

who had several wives), is said to be the father of Cú Chulainn after an incestuous union, a further allusion to the mythos of *Hamlet*, which is concerned with incest.

'Filed' (a pun on *file* the Irish for poet), etymologically comes from Middle English, a verb meaning 'to string documents on a thread,' relating again to 'the cataloguer' and to the DNA thread carrying genetic information.

Here, *Ephemera* is used in its librarian definition: a class of collectable items not originally intended to last for more than a short term, such as tickets, posters, flyers and cards. These items are often kept as mementoes. This relates to poetry and to the poet who collects scraps of words, notes down odd lines from day to day, then forms them into memorable lines: poems. In this way *Ephemera*, the blueprint or seed lives on. Like the mayfly that lives to reproduce and the promiscuous Cú Chulainn, everything is about reproduction in this poem, mirroring the natural world.

As well as love, reproduction and the mythological allusions, this poem is about causality; how a tiny mayfly becomes the greatest Irish mythological champion, Cú Chulainn. How his spear can augur great battles. How birds can predict events. How a thrush can cause avalanches. How the larch becomes a triumphal arch. How *Ephemera* is catalogued in a library. And so on.

Musically, the poem is full of nuanced sounds, echoing the causality motif. The poem begins with the AY sound ('A Mayfly taking'); 'mayfly' and 'mullein' alliterate at the beginning and end of the first line. The short UN sound of 'mullein' is echoed in the onomatopoeic 'blunder' (a relation of the word 'blind'; 'love is blind'). The beginning vowel and consonance sound of 'Deichtine' picks up on 'taking' from the first line. The IN sound at the end of Deichtine also echoes with the IN sound of 'mullein,' bringing then back before they fade into 'Cú Chulainn.' The short U sound in 'blunder' is echoed through 'become' and 'Cú Chulainn' – not to mention the slant-rhyming couplet of 'mullein' and 'Cú Chulainn.' All these sound-echoes already and we are only two lines into the poem. The commas, coming at the end of every second line, help break up the rhythm and transfer the weight of words as they are carried into the next line.

At the nucleus of this poem is the mystery of where small things may lead. Every poem is 'A Mayfly,' something that may fly to become something great in people's mind or become lost through the chilly annals of time. Like Cú Chulainn, the poem is conceived from that initial 'mayfly' or seed of an idea – a seed that may take off within writers' and readers' imaginations in years to come. In the words of Wallace Stevens: 'Things are because of interrelations or interactions.' This poem, like all good poems, is about poetry itself. Like the suggestion of Cú Chulainn's incestuous making, metaphor also sleeps around; having to know everything in the biblical sense, or in this case the Celtic mythological one.

*Reading Ireland* would like to thank Adam Wyeth and Salmon Poetry for their permission to include the above extract from *The Hidden World of Poetry: Unravelling Celtic Poetry in Contemporary Irish Poetry*. County Clare, Ireland: Salmon Poetry, 2013.

# Cuchulain Comforted

By W. B. Yeats

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man  
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;  
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head  
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree  
As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority  
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall  
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three

Came creeping up because the man was still.  
And thereupon that linen-carrier said  
'Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

'Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;  
Mainly because of what we only know  
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

'We thread the needles' eyes and all we do  
All must together do.' That done, the man  
Took up the nearest and began to sew.

'Now we shall sing and sing the best we can  
But first you must be told our character:  
Convicted cowards all by kindred slain

'Or driven from home and left to die in fear.'  
They sang but had nor human notes nor words,  
Though all was done in common as before,

They had changed their throats and had the throats  
of birds.

# Close Reading of “Cuchulain Comforted”

by Adrienne Leavy

Throughout his life the mythological Irish hero Cuchulain occupied a central place in Yeats’s imagination. Drawing on the mythology of the Ulster cycle, and inspired in part by the stories in Standish O’ Grady’s three-volume *History of Ireland* (1878-1881) and Lady Gregory’s translation, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), Yeats devoted much of his aesthetic energies to exploring the symbolic importance of Cuchulain to both himself and the Irish nationalist movement. His poetic engagement with this figure began early in his career with “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea,” from *The Rose* (1893), and continued literally up to the end of his life when he wrote “Cuchulain Comforted.”

In addition to poetry, Yeats also wrote five plays exploring various incidents from the life of Cuchulain. These ranged from the symbolist dramas *On Baile’s Strand* (1904) and *The Golden Helmet* (1908) to the *Noh influenced At the Hawk’s Well* (1916) and *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1917), and culminated with *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), written in the last months of 1938 when Yeats was himself dying. Given its dramatic narrative, “Cuchulain Comforted” can in some respects be read as a coda or a sequel to Yeats’s final Cuchulain play. Yeats himself confirms this view. In a letter from the poet to Edith Shackleton dated January 1st 1939, Yeats wrote: “I think my play is strange and the most striking I have written for some years. I am making a prose sketch for a poem – a kind of sequel – strange too, something new.” References to Cuchulain occur throughout both his poetry and dramatic work. For example, in “The Circus Animal’s Desertion,” the lines “And when the Fool and the Blind Man stole the bread/ Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea,” refer to the play *On Baile’s Stand* wherein Cuchulain, made mad by having unwittingly killed his son, fights the sea in a frenzy. With this last Cuchulain poem Yeats elaborated on the de-romanticized character he created in *The Death of Cuchulain*.

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Written in early January 1939, just two weeks before Yeats died on January 28th, “Cuchulain Comforted” is the ultimate example of just how deeply Yeats had internalized this archetypal figure. The poem contemplates the fate of the mythological hero in the afterlife, meditating on “wounds and blood,” yet the poem is also an elegy for the poet himself who identifies with the hero’s transition to the afterlife. Poetic self-elegies have a long tradition in the English and Anglo-American canon, stretching back as far as Keats and Dickinson and more recently in the work of Stevens, Hughes, Auden and Plath. In his final elegiac poem, Yeats confronts his own mortality and impending demise through the persona of Cuchulain.

“Cuchulain Comforted” creates a profoundly moving portrait of the recently deceased warrior which is in marked contrast to the youthfully arrogant and virile hero represented

in several of the plays. The first four stanzas draw the reader into the action of the poem as the figure of Cuchulain, mortally wounded, strides among the dead. The poem opens with the “Violent and famous” hero, who finds himself in the company of certain “Shrouds.” Cuchulain’s vulnerability in death is suggested as the hero leans against a tree for support. Introspection replaces action as Cuchulain appears to “meditate on wounds and blood.”

The second four stanzas consist of speeches by the shrouds, both individually and collectively. In a dramatic reversal, the code of honor by which Cuchulain has lived is now reduced to insignificance as he is invited to abandon his former warrior persona and instead join these ghostly shrouds, who sing of their past lives as “Convicted cowards.” Specifically, these otherworldly beings invite the dead warrior to “obey our ancient rule and make a shroud,” which he does, silently taking up the nearest bundle of linen and beginning to sew. Personal identity is thus submerged in the group action of these cowardly apparitions.

The idea of an after death reversal of the dead person’s emotional and moral code which he had lived by on earth is at the heart of Yeats’s poem, but it is also an idea he had teased out independently in his earlier prose work *A Vision* (1925). There, the concept of after death reversal is referred to as “The Shifting.” Helen Vendler writes that “to understand ‘Cuchulain Comforted,’ we must recall that Yeats’s imagined afterlife in *A Vision* contained a phrase called ‘The Shiftings,’ during which one had to live a life opposite to one’s earthly existence; only thus can the soul become complete.”<sup>1</sup>

Cuchulain’s destiny in the afterlife is diametrically opposed to his life of action; however, the poem eschews the pathos of this seemingly passive condition, suggesting instead that Cuchulain has found peace through accepting the rituals of the afterlife. Paradoxically, by embracing weakness, vulnerability and the communal sewing of shrouds, Cuchulain is comforted by this group activity.

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Through the persona of Cuchulain Yeats makes the case that individuality and independent agency are surrendered in death. This aesthetic representation of death is in keeping with Yeats’s other meditations on the subject of death. Jahan Ramazani sees the issue of death as a major impulse in Yeats’s poetry:

Death in Yeats’s major poetry, then, cannot be understood in terms of presence – the rotting body or the later incarnation – but must be seen as a mode of absence, an absence that may be interpreted psychologically as the absence of libidinal objects, ontologically as the anticipated absence of one’s own being, and linguistically as the absence of which the sign is a trace. Present only in representation and yet exceeding the compass of all representation, death for Yeats is an absence that elicits abundant imaginings and marks the limits of the imagination.”<sup>2</sup>

The poem builds inexorably to the eerie closing lines, with the shrouds singing not with “human notes or words,” and the disquieting image of their throats transformed into the throats of birds. There is also a magical element in this imagery which is reminiscent of the fantastical elements of the stories from the *Táin* wherein Cuchulain is transformed into a supernaturally violent creature by the “warp spasm” that occurs during the heat of battle.

In her work on Yeats's lyric forms Vendler pays particular attention to this poem, the only one that Yeats wrote in *terza rima*, a poetic form famously adopted by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. Vendler argues that Yeats choose *terza rima* because the form underscores the gravity of Cuchulain's entry passage into the underworld. In her view, "a reader ignorant of *terza rima* could read 'Cuchulain Comforted' appreciatively, but would miss the bridge across space and time to the *Divine Comedy*, and would not perceive the quasi-religious dignity with which Yeats wanted to invest the events of his poem."<sup>3</sup> In this self-elegy, Yeats-as-Cuchulain, feeling his body failing, implicitly agrees to disavow his own fantasy of a famous and aggressive life, and join the anonymity of the meek collective dead.

Yeats wrote several other self-elegies, most notably, the last section of "The Tower," "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," "The Circus Animals Desertion," and "Under Ben Bulbin," yet arguably his most fitting epitaph is "Cuchulain Comforted," given the extent to which this Irish hero influenced the poet's life and work. As he prepared to meet his death by constructing a response to his own mortality Yeats turned to the dramatic persona of Cuchulain. Nicholas Grene reads The poem as "the anti-heroic coda to Yeats's long imaginative engagement with Cuchulain;"<sup>4</sup> however, there is nobility in the manner Cuchulain accepts the strictures of the shrouds and acquiesces to their commands. Ultimately, the poem argues that for Cuchulain's soul to pass peacefully into the afterlife, his individual will must be sacrificed. Thus, at the end of his life, Yeats returns of the philosophical principle of the after-death counter-phase of life outlined decades earlier in *A Vision*.

1. Vendler, "The Later Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, p 97.

2. Ramazani, p 3.

3. Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*, p 375.

4. Grene, p 115.

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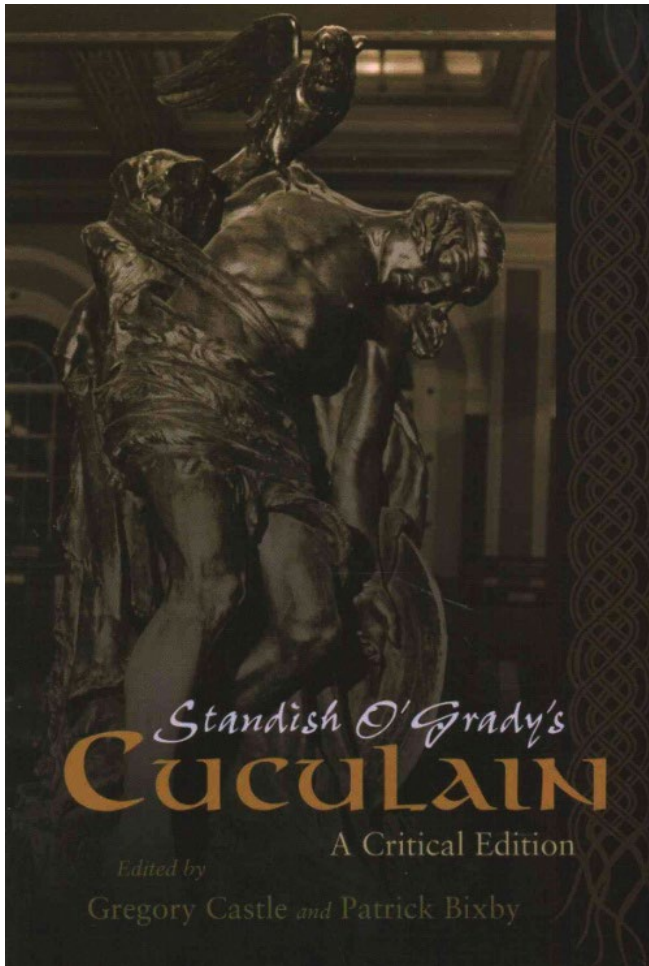
----*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. Richard J. Finneran, editor. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc. (Scribner Paperback Edition), 1996.



## Book Review:

### *ASU Professors Publish New Critical Edition in Irish Studies*

by Joyce East



Syracuse University Press now offers one with Arizona connections. *Standish O'Grady's Cuculain: A Critical Edition* (Fall 2016) is edited by Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby, professors at Arizona State University. From introduction to supplements and index, this edition offers college instructors a valuable text, but it will be equally useful for anyone interested in learning more about Irish history, literature, and culture.

For many of us Standish O'Grady (1846 – 1928) may be only a name associated with the revival of interest in the Irish myths and epic tales in the nineteenth century. We may not know that his *History of Ireland* (3 vols, 1878 – 1881) inspired major literary figures, especially W.B. Yeats. His mission was one of renewal: “I desire to make this heroic period once again a portion of the imagination of the country, and its chief characters as familiar in the minds of our people as they once were (p. 48).

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In this new critical edition, Castle and Bixby strive to make O'Grady a familiar figure for contemporary readers. Castle's introduction surveys the older schools of historiography and elaborates on O'Grady's objections to them. O'Grady's own introduction and episodes from the life of Cuculain serve as primary sources. Four scholarly essays analyze O'Grady's treatment of historical resources and the influence of his *History*. Finally, as with any good critical edition, Castle and Bixby have provided glossary, bibliography for further reading, and biographical supplement.

The essays expand upon Castle's introduction, enhancing understanding of O'Grady's motives and influence. Renée Fox “argues that Standish O'Grady's historical musing in *History of Ireland*, in particular, marks a turning point in nineteenth-century stories of Ireland, one where Irish history becomes a living, experiential phenomenon rather than a contained body of knowledge to be acquired” (p. 192).

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Joseph Valente explores O'Grady's treatment of bardic materials to emphasize the civilized manliness of Cuculain—in part, no doubt, as a response to negative Irish stereotypes popular in England at the time. Michael McAteer—with tantalizing glances at O'Grady's influence on James Joyce—analyzes how honor, individuality, and nationhood are conflicted in the story of Cuculain. And Patrick Bixby, co-editor, focuses on Sheppard's statue of Cuculain, installed in the General Post Office in 1935, and considers the contested use of the hero as a Republican icon.

Standish O'Grady's Cuculain provides source material and critical analyses for greater understanding about the borderland where history meets literature. It makes a case for the influence of historical narratives on later writers and events. Gregory Castle's own assessment notes, not only the challenges in the History, but also its importance in Irish history, literature, and culture: "Like O'Grady's contemporaries, we may find ourselves in disagreement with his claims or his aims, but what is undeniable is the extent to which his imaginative historiography resuscitated or revived what was most needful: a new attitude toward and responsibility to the Irish past" (p. 31).

The book will be available in bookstores and from Amazon and Syracuse University Press.

This review first appeared in *The Desert Shamrock*. *Reading Ireland* is grateful to the editor of *The Desert Shamrock* for permission to reprint Dr. East's review.

## Joyce East, Ph.D.



### **Bio**

Joyce East, Ph.D., is retired from Marshall University Graduate College, Charleston, WV. She directed an interdisciplinary graduate program in Humanities and taught courses in drama, Shakespeare, and Irish Studies. She was active with WV Humanities Council and the Association of Graduate Liberal Studies Programs. Currently she is volunteering at the McClelland Irish Library.

## Book Review:

### *Geis*

by Caitríona O'Reilly, Wake Forest University Press ISBN: 978-1-930630-73-4

Reviewed by Adrienne Leavy



Winner of the *Irish Times* Poetry Now Award, *Geis* is the third volume of poetry published by Caitríona O'Reilly, and her first volume published in North America. O'Reilly, who studied Archeology and English at Trinity College, brings a philosophical sensibility to this beautifully composed lyrical collection in which natural, mythological and real worlds collide. Combining a critical and aesthetic intelligence, O'Reilly imbues both weight and meaning to a range of emotional states that run the gamut from longing and desire, to mental breakdown and grief.

The title *Geis* is a term taken from Irish mythology, and refers to a supernatural taboo or a form of injunction on behavior. In this collection O'Reilly interrogates the psychological, emotional and moral implications of the *geis*, and in the process brings new insight into the prohibitions and compulsions under which we sometimes place ourselves. Other mythologies and legends also inform many of the poems in this collection.

O'Reilly's astute command of language, and her awareness of how the pressure of a poem affects language, is evident from the opening poem "Ovum." A meditation on female sexuality and reproduction, the poem also engages in clever syntactical word play, weaving archaic words such as "orotund," "ocarina," "oblation," and "obelus," into its linguistic tapestry. In "Ariadne," the title refers to the Greek goddess who helped Theseus overcome the Minotaur in the labyrinth, thereby saving potential sacrificial victims. Sexual violence and confinement are alluded to and escape from the maze (whether real or metaphorical) seems unlikely: "It will take me a lifetime / to unpick this, / finding the right thread / to pull and unravel, / pull and unravel."

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There are also poems of great tenderness and sensuous desire such as the sequence "Island," where the speaker declares "My chief want: / the gold-and-olive chasing of your glance, / a look of nakedness and clear fathoms." Elsewhere, the quietly intimate "Potlach" is both erotic and familial. Two more poems, the gentle "Everything Flowers" and "Bee on Agastache," demonstrate that O'Reilly's natural world is a thinking world.

In the title sequence "Geis," the poet addresses questions of mental illness and hospitalization. The speaker's dreams are "medieval," and terrifying: "pointed flames out of Bosch / scorch me hotter / than any bitch burned by history." Here, O'Reilly's language is reminiscent of Robert Lowell's stripped down style in "Waking in the Blue" from *Life Studies*.

Sickness, which is how an imaginary love is characterized at the onset of the sequence, becomes real and threatening as the poem progresses, transforming into “a purple knot of violence in the head; *that old snarl in the brain again* that will not unfurl.”

The lives of the speaker’s mother and grandmother saturate “The Servant Question,” an elegiac poem which considers class distinctions and the hardships of domestic employment. Although her family’s experiences are from “a drowned epoch,” and their memories are not her memories, the speaker acknowledges the influence of these memories which “move in me continually / with a river’s moment, / breaking and reforming its ripples, its patterns, / through all my rooms and days, /my work all about me.” The spirit of novelist Virginia Woolf also haunts this poem, with a direct reference to her in the third stanza and a quotation from Woolf about servants in the fourth stanza. O’Reilly also alludes to Woolf in more subtle ways through her use of river imagery and the reference to a “drowned epoch,” as Woolf drowned herself in a river behind her house. Moreover, the reference to the speaker’s work being all around her “through all my rooms” brings to mind Woolf’s famous 1929 essay, “A Room of One’s Own,” wherein she advocated that in order for women to be able to write they must have the financial freedom to devote themselves to their work along with a room free from domestic constraints.

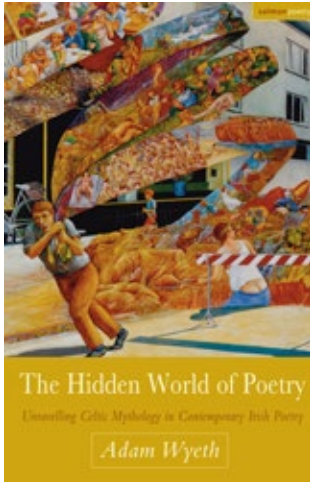
In the elegiac “An Idea of Iowa,” O’ Reilly turns an immigrant’s eye on the American Midwest, specifically the state of Iowa, “A darkening indigo shimmer above tracts of corn,” which she writes, was “Named for a people asleep, a people with dusty faces.” A state characterized by rolling farmlands that is not as flat as the neighboring state of Nebraska, the stark vastness of the landscape is captured beautifully in the poem’s closing couplet: “even its hills are so much dust: loess, the millennial / accumulation of cracked flood-plains; winds.”

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In a recent review of *Geis* Anna Bedsole Stone writes that “*Geis* is mandatory reading not only for those interested in gender and Irish literature, but for all who profess an interest in Irish poetry.”<sup>1</sup> The formal skill and psychological insight that characterize these meditative and moving poems demonstrate that O’Reilly comfortably inhabits the Irish poetic tradition embodied by poets such as Thomas Kinsella, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Medbh McGuckian.

1. Anna Bedsole Stone “Spilled scatheless from the casting dark.” Published: February 2 2017 in *breac: A digital Journal of Irish Studies*. <http://breac.nd.edu/articles/spilled-scatheless-from-the-casting-dark/>

# *Spotlight on The Hidden World of Poetry – Unravelling Celtic Mythology in Contemporary Irish Poetry* by Adam Wyeth



Paula Meehan's Introduction at the Launch of *The Hidden World of Irish Poetry*

by Adam Wyeth

Venue: The Writers Centre, Parnell Square, Dublin 1 - 25th October, 2014

You can't judge a book by its cover is an old and sound saying, but in this case the marvelous cover is a reliable guide to what you will find within — to wit marvels, wonders, vivid encounters with the imagination of the ancestors. You will meet them in their myths and legends, with their heroes and gods; you will access their understanding of the interdependence and interpenetration of human and animal worlds, and of this world and the otherworld.

Adam Wyeth reminds us that one etymology for, or source of, the word Celtic is Hidden. So the book is essentially sixteen individuated forays into the minds, inspirations and compositional habits of contemporary poets. Each of the sixteen poems under his forensic gaze yields up its hidden treasure trove of poem lore and myth lore and what are the myths but the poems of the ancestors? Each essay can be read on its own but together they braid into a whole and they too are interdependent and interanimate each other.

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We apprehend in these elegant readings what I call our aboriginal mind, so crucial as an antidote to the growing institutionalized mind which marks and, I believe, afflicts so much of our human culture in an age when we are the most dangerous species on the planet, a danger even to ourselves. The institutionalized mind keeps wittering on about accountability and transparency till those words have lost their meaning and what they actually represent now is erosion of democracy and increase of bureaucracy. The institutionalized mind — devoid of a shred of common sense will, if left unchecked, drive turbo development and exploitation of dwindling resources to the point where we will make this home planet incapable of sustaining us.

This book connects us back to a Celtic dreamtime through mythology which is, no more, no less than the poetry of the ancestors. It reaffirms the vestigial and, paradoxically, central role of ancestral thought in contemporary Irish poetry in general, and in this generous selection from contemporary makers in particular. It illustrates the continuity of the trade back through the technologies, virtual and print, into the oral tradition. We can hear back to the bronze age culture of the Milesians, and read back to the first writing down of the myths and legends in the 6th to the 11th centuries. So Adam's book is both nourishment and boon for readers in the English language who might not have access to the lore in the mother tongue.

One of the unexpected gifts of this book for me has been that it has encouraged me to go back to the source – to the mother tongue. The huge number of the ancient manuscripts that are being digitized means we can look at the very texts themselves that carried the oral tradition into the written tradition. For example the site Irish Script on Screen, or the digitized holdings of the Royal Irish Academy, and many more such sites, allow us access from our own armchairs to heretofore remote and precious, sometimes unavailable for reasons of conservation, ancient manuscripts. A lovely irony that the machine age with its digital memory restores to us a version of our earliest imaginings.

Adam Wyeth is exactly the kind of reader poets dream of. Deeply intuitive, interested in everything to do with words. Pasternak remarked that each word comes to us carrying all its ghosts; Adam, as a learned and productive poet himself, respects those ghosts and understands the shamanic heft, the magic potential of each word, and the spell-like nature of a line of poetry, each word and its host of etymological ghosts in its fated place. Adam quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson who says “Language is fossil poetry.” And because he is a fine poet himself he inspires confidence: he opens up, and is an impeccable guide to, the craftworking and deliberate shaping of each poet, and the poetry lore is as erudite as the folk lore. He gets the anvil music, the fluent song of water.

He brings a wealth of reference, historic, archeological and literary to his readings of the chosen poems. And they are read with love, respect and enthusiasm. He opened up new readings for me in poems I thought I knew well – Leanne O’ Sullivan’s ‘Promise’, Paul Muldoon’s ‘Mayfly’. Indeed he opened up new readings for me in my own poem and reaffirmed what I have long suspected — that the maker of the poem is not necessarily the poem’s most informed or nuanced reader. One can be blind, as the poem’s maker, to what is blindingly obvious to the poem’s reader.

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Ancient history is by its very nature highly speculative; and while I might argue with some of Adam’s speculations I applaud wholeheartedly the verve and coherence of those speculations. A lovely word itself – speculate. One of its meanings is to look at from a vantage point and that expresses exactly what Adam has achieved.

Another, though by no means the least, of its achievements is, to be a kind of core sampling through the living generations of Irish poets writing in English, which might be termed our stepmother tongue, with one representative from the mother tongue. Informative as to backgrounds, publications, contexts for writing, it is a solid introduction to a generous helping of beautiful poems.

And the placing of these recently made poems — their ink hardly dry, their soundwaves hardly digitized: by placing them against the earliest stories on the island it frees them of any individuated ego driven energies of the ‘poetry bizniz’ and restores them to their rightful place in a long continuum of makers, native and incoming, who are known to us mostly as the genius ‘Anonymous’.

I convey my gratitude at being placed in such company, both of this world and of the otherworld.

‘A gifted commentator/close reader. “A hearer and heartener.” SEAMUS HEANEY

‘Adam Wyeth discloses the pulse of an unbroken tradition in poems that speak absolutely to the living moment. At once guide to a rich, hidden inheritance and informed celebration of the contemporary, here is a book that will illumine the mind and cheer the heart.’  
Theo Dorgan

‘Wyeth’s essays excavate the intricate Celtic motifs running through his chosen poems with charm and precision. In doing so he performs the dual task of bringing less familiar work to the fore as well as illuminating new ways of reading old favourites.’ Josephine Balmer

In this unique book, Adam Wyeth unravels the many rich and varied ancient Celtic legends which run through contemporary Irish poetry. Each chapter begins with a poem by one of Ireland’s leading poets, followed by sharp, shrewd analysis of its making and references. As well as poetry’s inner workings, the reader will discover a wealth of Celtic culture – their gods, heroes and folklore – and its continuing role in shaping Ireland’s identity in the twenty-first century.

Celtic mythology is far from a dead or peripheral part of our history; its narratives and traditions are deeply intertwined into the fabric of our daily lives. As each generation re-visits these ancient tales, our personal and expanding lives offer fresh interpretations of these age-old myths.

Including poems by Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Bernard O’Donoghue, Paul Durcan, John Ennis, Desmond O’Grady, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Mary O’Malley, Paula Meehan, Patricia Monaghan, Paul Muldoon, Maurice Riordan, Leanne O’Sullivan and Matthew Sweeney.

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With ink paintings by Miriam Logan – [www.miriamlogan.com](http://www.miriamlogan.com)



# Adam Wyeth



## Bio

Adam Wyeth is an award-winning poet, playwright and essayist who lives in Dublin. His critically acclaimed debut collection, *Silent Music* (2011) was Highly Commended by the Forward Poetry Prize. Adam's second book is *The Hidden World of Poetry: Unravelling Celtic Mythology in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2013). Adam's third book and second poetry collection *The Art of Dying* (2016), was named as an *Irish Times* Book of the Year in 2016. Adam's poetry has won and been commended in many international competitions, including The Bridport Poetry Prize, The Arvon Poetry Prize and The Ballymaloe Poetry Prize. His work appears in several anthologies and he was also a selected poet for the 2016 Poetry Ireland Review's Rising Generation of poets.

For more information on Adam's work visit [www.adamwyeth.com](http://www.adamwyeth.com)

# A Retelling of The Cúchulainn Saga

*Laoch na Laochra* – Scéal Chúchulainn has been launched by Professor Séamus Mac Mathúna of the University of Ulster, in the Navan Centre, Armagh, which was the seat of power for the stories in The Ulster Cycle. He was clearly impressed with the publication: 'I am unaware of any other publication dealing with the Ulster Cycle which is so comprehensive or so rousing as Ó Ciaráin's writing and Vallely's paintings: this book has the capacity to shock, sadden and surprise the reader in equal measure and to move one deeply, a book which reconnects us with our ancient and native roots.' (Séamus Mac Mathúna – Professor of Irish)

This authentic retelling is published by Gael Linn with the support of Ultach Trust and recounts the deeds of Cúchulainn which secured his eternal place in the mythology of Ireland. The stories are decorated beautifully by the powerful and tribal paintings of Dara Vallely. The reader takes a journey with the Ulster Champion and the foremost hero of Ireland from conception to his young, tragic but heroic death at the hand of Méabh, Queen of the Connaught men. The book is written in the Ulster dialect and contains the scene-setting stories of the Cattle-raid of Cooley, 'Réamhscéalta' and the epic Táin Bó Cuailgne itself. The book has 280 pages which are in full colour and beautifully bound with hardback and striking dust-jacket.

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These stories from the Ulster Cycle are re-imagined by two Armagh men who have a special affinity with this ancient Ulster mythology. This is the first time that these stories are collected together in a single volume in the modern Ulster dialect of Ulster.

It is timely that this book is being published in the run up to the commemoration of the 1916 Easter rising. It is widely accepted that the spirit of Cúchulainn inspired some of the key-players in that rebellion.

'When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side.  
What stalked through the post office? What intellect,  
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?' (W.B. Yeats)

Antoine Ó Coileáin, CEO of Gael Linn, said, 'Cúchulainn is a powerful symbol of bravery, loyalty, martial prowess, beauty and intellect. The spirit of Cúchulainn has inspired revolutionaries, artists, sportsmen and women and leaders for over 1000 years in Ireland.

*Laoch na Laochra* is 'one of the most beautiful, stirring and inspiring books that I have seen for a long time,' wrote Robert McMillen from The Irish News.

The stories in *Laoch na Laochra* clearly convey Cúchulainn as the premier warrior of the Red Branch Knights and the greatest hero of all in Ireland. When the young boy-soldier took up arms at Navan Fort for the first time, he declared that he cared not if his life was to be short as long as he ensured eternal renown. Cúchulainn is still revered in the imagination of Ireland and further afield and this book will renew interest in the exploits that secured his everlasting fame.

Réamonn Ó Ciaráin has worked for over twenty years promoting the Irish language and culture in Ulster. He is a director of The Ó Fiaich library and archives and chairman of An tUltach, Ireland's longest in-print literary monthly magazine.

Dara Vallely is an accomplished musician and an exceptional visual and performance artist. He is artistic director with Armagh Rhymers and has exhibited and performed to international acclaim from Belfast's Ulster Museum and Dublin's RHA to Chicago, Dallas, Milwaukee and New York.

The book is available from [www.gael-linn.ie](http://www.gael-linn.ie) (Shop)

Sample of the artwork from *Laoch na Laochra*.

Photos: Bryan Rutledge  
Artwork: Dara Vallely



Cú Chulainn facing Connaught Army with feats.



Cathbadh prophesizes events of Cú Chulainn's life.



Eamhain Mhacha Boy Core.



Ferdia is offered Finn Abair.



Gods cast a shield of protection around Cú Chulainn.



Man-warriors refuse to fight boy-warrior.



Méabh dismissed Connaught Bull



Women confront Cú Chulainn bare-breasted.



Two Bulls – Past and Present Interwoven



Setanta slays Culann's hound.