

Fenian Tales and Poems

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Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history (1861)

LECTURE XIV

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Of the ancient Imaginative Tales and Poems ; and of the use to be made of them in serious historical investigation. Of the Fenian Poems and Tales. Of the compositions of *Oisín* (Ossian). Of Fergus. Of *Caeilté*. The " Dialogue of the Ancient Men". Description of the dwelling of *Crédé*, the beautiful daughter of *Cairbré*, King of Kerry. The Story of the " Pursuit of *Diarmaid* and *Grainnè*". The Story of the " Battle of Ventry Harbour".

The poems, upon anything like respectable authority, to *Finn Mac Cumhill* are few indeed, amounting only to five, as far as I have been able to discover; but these few are found in manuscripts of considerable antiquity — namely, the Book of Leinster, which, as I have already observed, was compiled, chiefly from older books, in the early part of the twelfth century; and the Book of *Lecain*, compiled in the same way in the year 1416.

The first of these five poems is devoted to an account of the exploits and death of Goll Mac Morna, the great chief of the Connacht Fenians.

This Goll had slain Finn's father, Cumhall, in the battle of Cnucha, near Dublin, and was in Finn's early life his mortal enemy ; but he subsequently made peace with him and submitted to his superior command. In the poem Finn gives a vivid and rapid account of all the men of note who fell by the hands of Goll and the Connacht warriors in all parts of Erin, with the names of the slain and of the places in which they fell. The poem consists of 86 quatrains, and begins thus [see original in Appendix, No. XCII.] : —

“ The grave of Goll in *Magh Raighné*”.

This *Magh Raighné* was an ancient plain in Ossory in Leinster ; *cill Finché*, or Saint Finche's church was situated in it, according to the Festology of *Aengus Céilé Dé*, or Aengus the “ Culdee”. The poem contains a great number of topographical references, for which it is particularly valuable.

The second is a short poem, of only five quatrains, on the origin of the name of *Magh-da-Gheisi*, or the Plain of the Two Swans, also in Leinster, beginning [see original in same Appendix] : —

“ The stone which I was wont to throw”.

The third is a shorter poem of only three quatrains, on the origin of the name of *Roirend*, a place in *Ui Failghé*, or Offaly, beginning [see original in same Appendix] : —

"Beloved is he who came from a brave land".

These three (which belong to the ancient lost tract called the *Dinnsenchus*) are found in the Book of Leinster only : the following are likewise to be found there, but are also preserved in the Book of Lecain.

A poem of seventeen quatrains, descriptive of *Ros-Broc* [Badger-Wood] , the place which is now *Teach Moling* [Saint Mullen's], on the brink of the River *Bearbha* [or Barrow], in the present county of Carlow. It begins [see original in same Appendix] :—

" *Ros-Broc* this day is the resort of warriors .

In this poem (the authenticity of which as Finn's, there is abundant reason to question), Finn is made to prophesy the coming of Saint Patrick into Ireland to propagate the truths of Christianity, and the future sanctity of *Ros-Broc* when it should become the peaceful abode of Saint Moling and his monks.

Another poem is on the tragical death of *Fithir* and *Dariné*, the two daughters of the monarch *Tuathal Techtmar*, whose untimely end was produced by the treachery of *Eochaidh Anchean*, King of Leinster. This poem begins [see original in same Appendix] : —

" Fearful the deed which has been done here".

So far the Book of Leinster : but the Book of *Lecain* contains, in addition, two other poems ascribed to Finn. One of these is taken from the tract in the *Dinnsenchus*, on the origin of the name of a place called *Druim Dean*, in Leinster. This was a hill upon which Finn had a mansion. Finn went on an expedition into Connacht, during which he defeated the chieftain *Uinché* in battle at *Ceann Mara* [now called Kinvara], on the Bay of Galway. *Uinché*, with twenty-one of his party, escaped from the battle, and came directly to Finn's mansion at *Druim Drean*, which he succeeded in totally destroying. Finn soon returned home, but finding his residence destroyed and several of his people killed, he went with his son *Oisín* and his cousin *Caeilté* in pursuit of the enemy, whom he overtook and slew at a ford called ever since *Ath Uinché*, or *Uinches Ford*. On Finn's return from this last achievement, he addressed this poem to the hill on which stood his desolate home [see original in same Appendix] : —

" Desolate is your mansion, O *Druim Dean*."

Of some poems, prophecies, and sayings ascribed in other manuscripts to *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, the space I have allotted me will not allow me to speak in detail ; but I may, however, take occasion to assure you that it is quite a mistake to suppose *Finn Mac Cumhaill* to have been a merely imaginary or mythical character. Much that has been narrated of his exploits is, no doubt, apocryphal enough ; but Finn himself is an undoubtedly historical personage ; and that he existed about the time at which his appearance is recorded in the annals, is as certain as that Julius Cæsar lived and ruled at the time stated on the authority of the Roman historians. I may add here, that the pedigree of Finn is fully recorded on the unquestionable authority of the Book of Leinster, in which he is set down as the son of *Cumhall*, who was the son of *Trenmór*, son of *Snaelt*, son of *Eltan*, son of *Baiscni*, son of *Nuada Necht*, who was of the Heremonian race, and monarch of Erin about A.M. 5090, according to the chronology of the Four Masters, that is, 110 years before Christ. Finn himself was slain, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, in Anno Domini 283, in the reign of *Cairbré Lifeachair*.

Oisín (a word which signifies literally the " little fawn"), the son of *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, has within the last hundred years attracted much attention among the most learned men of Europe. Mr. James Mac Pherson, a Scottish gentleman, gave to the world, as you are all doubtless aware, about the year 1760, a highly poetic translation of what he pretended to be some ancient genuine compositions of *Oisín*. It is no part of the purpose of this Lecture to review the long and learned controversy which followed the publication of these very clever

imitations of what was then, and for a long time afterwards, believed to be the genuine style of *Oisín's* poetry ; but I cannot omit to observe, that of all Mac Pherson's translations, in no single instance has a genuine Scottish original been found, and that none *will* ever be found I am very certain.

The only poems of *Oisín* with which I am acquainted, that can be positively traced back so far as the twelfth century, are two, which are found in the Book of Leinster. One of these (consisting, indeed, but of seven quatrains) is valuable as a record of the great battle of *Gahhra*, which was fought in A.D. 284, and in which Oscar, the brave son of *Oisín*, and *Cairbré Lifeachair*, the monarch of Erin, fell by each others hands. There are two specially important facts preserved in this poem, which, whether it be the composition of *Oisín* or not, is, at all events, one of very ancient date ; namely, the fact, that the monarch *Cairbré* fought on horseback, and that the poet, whoever he may be, refers to an Ogham inscription on *Oscar's* tombstone.

A perfect and very accurate copy of this poem was published in the year 1854, by a society which, adopting the Scottish instead of the proper Irish form, calls itself the " Ossianic Society".

The second poem of *Oisín*, preserved in the Book of Leinster, is of much greater extent than the first, as it consists of fifty-four quatrains, and it is equally, if not more, valuable in its contents.

Oisín, at the time of writing this poem, appears to have been blind, and to have been popularly known by the name of *Guairé Dall*, that is, *Guairé* " the blind".

The occasion of the poem appears to have been the holding ascribed to of the great fair and festival games of the *Lifé*, or Liffey, which probably were held on the *Cuirrech Lifé* (now known as the Curragh of Kildare), These games and fairs were of frequent occurrence in ancient Erin, down even to the tenth century ; and among the sports on such occasions, horse racing appears always to have held a prominent place.

The poet begins by stating that the king has inaugurated the fair; speaks of the happiness of those who can attend it, and contrasts their condition with his own, as being incapable, from old age and blindness, to participate as he had been accustomed , to do in these exciting sports. He then gives a vivid account of a visit which, in his more youthful days, he had made, along with his father, Finn, and a small band of the Fenian warriors, to the court of *Fiacha Muilleathan*, King of Munster, at *Badamar* (near the present town of Cahir in Tipperary) ; and of the races of *Oenach Clochair* [now Manister, near Croom, in the county of Limerick], which the king had celebrated on the occasion of Finn's visit. The winning horse at the course was a black steed, belonging to Dill, the son of *Dachréca*, who was the king's tutor. The king purchased the steed from his old tutor on the spot, and made a present of it to Finn. Finn and his party then took their leave, and passed into the district comprised by the present county of Kerry, on to the sandy strand of *Beramain* [near Tralee]. Here Finn challenged his son, *Oisín*, and his cousin, *Caeilté*, to try the speed of their choice horses with his black steed on the sandy strand. The race is won by Finn ; but, in place of taking rest after it, he strikes into the country southward, followed by his two companions, and they proceed without resting until night comes on, when they find themselves at the foot of the hill of *Bairnech* [near Killarney]. Here night overtook them, and although they were well acquainted with the locality, and had never known or seen a house there before, they saw one now, which they entered without ceremony. This, however, was, it seems, no other than an enchanted house, prepared by some of Finn's necromantic enemies, in order to frighten and punish him for the death of some friends of theirs by his hands. The wild horrors of the night in such a place need not here be related ; nor shall I delay over details of more solid interest in the story, such as the various incidents of Finn's visit to Munster on this occasion, and the very

curious topographical notices of his progress. For all these things I must refer you to the poem itself. This, however, is not very difficult of study ; and you will gain some assistance from a free metrical translation of it, made by our distinguished countryman, Dr. Anster, which was published in the Dublin University Magazine for March and April, 1852.

The next of the Fenian poets is *Fergus Finnbheoil* (Fergus " the Eloquent"), son of *Finn Mac Cumhaill*.

Of this early bard's compositions, I have met but one genuinely ancient poem. It occurs in the lost Book of *Dinnsenchus*, copied into the Books of *Lecain* and Ballymote, and professes to account for the name of an ancient well or spring named *Tipra Seangarmna*, situated in the south-eastern part of the present county of Kerry, and in which, I believe, the river *Feilé* [Feale] has its source. It would appear from this poem that the spring of *Seangarmain* issued from a cleft in a rock, or rather from a mountain cavern. *Oisín*, the brother of Fergus, with a few followers, were, it would appear, while out hunting, inveigled into this cleft or cavern by some of its fairy inhabitants, and detained there for a whole year. During all this time *Oisín* was accustomed to cut a small chip from the handle of his spear, and cast it upon the issuing stream. Finn, his father, who had been in search of him all the time, happening at last to come to this stream, saw a chip floating down, took it up, and knew immediately that it was part of *Oisín's* spear, and intended for a sign. He therefore followed the stream to its source, entered the cavern, and rescued his son and his companions. And this is the legend which Fergus relates in the poem, (Book of Ballymote, fol. 202, a. a.) which consists of thirty-three quatrains, and begins [see original in Appendix, No. XCIII] :

" The well of *Seangarmain*, with all its beauty".

The next and last of the ancient Fenian bards is *Caeilté Mac Ronain*, the cousin of Finn, and one of his officers, the most distinguished both as warrior and poet, but chiefly distinguished above all the rest in legendary record by his singular agility and swiftness of foot.

Of *Caeilte's* poems I find but one among our more ancient tracts, and this was in the *Dinnsenchus*, in which it is quoted as supplying an account of the origin of the name *Tonn Chliodhna* [or Wave of *Chliodhna*], which was the ancient name of a strand and the waves that broke over it, situated in or near the bay of *Cloch-na-Coillté* [Clonakilty] , on the coast of the county of Cork.

This poem, like the last, is found in the Books of Ballymote and *Lecain*, and is said to have been sung by the author for Saint Patrick. It is not a legend of Finn or his people, but a love story, the heroine in which (*Clíodhna*, a foreign lady) was unfortunately drowned on this shore, and from whose name was derived the appellation of the Wave of *Clíodhna*. The poem is very ancient, and begins [see original in same Appendix] : —

" *Clíodhna* the fair-haired, long to be remembered".

Having so far described to you such of these very ancient poems as I have found ascribed directly to *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, his sons *Oisín* and *Fergus Finnbheoil*, and his cousin *Caeilté*, I shall now bring under your notice the second class of our ancient imaginative compositions — namely, those tracts which were made up of articles in prose and verse, ascribed to some one or more of the personages already mentioned, but related by a second person.

The most important, perhaps the only genuine, tract of this class now existing, is that which is well known as the *Agallamh na Seanórach*, or Dialogue of the Ancient Men.

These " ancient men" were *Oisín*, the son of *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, and *Caeilté*, the son of *Cronchu*, son of *Ronan*, popularly called *Caeilté Mac Ronain*, a near relative of *Oisín*.

These two chiefs long survived their brethren in arms, and are even reported to have lived until the coming of Saint Patrick into Erin to preach Christianity, by whom it is said they were converted and baptized. So in the " Dialogue" just referred to, then, they are made to give an account to the Saint of the situation, the history, and origin of the names of various hills, mountains, rivers, caverns, rocks, wells, mounds, shores, etc., throughout Erin, but more particularly such places as derived their names or any celebrity from actions or events in which *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, or his warriors, had been personally engaged or in any way concerned. Of this class of compositions we have at present existing, as I have just observed, but this one tract ; and even this, as far as can be yet ascertained, is imperfect. There is a large fragment of it preserved in the Book of Lismore, a vellum manuscript written about the year 1400 ; another large fragment, on paper, in the Royal Irish Academy [H. and S. Collection, No. 149] ; a more perfect, but still damaged copy in the Bodleian Library at Oxford [Rawlinson, 487] ; and, as far as I am able to judge without having seen the book, an older and more perfect copy than any of these, if not quite perfect, in the College of St. Isidore, in Rome.

This tract, which might almost be called a Topographical and Historical Catechism, commences by stating that after the disastrous battles of Comar, *Gabhra*, and *Ollarhha*, the *Fianns* or Fenian forces were so shattered and diminished in numbers, that the surviving few of them dispersed themselves over the country so that their number was at last reduced to eleven — namely the two good old chiefs, *Oisín* and *Caeilté*, and nine common soldiers. After having wandered a long time among the new and strange generation that had sprung up around them in their native country, the two chiefs agreed to separate for a time ; and *Oisín* went to his mother to the (enchanted) mansion of *Cleitech*, near Slane, while *Caeilté* passed over *Magh Breagh* (or Bregia) to the south, and to Saint Patrick, who was then sojourning at *Raith-Droma-deirg*, to whom *Caeilté* related his unfortunate story. Saint Patrick was very glad to add so remarkable a personage to his congregation, and readily gave *Caeilté* and his few companions a comfortable maintenance in his establishment.

Oisín soon after joined his old friends, and the two chiefs thenceforth were Patrick's constant companions in his missionary journeys through the country, always giving him the history of every place that they visited, and of numberless other places, the names of which incidentally occur in the course of the narrative, as well as the origin of their names, all of which was written into a book, for the benefit of future generations, by Brogan, Saint Patrick's scribe.

The space allotted to these lectures will not allow me to dwell further on this tract than to lay before you one or two examples of the nature and style of the countless articles of which it is composed.

Saint Patrick, with his travelling missionary retinue, including *Caeilé*, we are told, was one day sitting on the hill which is now well known as Ard-Patrick, in the county of Limerick. The hill before this time was called *Finn Tulach*, the Fair (or White) Hill, and Patrick asked *Caeilté* why or when it had received that name. *Caeilté* answered that its first name was *Tulach-na-Feiné* ; but that Finn had afterwards given it the name of *Finntulach*. " And (continued *Caeilté*) it was from this hill that we marched to the great battle of *Fintraigh* (now ' Ventry' Harbour)". [See original in Appendix, No. XCIV.]

" One day that we were on this hill, Finn observed a favourite warrior of his company, named *Cael O'Neamhain*, coming towards him, and when he had come to Finn's presence, he asked him where he had come from. *Cael* answered that he had come from *Brugh* in the north (that is the fairy mansion of *Brugh*, on the Boyne). What was your business there? said Finn. To speak to my nurse, *Muirn*, the daughter of Derg, said *Cael*. About what? said Finn. Concerning *Credé*, the daughter of *Cairbré*, King of Kerry [*Ciarraighe Luachra*], said *Cael*. Do

you know, said Finn, that she is the greatest deceiver [flirt, coquette] among all the women of Erinn ; that there is scarcely a precious gem in all Erinn that she has not obtained as a token of love ; and that she has not yet accepted the hand of any of her admirers ? I know it, said *Cael* ; but do you know the conditions on which she would accept a husband? I do, said Finn : whoever is so gifted in the art of poetry as to write a poem descriptive of her mansion and its rich furniture, will receive her hand. Good, said *Cael* ; I have with the aid of my nurse composed such a poem ; and if you will accompany me, I will now repair to her court and present it to her.

" Finn agreed to this proposal, and having set out on their journey they soon arrived at the lady's court, which was situated at the foot of the well known mountains called the Paps of Anann, in Kerry. When arrived, the lady asked their business. Finn answered that *Cael* came to seek her hand in marriage. Has he a poem for me ? said she. I have, said *Cael* ; — and he then recited the very curious poem, of which the following is a literal translation :

“ A journey I make on Friday:
And should I go I shall be a true guest.
To *Credé's* mansion, — not small the fatigue, —
At the breast of the mountain on the north-east.

“ It is destined for me to go there,
To *Credé*, at the Paps of Anann,
That I be there, awaiting sentence,
Four days and half a week.

“ Happy the house in which she is,
Between men and children and women.
Between Druids and musical performers,
Between cup-bearers and door-keepers.

“ Between equerries without fear,
And distributors who divide [the fare] ;
And over all these the command belongs
To fair *Credé* of the yellow hair.

“ It would be happy for me to be in her *dún*,
Among her soft and downy couches.
Should *Credé* deign to hear [my suit],
Happy for me would be my journey.

“ A bowl she has whence berry-juice flows,
By which she colours her eye-brows black ;
[She has] clear vessels of fermenting ale ;
Cups she has, and beautiful goblets.

“ The colour [of her *dún*] is like the colour of lime ;
Within it are couches and green rushes ;
Within it are silks and blue mantles ;
Within it are red gold and crystal cups.

“ Of its *Grianan* [sunny chamber] the corner stones
Are all of silver and of yellow gold, —
Its thatch in stripes of faultless order,
Of wings of brown and crimson red.

“ Two door-posts of green I see ;
Nor is its door devoid of beauty ;
Of carved silver, long has it been renowned.
Is the lintel that is over its door,

“ *Credé's* chair is on your right hand ;
The pleasantest of the pleasant it is ;
All over a blaze of Alpine gold,
At the foot of her beautiful couch.

“ A gorgeous couch, in full array.
Stands directly above the chair;
It was made by [at?] *Túilé*, in the east,
Of yellow gold and precious stones.

“ There is another bed on your right hand,
Of gold and silver without defect, —
With curtains, with soft [pillows],
And with graceful rods of golden-bronze.

“ The household which are in her house,
To the happiest of conditions have been destined ;
Gray and glossy are their garments ;
Twisted and fair is their flowing hair.

“ Wounded men would sink in sleep.
Though ever so heavily teeming with blood,
With the warblings of the fairy birds
From the eaves of her sunny chamber [*Grianan*].

“ If I am [*i.e.*, have cause to be] thankful to the woman.
To *Credé*, for whom the cuckoo sings,
In songs of praise she shall ever live.
If she but repay me for my gift.

“ If it please the daughter of *Cairbré*, —
She will not put me off to another time, —
She will herself say to me here :
' To me your journey is greatly welcome'.

“ An hundred feet spans *Credé's* house
From one angle to the other ;
And twenty feet are fully measured
In the breadth of its noble door.

" Its portico is thatched
With wings of birds both blue and yellow ;
Its lawn in front, and its well,
Of crystal and of carmogal.

" Four posts to every bed [there are],
Of gold and silver finely carved, —
A crystal gem between each post, —
They are not of unpleasant heads. [See Appendix.]

" There is in it a vat of royal bronze,
Whence flows the pleasant juice of malt ;
An apple-tree stands overhead the vat
With the abundance of its weighty fruit.

" When *Credé's* goblet is filled
With the ale of the noble vat,
There drop down into the cup directly
Four apples at the same time,

" The four attendants [distributors] that have been named,
Arise and go to the distribution ;
They present to four of the guests around,
A drink to each man, and an apple.

" She, who has all these things, —
Within the strand and the flood, [see Appendix]
Credé of the three-pointed-hill, —
Has taken [*ie.*, won by] a spear's cast before the women of Erinn.

" Here is a poem for her, no mean present.
It is not a hasty rash composition :
To *Credé* now it is here presented —
May my journey be brightness to her".

The young lady was, it seems, delighted with this poem, and readily consented to become the wife of the gifted *Cael* ; and their marriage, we are told, took place soon after. Their happiness was, however, of short duration ; for *Cael* was almost immediately called away to the great battle of Ventry Harbour, where he was killed in the midst of victory, fighting against the host of foreign invaders. *Créde* had followed him to the battle-field, and received his last sighs of affection for herself, and of exultation for having died in his country's cause. He was buried by his comrades on the south side of the harbour in a place which was (after him, it is said) called *Traigh Caeil*, or the strand of *Cael*. *Créde* composed an elegy for him, which is valuable to us, among other things, as containing some curious allusions to ancient customs, as well as a description of the grave of her lover and the manner of his interment.

I think I need offer no apology for detaining you so long with the details of this singularly interesting little poem. I shall only give you, in a few words, one other example of the varied sort of information which will be found in the tract at present under consideration, and then pass from the " Dialogue of the Ancient Men" for the present.

Saint Patrick, we are told in it, receives an invitation from the king of Connacht to visit his country. He sets out from Ard Patrick, passes through Limerick, Cratloe, *Sliabh Echtghé*, and many other places, into *Ui Mainé*, and to the court of the king of Connacht at *Loch Croiné* (in the present county of Roscommon), where he was joyfully and reverently received.

One day that they were seated on a green mound in the vicinity of the palace, a young Munster warrior, who was attached to the king's court, put the following questions to *Caeilté* with Patrick's consent. Where did *Oilioll Oluim*, [the celebrated king of Munster,] and his wife *Sadhbh*, die, and where were they buried ? Where did their seven sons die in one day ? Who were the parties that fought the battle of *Cnoc Samhna*, in Tipperary ? Where and how did Cormac Cas [another son of *Oilioll Oluim*] die ? etc. *Caeilté* answers all these questions, and tells how the battle of *Cnoc Samhna* was fought between *Eochaidh Abradruadh* [the Red Browed], King of Leinster, and *Cormac Cas* ; how the latter received a fearful wound in the

head ; and how after lingering for thirteen years in great agony, he died at *Dun Tri-Liag*, that is, the Dun (or fort) of the three pillar stones [now Duntrileague, in the county of Limerick], which was specially built for his particular accommodation ; together with many other similar details.

From the nature of these questions, and the copious answers which *Caeilté* is always made to give, it will be seen that this, as well as the other articles in this valuable tract, must be full of curious and really valuable historical information.

Besides the pieces of which I have already spoken, a large collection of Fenian poems, chiefly ascribed to *Oisín*, but some of them also to his brother poets, is to be found in our paper MSS. of the last 200 years; most of these manuscripts being transcripts, as I have already observed, from books of much older date. These poems are generally given as dialogues between *Oisín* and Saint Patrick ; but they seldom contain much matter illustrative either of topography or social manners.

The most popular, as well as the largest, of this class of poems is that which is known as *Cath Chnuic an Air*, the battle of the Hill of Slaughter ; but as no details of topography are given in it — not even the situation of the Hill of Battle — and as the foes were little more than three or four foreign champions, the piece is of little historic value.

The next and last class are the Prose Tales, of which the of the following are the chief, if not all, that are at present known : the *Toruigheacht Dhiarmada is Ghràinè*, or Pursuit of *Diarmaid* and *Grainné* ; the *Cath Finntrágha*, or Battle of Ventry Harbour (in Kerry); the *Bruighean Chaerthainn*, or Mountain-ash Court ; the *Imtheacht an Ghilla Deacair*, or Flight of the Slothful Fellow ; *Bruighean Cheisé an Chorainn*, or the Court of *Ceis Corann* ; the *Bruighean Eochaidh Big Deirg*, or Court of Little Red *Eochaidh* ; the *Bruighean bheag na h-Almhainé*, or Little Court of *Almhain* (or Allen); and the *Feis Tighé Chonáin Chinn t-Sleibhé*, or Feast of Conan's House of *Ceann Sleibhé*.

Of these, the only tale founded on fact, or, at least, on ancient authority (though romantically told), is one in which Finn himself was deeply interested. It is the pursuit of *Diarmaid* and *Grainné*. The facts on which it is founded are shortly these.

Finn, in his old age, solicited the monarch Cormac Mac Art for the hand of his celebrated daughter *Grainné* in marriage. Cormac agreed to the hero's proposal, and invited Finn to go to Tara, to obtain from the princess herself her consent (which was necessary in such matters in those days in Erin) to their union. Finn, on this invitation, proceeded to Tara, attended by a chosen body of his warriors, and among these were his son *Oisín*, his grandson Oscar, and *Diarmaid O'Duibhné*, one of his chief officers, a man of fine person and most fascinating manners. A magnificent feast was of course provided, at which the monarch presided, surrounded by all the great men of his court, among whom the Fenians were accorded a distinguished place.

It appears to have been a custom at great feasts in ancient Erin for the mistress of the mansion, or some other distinguished lady, to fill her own rich and favourite drinking-cup or glass from a select vessel of choicest liquor, and to send it round by her own favourite maid in waiting to the chief gentlemen of the company, to be sent round again by them to a certain number (which was, I believe, four), in their immediate vicinity, so that every one of those invited should in turn enjoy the distinction of participating in this gracious favour. On the present occasion the lady *Grainné* did the honours of her royal father's court, and sent round her favourite cup accordingly, until all had drank from it, *Oisín* and *Diarmaid O'Duibhné* alone excepted. Scarcely had the company uttered their praises of the liquor and their profound acknowledgments to the princess, than they all, almost simultaneously, fell into a heavy sleep.

The liquor was of course drugged for this purpose, and no sooner had *Grainné* perceived the full success of her scheme, than she went and sat by the side of *Oisín* and *Diarmaid*, and, addressing the former, complained to him of the folly of his father Finn, in expecting that a maiden of her youth, beauty, and celebrity, could ever consent to become the wife of so old and war-worn a man ; that if *Oisín* himself were to seek her hand she should gladly accept him ; but since that could not now be, that she had no chance of escaping the evil which her father's temerity had brought upon her but by flight ; and as *Oisín* could not dishonour his father by being her partner in such a proceeding, she conjured *Diarmaid* by his manliness, and by his vows of chivalry, to take her away, to make her his wife, and thus to save her from a fate to which she preferred even death itself.

After much persuasion (for the consequences of so grievous an offence to his leader must necessarily be serious) *Diarmaid* consented to the elopement ; the parties took a hasty leave of *Oisín* ; and as the royal palace was not very strictly guarded on such an occasion, *Grainné* found little difficulty in escaping the vigilance of the attendants, and gaining the open country with her companion.

When the monarch and Finn awoke from their trance, their rage was boundless ; both of them vowed vengeance against the unhappy delinquents ; and Finn immediately set out from Tara in pursuit of them. He sent parties of his swiftest and best men to all parts of the country ; but *Diarmaid* was such a favourite with his brethren in arms, and the peculiar circumstances of the elopement invested it with so much sympathy on the part of those young heroes, that they never could discover the retreat of the offenders, excepting when Finn himself happened to be of the party that immediately pursued them, and then they were sure to make their escape by some wonderful stratagem or feat of agility on the part of *Diarmaid*.

This, then, was the celebrated Pursuit of *Diarmaid* and *Grainné*. It extended all over Erin ; and in the description of the progress of it, a great amount of curious information on topography, the natural productions of various localities, social manners, and more ancient tales and superstitions, is introduced.

The flight of *Diarmaid* and *Grainné* is mentioned in several of our ancient manuscripts, and the popular traditions throughout the country point to those ancient monuments, vulgarly called *Cromlechs*, as their resting and hiding places, many of which are still commonly, though of course without any reason, called *Leabthacha Dhiarmada is Ghrainné*, or the Beds of *Diarmaid* and *Grainné*. [See Appendix, No. XCV.]

The next Fenian tale that claims attention is that which is so popularly known as *Cath Finntrágha*, the Battle of the White Strand (a name now Anglicized Ventry Harbour, — in west of Kerry).

That this is an ancient tale may be inferred from the mention of it made in the story of the unfortunate lovers *Cael* and *Créde* just mentioned, as well as from a damaged copy of it on vellum, which is preserved in an old manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford [Rawlinson, 487] ; but the paper copies of it, which are numerous in Ireland, are very much corrupted in language, and interpolated with trivial and incongruous incidents. The tale is a pure fiction, but related with considerable force and in a highly popular style.

The tale commences with the statement that *Dairé Dornmhar* according to the author the emperor of the whole world except Erin, calls together all the tributary kings of his empire to join him in an expedition to Erin, to subjugate it and to enforce tribute. He arrives with a great fleet at *Glas Charraig* [now the " Skellig Rocks", on the coast of Kerry], piloted by *Glas Mac Dremain*, a soldier of Kerry, who had been previously banished by *Finn Mac Cumhaill*. This *Glas Mac Dremain*, who was well acquainted with his native coast, brought

the fleet safely into the noble harbour of *Finntráigh* (or Ventry), from which place the emperor determined to subdue the country.

Finn had at all times some of his trusty warriors, vigilant and swift of foot, posted at all the harbours of the country, for the purpose of giving him timely information of the approach or landing of any foreign foe on the island ; and not the least important, as well as interesting, part of this tale is the list of these harbours, with their ancient as well as their more modern names.

At the actual time of this invasion, Finn, with the main body of his warriors, was enjoying the pleasures of swimming and fishing in the waters of the river Shannon, where a messenger from his warden at Ventry reached him with the important news. In the meantime, the news also reached several chiefs and warriors of the *Tuatha De Danann* race, who were located in *Ui Chonaill Gabhra* [in the present county of Limerick] , and several of these, simultaneously with Finn, set out for Ventry, where they all arrived in due time, and immediately entered upon a series of combats with the foreign enemy.

Tidings of the invasion were soon carried into Ulster also ; and Gall, the son of *Fiacha Foltleathan*, king of that province, a youth of fifteen, obtained leave from his father to come to Finn's assistance, at the head of a fine band of young volunteers from Ulster. Young Gall's ardour, however, cost him rather dear ; for having entered the battle with extreme eagerness, his excitement soon increased to absolute frenzy, and after having performed astounding deeds of valour, he fled in a state of derangement from the scene of slaughter, and never stopped until he plunged into the wild seclusion of a deep glen far up the country. This glen has ever since been called *Glenn-na-n-Gealt*, or the Glen of the Lunatics, and it is even to this day believed in the south, that all the lunatics of Erin would resort to this spot if they were allowed to be at large.

The siege, as it may be called, of Ventry Harbour, held for twelve months and a day ; but at length the foreign foe was beaten off with the loss of all his best men, and indeed of nearly the whole of his army ; and thus Finn and his brave warriors, as was their long custom (would that we had had worthy successors to them in after times !) , preserved the liberty and integrity of their native land.

This tale of the Battle of Ventry is of no absolute value as historic authority for the incidents related in it ; but the many names of places, and the various manners and customs traditionally handed down and preserved in it, render it of considerable interest to the student in Irish history.

The next Fenian tale which requires notice is one which is well known under the name of the *Imtheacht an Ghiolla Deacair*, or " Flight of the Slothful Fellow",

On one occasion that *Finn Mac Cumhaill* gave a great feast to his officers and men, at his own court at *Almhain* [the Hill of Allen, in the present county of Kildare], it was determined to go into Munster on a hunting excursion. The feast being over, they set out with their dogs and hounds, and after having passed through several places of historical celebrity, which are named in the tract, they arrived at last at *Cnoc Ainé* [now called Knockany], in the present county of Limerick. Here Finn took his stand, and setting up his tent on the top of the hill, he despatched his warriors and their hounds in various groups to the long range of mountains which divide the present counties of Limerick, Cork, and Kerry. The chase was commenced with ardour and prosecuted with increasing excitement through the mountains already mentioned, and then into the game-abounding wilds of Kerry.

When Finn had established his temporary residence on Knockany, he placed a scout on the brow of the hill to keep watch, while he himself, with his few attendants, sought amusement

in a game of chess. While thus engaged, the scout returned with news that he saw a man of great and unwieldy bulk slowly approaching them from the east, leading a horse, which he seemed to be dragging after him by main force. Finn and his party immediately started to their feet ; and although the stranger was but a short distance from them, so slow was his movement, that some considerable time elapsed before he reached their presence. Having arrived before them at last, Finn questioned him as to his name, race, country, profession, and the object of his visit. The stranger answered that his pedigree and country were undistinguished and uncertain ; that his name was *Giolla Deacair*, or the " Slothful Fellow" ; and that he was seeking service under some distinguished master ; and that being slow and very lazy, he kept a horse for the purpose of riding whenever he was sent upon a message or errand. The latter part of the answer afforded Finn and his friends matter for merriment, as the horse, from his gaunt and dying appearance, seemed to be less desirous of carrying any burden than of being carried himself. However, Finn took the " Slothful Fellow" into his service ; upon which the latter requested and obtained permission to turn his old horse out among the horses of the Fenian party.

No sooner, however, had the old horse found himself among his better conditioned neighbours, than he began to kick, bite, and tear them at a fearful rate. Finn immediately ordered the new servant to go and bring his wicked beast away. This the servant set about doing, but so slow was his movement that all the horses in the field would have been torn to pieces before he could have reached them, though the distance was but short.

Conan Mac Morna, who may be described as the Fenian Thersites, seeing his own steed attacked by the malignant animal, went boldly up to him, caught hold of him, and endeavoured to lead him off from the field. But no sooner was the old beast laid hold of, than he seemed to have lost all power of life and limb, and stir he would not. His owner, however, having come up by this time, told Conan that the horse was not accustomed to move with strangers except when ridden; whereupon Conan mounted him, but neither would he move any more than before. The new servant then said that Conan was too light for the horse, which was accustomed to move only with a weighty load, and pressed the other men of Finn's party to mount along with Conan, which they did to the number of twelve. The owner now dealt the old horse a smart blow of an iron rod which he always carried for that purpose. No sooner had the horse received this blow than he started off at a rapid speed with his burden in a western direction towards the sea, followed by Finn and the few of his party who had remained with him. Having reached the sea, the horse plunged in, and the waves immediately opened a dry passage far in front, but closed up after him, the " Slothful Fellow" holding fast by his tail.

It is sufficient to say that the riders were carried by enchantment to a foreign unknown country ; that Finn and a select party followed them in a ship ; and that after much of wild and extravagant adventure, they were discovered and brought home again.

These two last tales that I have been just describing, and another called the *Bruighean Chaerthainn*, still existing, are mentioned by Dr. Keting, in his History of Erinn, at the reign of Cormac Mac Art, as among the many romantic tales written of *Finn Mac Cumhaill* and his warriors, existing in his own time, say about the year 1630.

In describing to you these early Fenian Tales, I have, in fact, made you acquainted with the general scope of the numerous tales of a purely imaginative character which come after them in the chronological order of the pieces of ancient literature which have been presented to us. For my present purpose it is, therefore, unnecessary to give you any examples of the latter in detail. The value of all of them to the student of mere history, consists only, as I have already said, in the records of ancient topography, and in the glimpses of life, manners, and customs, which they contain ; and important as they are in so many other ways to the student of the Gaedhlic language and literature, a more minute examination of them must be reserved till

such time as, in another course of lectures, it may become my duty to treat of those special subjects.

Of these Imaginative Tales of ancient date, some older than those called Fenian, of which I have been speaking, some not so old, I shall, then, at present, only give you the titles of some of the more important ; and I may particularly name : — The Adventures of Brian, the son of *Feabhall* ; of *Conla Ruadh* ; of Cormac Mac Art, in the land of promise ; of *Tadhg* (or *Teige*) *Mac Cein* ; the exile of the sons of *Duil Dearmart* ; the courtship of *Etain* ; of *Beag Fola* ; and the death of *Aithirné*. Copies of these are preserved in vellum ; and of the following ancient there are copies on paper. The Adventures of Conall Gulban ; tales in the great battle of *Mairthnme* and death of *Cuchulainn* ; the Red Route of *Conall Cearnach* (to avenge that death) ; and the tales called the Three Sorrowful Stories of Erin — namely, the Story of the tragical fate of the children of *Lear* ; the Story of the children of *Uisnech* ; and the Story of the sons of *Tuireann*, etc.

These various tales were composed at various dates, but all, I believe, anterior to the year 1000.

In conclusion, I have only to indicate to you the extent of our existing manuscript treasures in this department of literature, by stating roughly, as before, the quantity of letterpress which they would fill, if printed at length in the same form as the text of O'Donovan's Four Masters.

The Gaelic text of the Fenian poems and tales, then, may be calculated as extensive enough to occupy about 3000 pages of such volumes ; and I believe the text of the mass of the other tales of which I have spoken, would extend to at least 5000 pages more.

You may thus form to yourselves some idea of the amount of that literature, — small a portion of it as has, in any form, come down to us, — which awaits your study whenever you qualify yourselves to open its pages by making yourselves acquainted with that ancient tongue, so long neglected by the present descendants of the Gaedhils of your country. And in estimating the literary value of the compositions of this class (of which so very great a number remain to us), remember you are not to be guided by the remarks I have made respecting their merely *historical* importance. Perhaps their chief claim, after all, to your attention would be found to lie in their literary merits, and in the richly imaginative language in which they are written. Let me, then, always remind you, that in these Lectures I still confine myself strictly to my subject, — the materials of the Ancient History of Erin ; and that the subject of our *Literature* must be reserved for another course.

Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history (1861)

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