

The Celtic Dragon Myth  
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With The  
Geste of Fraoch and the Dragon  
Translated with Introduction  
By George Henderson

Between the years 1870 and 1884 the late Mr J. F. Campbell of Islay was repeatedly attracted by a series of legends current in the Highlands and Isles, which made special appeal to him as a storyologist. After reading a dozen versions of the stories, he found that no single title fitted so well as that of the Dragon Myth. “It treats of water, egg, mermaid, sea-dragon, tree, beasts, birds, fish, metals, weapons, and men mysteriously produced from sea-gifts. All versions agree in these respects ; they are all water myths, and relate to the slaying of water monsters.”

Literature abounds in references to dragon-monsters. Homer describes the shield of Hercules as having the scaly horror of a dragon coiled, with eyes oblique, that askant shot gleaming fire. Ovid locates the dragon slain by Cadmus near the river Cephissus, in Bœotia. Arthur carries a dragon on his helm, a tradition referred to in the *Faerie Queen*. Shakespeare, too : —

“Peace, Kent ;  
Come not between the Dragon and his wrath !”

Ludd’s dominion was infested by a dragon that shrieked on May-Day Eve. In Wales, St Samson is said to have seized the dragon and thrown it into the sea. Among the Welsh, indeed, a pendragon came to mean a chief, a dictator in times of danger. And if we surveyed the lives of the saints, it would be tedious to enumerate the number who figure as dragon-slayers—all of them active long ere the days of the modern Mediterranean shark !

Over the linguistic area covered by the Celtic branches of the Indo-European peoples, legends of contests with monsters have been current from early times. As to their origin, it is difficult to be certain as to how far they may have been transmitted from one people to another. Possibly external influence may be traced in the *Bruden Dâ Derga*, a Gadhelic text from about the eighth century, which speaks of

“In leuidán timchella inn domon” [1]  
(The Leviathan that surrounds the world).

The Cymric book of Taliessin tells of

“That river of dread strife hard by *terra* [earth],  
Venom its essence, around the world it goes,” [2]

*The Early Lives of the Saints* have parallel references. In an eighth-century chronicle concerning St Fechin, we hear of evil powers and influences whose rage is “seen in that watery fury, and their hellish hate and turbulence in the beating of the sea against the rocks.” Pious men are often afraid to approach the shore, fearing to encounter the like hellish influence. Of a great storm we read of “the waves rising higher and higher—Satan himself doubtless assisting from beneath.” [3] The Life of the Irish Saint Abban tells how from his ship he saw a beastly monster on the sea, having a hundred heads of divers forms, two hundred eyes, and

as many ears ; it extended itself to the clouds and set the waters in such commotion that the ship was almost lost. The sailors feared greatly. St Abban prayed against the monster, the beast fell as if dead, and there was a calm. But strange to relate, the body of the monster could be seen neither on sea nor on land (*et in hoc apparet quod dyabolus fuit*), [4] In Adamnan's Life of Colum-Cille [5] there is a chapter concerning the repulse of a certain aquatic monster (*aquatilis bestia*) by the blessed man's prayer. The incident occurred somewhere by the river Ness. The inhabitants were burying one who had been bitten while swimming. To fetch a coble from the opposite bank, one of Columba's companions, Lugne Mocumin, cast himself into the water. And Adamnan relates : —

“ But the monster, which was lying in the river bed, and whose appetite was rather whetted for more prey than sated with what it already had, perceiving the surface of the water disturbed by the swimmer, suddenly comes up and moves towards the man as he swam in mid-stream, and with a great roar rushes on him with open mouth, while all who were there, barbarians as well as brethren, were greatly terror-struck. The blessed man seeing it, after making the salutary sign of the cross in the empty air with his holy hand upraised, and invoking the name of God, commanded the ferocious monster, saying : ‘ Go thou no further, nor touch the man ; go back at once.’ Then, on hearing this word of the saint, the monster was terrified, and fled away again more quickly than if it had been dragged off by ropes, though it had approached Lugne as he swam so closely that between man and monster there was no more than the length of one punt pole.”

The whole incident reflects some natural fact, together with the human belief in the possible occurrence of such. “ The belief,” says Bishop Reeves, “ that certain rivers and lakes were haunted by serpents of a demoniacal and terrible character was current among the Irish at a very remote period, and still prevails in many parts of Ireland.” St Molua and St Colman of Dromore are recorded to have saved people from such monsters. As to the modern Irish belief, let Mr W. R. Le Fanu's *Seventy Years of Irish Life* be evidence : —

“ The dreadful beast, the wurrum—half fish, half dragon—still survives in many a mountain lake—seldom seen, indeed, but often heard. Near our fishing quarters in Kerry there are two such lakes, one the beautiful little lake at the head of the Blackwater River, called Lough Brin, from Brin or Bran as he is now called, the dreadful wurrum which inhabits it. The man who minds the boat there speaks with awe of Bran ; he tells me he has never seen him, and hopes he never may, but has often heard him roaring on a stormy night. On being questioned what the noise was like, he said it was ‘ like the roaring of a young bull’ . . . Some miles further on, between Lough Brin and Glencar, there is another lake from which a boy while bathing was driven and chased by the dreadful wurrum which dwells in it. It bit him on the back and hunted him all the way home, where he arrived naked and bleeding.”

In the Life of St Mochua of Balla it is recounted that no one ventured to pursue a wounded stag that fled to an island in Lough Ree, on account of a horrible monster that infested the lake and was wont to destroy swimmers. A man was at last persuaded to swim across, but as he was returning the beast devoured him.

In the *Altus* of St Colum-Cille he refers to a great slimy dragon, terrible and most horrible, that slimy serpent more subtle than all the beasts : —

“ Draco magnus deterrimus terribilis et antiquus qui fuit serpens lubricus sapientior omnibus bestiis. . . .”

Nor is a similar belief yet extinct in the Highlands. The late Miss Dempster of Skibo records in her manuscript a legend of St Gilbert and the Dragon, with a note that some say that this was not a dragon, but a witch from Lochlin—a variant to be expected in Sutherland :—

“ There lived once upon a time in Sutherland a great dragon, very fierce and strong. It was this dragon that burnt all the fir woods in Ross, Sutherland, and the Reay country, of which the remains, charred, blackened, and half-decayed, may be found in every moss. Magnificent forests they must have been, but the dragon set fire to them with his fiery breath, and rolled over the whole land.

Men fled from before his face, and women fainted when his shadow crossed the sky-line. He made the whole land desert. And it came to pass that this evil spirit, whom the people called the ‘ beast’ and ‘ Dubh Giuthais,’ came nigh to Dornoch as near as Lochfinn, and when he could see the town and spire of St Gilbert, his church—‘ Pity of you, Dornoch,’ roared the dragon. ‘ Pity of you, Dornoch,’ said St Gilbert, and taking with him five long and sharp arrows, and a little lad to carry them, he went out to meet the ‘ beast.’ When he came over against it he said, ‘ Pity of you,’ and drew his bow. The first arrow shot the beast through the heart. He was buried by the towns-people. Men are alive now who reckoned distance by so or so far from the ‘ stone of the beast’ on the moor between Skibo and Dornoch. The moor is planted, and a wood called Carmore waves over the ashes of the destroying dragon.”

This church. Miss Dempster notes, was built between 1235-45, burnt 1570, and rebuilt 1614 ; it was repaired in 1835 by the Duchess, Countess of Sutherland. While the work was going forward the tomb of the founder, Gilbert, Bishop of Caithness, called St Gilbert, was discovered. The saying went in Sutherland that when this happened, the cathedral would fall at mid-day the following Sunday ; and Mrs Dempster well remembered seeing a third of the congregation (Gaelic) camped out on the hill above the town, expecting to see the fall of the roof ; nor did many of the oldest inhabitants go to church for several following Sundays.

In addition to legends of the *beithir-nimh* (venomous serpent) and *uile-bheist* (dragon ; also *a' bheisd*), there are endless tales of the water-horse (*each-uisge*) associated with Highland lochs. There is hardly a district without some legend of a *Linne na Baobh* (Badhbh) : very often the water-horse is represented as a kind of creature covered all over with rags and ribbons, typifying the wind-tossed surface of the waves. His appearance is a portent of a drowning soon to follow.

In the poem of *Tristan and Iseult*, by Gottfried of Strassburg, a German poet who wrote about the year 1210, working on sources found by him in a poem by Thomas of Brittany, there is an account of the fight with the dragon, strangely analogous to that in Highland tradition. The hero overcomes a monster, and is about to be robbed of the credit of his exploit by a traitor who claims the princess as his guerdon. It is a widespread Aryan tale. A similar adventure is ascribed to Lancelot in *Le cerf au pied blanc*, and in the Dutch poem of *Morien*. At least three of the printed prose versions of *Tristan* retain the dragon fight, [6] whether it formed originally a part of the tale or not. Gottfried of Strassburg introduces it thus :—

“ Now, the story tells us that there was at that time in Ireland a monstrous dragon which devoured the people and wasted the land ; so that the king at last had sworn a solemn oath that whoever slew the monster should have the Princess Iseult to wife ; and because of the beauty of the maiden and the fierceness of the dragon, many a valiant knight had lost his life. The land was full of the tale, and it had come to Tristan’s [7] ears, and in the thought of this had he made his journey.

“ The next morning, ere it was light, he rose and armed himself secretly, and took his strongest spear, and mounted his steed, and rode forth into the wilderness. He rode by many a rough path till the sun was high in the heavens, when he turned downwards into a valley, where, as the geste tells us, the dragon had its lair. Then he saw afar off four men galloping swiftly over the moor where there was no road. One of them was the queen’s seneschal, who would fain have been the lover of the Princess Iseult, but she liked him not. Whenever knights rode forth bent on adventures, the seneschal was ever with them for nothing on earth save that men might say they had seen him ride forth, for never would he face the dragon, but would return swifter than he went.

“ Now, when Tristan saw the men in flight he knew the dragon must be near at hand, so he rode on steadily, and ere long he saw the monster coming towards him, breathing out smoke and flame from its open jaws. The knight laid his spear in rest, and set spurs to his steed, and rode so swiftly, and smote so strongly, that the spear went in at the open jaws, and pierced through the throat into the dragon’s heart, and he himself came with such force against the dragon that his horse fell dead, and he could scarce free himself from the steed. But the evil beast fell upon the corpse and partly devoured it, till the wound from the spear pained it so sorely that it left the horse half-eaten, and fled into a rocky ravine.

“ Tristan followed after the monster, which fled before him, roaring for pain till the rocks rang again with the sound. It cast fire from its jaws and tore up the earth around, till the pain of the wound overcame it, and it crouched down under a wall of rock. Then Tristan drew forth his sword, thinking to slay the monster easily, but ’twas a hard strife, the hardest Tristan had ever fought, and in truth he thought it would be his death. For the dragon had as aids smoke and flame, teeth and claws sharper than a shearing knife ; and the knight had much ado to find shelter behind the trees and bushes, for the fight was so fierce that the shield he held in his hand was burnt well-nigh to a coal. But the conflict did not endure over-long, for the spear in the vitals of the dragon began to pain him so that he lay on the ground, rolling over and over in agony. Then Tristan came near swiftly and smote with his sword at the heart of the monster so that the blade went in right to the hilt ; and the dragon gave forth a roar so grim and terrible that it was as if heaven and earth fell together, and the cry was heard far and wide through the land. Tristan himself was well-nigh terrified, but as he saw the beast was dead he went near, and with much labour he forced the jaws open, and cut out the tongue ; then he closed the jaws again, and put the tongue in his bosom. He turned him again to the wilderness, thinking to rest through the day, and come again to his people secretly in the shadows of the night ; but he was so overcome by the stress of the fight and the fiery breath of the dragon that he was well-nigh spent, and seeing a little lake near at hand into which a clear stream flowed from the rock, he went towards it, and as he came to the cool waters the weight of his armour and the venom of the dragon’s tongue overpowered him, and he fell senseless by the stream.

“ Iseult and her mother afterwards found Tristan, and drew him out of the water, whereupon the dragon’s tongue fell from his breast. And when all the folk came together to know the end of the seneschal’s matter, Tristan spake —

“ ‘ Lords all, mark this marvel, I slew the dragon, and cut this tongue from out the jaws, yet this man afterwards smote it a second time to death.’

“ And all the lords said, ‘ One thing is clear, he who came first and cut out the tongue was the man who slew the monster.’ And never a man said nay.” [8]

Wales, too, has its legends of dragons, serpents, and snakes. It seems to have been an old Welsh belief that all lizards were formerly women. [9] Every Welsh farmhouse had two

snakes. “ They never appeared until just before the death of the master or mistress of the house ; then the snakes died.” Parallel with this, perhaps, is the number of river names within the Celtic area that seem to contain the names of goddesses or nymphs of the stream. Such are met with in Lōchy, the Nigra Dea (black goddess) of Adamnan ; in Affric, both a lake and river name, also a personal female name, from *aith bhric* (root), as in *breac* (spotted) ; in Nevis, where Dr MacBain rightly detected some nymph name like Nebestis ; Aberdeen, Gaelic *Obair-dhea’oin*, with a strongly trilled *r*, showing that *dh* of old *deuona* (goddess, etc.) has been assimilated to the preceding word for estuary, *deuona* itself being a divine name, and exemplifying in a river name what Ausonius tells us was the case with sacred springs in Gaul—*fons addite divis* (they were dedicated to the gods). To be included in the number is the name of the river Boyne, which under the form *Bofind* (white cow) yields Boyne, the name of Fraoch’s mother’s sister from the Sídh (Shee) or Faëry. The form Boand (genitive Bóinde), also that in the phrase *in (h)ostio Boindeo* (at the mouth of the Boyne) goes back on some such form as Boouinda (white cow). This recalls an Irish name for the Milky Way—*bóthar bó finne* (the way or path of the cow of whiteness). But in Uist I met with the name *Sliochd Uis* (Milky Way), meaning seemingly “ the path or way of whiteness or brightness,” the root of which recurs again in Uisnech (Uisnech).

But the survey of the theme would not be complete in the form in which the more modern tradition leaves it. I have therefore given the story of Fraoch from the Book of the Dean of Lismore, and also the first part of the old and important tale known as the *Táin Bó Fráich*, of which the following manuscripts exist : The Book of Leinster ; The Yellow Book of Lecan ; Edinburgh Advocates’ Library Gaelic MS. XL. ; Egerton 1782 (British Museum). This old story has been edited with all the important variants, with his wonted care and skill, by Professor Kuno Meyer in the *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* for 1902. In making my translation I tried to select from among the best of the variant readings. The last seven sections of the *Táin Bó Fráich* I have not translated here : they are apart from the Geste of Fraoch, and bring the hero of the narrative on further adventures elsewhere. This tale is one of the oldest of our secular narratives in Gadhelic : it belongs to about the ninth century, a period when the Scoto-Celtic idiom of Alba was one with the language of Erin. A translation was made by the late Mr J. O’Beirne Crowe, which appeared in the Royal Irish Academy Proceedings for 1870, but subsequent studies have necessitated many changes.

The name Fraoch (Fraech) is very ancient. It survives in the place name Clonfree (Cluain Fraeich), Strokestown, Roscommon. On an Ogham stone it occurs in *Netta Vroicci maqi muccoi Trenaluggo* at Donaghmore, Kildare ; also in *Vraicci maqi Medvi* on an Ogham from Rathcroghan, Roscommon. In this last it stands for (the stone) of Fraoch, son of Medb. [10] Another account of the death of Fraoch than that given in what I term the Geste of Fraoch is met with in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, where he meets his death at the hands of Cuchulainn. It is noticeable that his fairy origin is pointed to, and that his death is associated with water. This episode is at a later stage in his story than that in *Táin Bó Fráich*, which gives the serpent encounter. He had by this time accompanied Mève’s forces as recounted in the Cattle-Raid of Cuailnge (*Táin Bó Cuailnge*), and his healing at the hands of the folk of Fäery is to be pre-supposed : here again they intervene, and we hear of Fraoch’s fairy-mound. Here is the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* version of the death of Fraoch, or Fraech : —

“ They are there till next morning ; then Fraech is summoned to them. ‘ Help us, O Fraech,’ said Medb (Mève). ‘ Remove from us the strait that is on us. Go before Cuchulainn before us, if perchance you shall fight with him.’

“ He set out early in the morning with nine men, till he reached Ath Fuait. He saw the warrior bathing in the river.

“ ‘ Wait here,’ said Fraech to his retinue, ‘ till I come to the man yonder ; not good is the water,’ said he.

“ He took off his clothes, and goes into the water to him.

“ ‘ Do not come to me,’ said Cuchulainn. ‘ You will die from it, and I should be sorry to kill you.’

“ ‘ I shall come indeed,’ said Fraech, ‘ that we may meet in the water ; and let your play with me be fair.’

“ ‘ Settle it as you like,’ said Cuchulainn.

“ ‘ The hand of each of us round the other,’ said Fraech.

“ They set to wrestling for a long time on the water, and Fraech was submerged. Cuchulainn lifted him up again.

“ ‘ This time,’ said Cuchulainn, ‘ will you yield and accept your life ?’

“ ‘ I will not suffer it,’ said Fraech.

“ Cuchulainn put him under it again, until Fraech was killed. He comes to land ; his retinue carry his body to the camp. Ath Fraich, that was the name of that ford for ever. All the host lamented Fraech. They saw a troop of women in green tunics [11] on the body of Fraech mac Idaid ; they drew him from them into the mound. Sid Fraich was the name of that mound afterwards.”

Ailill’s plan in compassing the death of Fraoch recalls his episode with Fergus, son of Rōg. Keating [12] tells how, when Fergus was in banishment in Connaught, it happened that he was with Ailill and Mève in Magh Ai, where they had a fortress ; and one day, when they went out to the shore of a lake that was near the *lios* (or outer court), Ailill asked Fergus to go and swim in the lake, and Fergus did so. While swimming, Mève was seized by a desire of swimming with him ; and when she had gone into the lake with Fergus, Ailill grew jealous, and he ordered a kinsman of his to cast a spear at Fergus, which pierced him through the breast ; and Fergus came ashore on account of the wound caused by that cast, and extracted the spear from his body and cast it in the direction of Ailill ; and it pierced a gray hound that was near his chariot, and thereupon Fergus fell and died and was buried on the shore of the same lake.

Rhys points out that Ailill (written Oilill in Keating) seems cognate with Welsh *ellyll* (an elf or demon), and that Mève’s Ailill belongs to a race which is always ranged against the Tuatha Dé Danann. Mève he associates with the goddesses of dawn and dusk, who are found at one time consorting with bright beings and at another with dark ones, and they commonly associate themselves with water. Curious too that Mève’s sisters Eithne and Clothru are associated the one with the river Inny (Eithne) in Westmeath, the other with Clothru’s Isle (Inis Clothraun) in Loch Ree.

Eochaidh Feidhlioch, monarch at Tara, was Mève’s father. He had three sons and three daughters—namely, Breas and Nar and Lothar, the three sons ; Eithne Uathach, Clothra, and Mève of Cruachan, the three daughters, as the poet says in this quatrain : —

“ Three daughters had Eochaidh Feidhlioch,

Fame on a lofty seat :  
Eithne Uathach, fair Mève of Cruachan,  
And Clothra.” [13]

O’Curry remarks of Mève that she seemed more calculated to govern many men than to be governed by one man. She soon abandoned Conchobar, and returned to her father, the monarch Eochaidh Feidhlioch, to Tara, who shortly after set her up as the independent queen of the province of Connaught. Through jealousy and hatred, fierce war raged between her and her former husband, Conchobar, who finally was killed by a Connaught champion, Cét Mac Magach. This Conchobar, King of Ultonia, is spoken of as being a terrestrial god among the Ultonians. His mother’s name was Ness, hence he is known as Mac Nessa. This goddess name is connected with that in Loch *Ness*, and points to her as having been conceived of at first as a water-nymph. This does not prejudice what reflex of historic movements these stories may imply. Curiously, the death of Mève, no less than that of Fraoch, is associated with water. Keating’s [14] account is as follows : —

“ When Olill had been slain by Conall Cearnach, Mève went to Inis Clothrann, on Lough Ribh (Ree), to live ; and while she resided there, she was under an obligation (*ba geis di*, *i.e.*, under a taboo or *gessa*) to bathe every morning in the well which was at the entrance to the island. And when Forbuidhe, son of Conchobar (her former husband) heard this, he visited the well one day alone, and with a line measured from the brink of the well to the other side of the lake, and took the measure with him to Ulster, and practised thus : he inserted two poles in the ground, and tied an end of the line to each pole, and placed an apple on one of the poles, and stood himself at the other pole, and kept constantly firing from his sling at the apple that was on the top of the pole till he struck it. This exercise he practised until he had grown so dexterous that he would miss no aim at the apple. Soon after this there was a meeting of the people of Ulster and Connaught at both sides of the Shannon at Inis Clothrann ; and Forbuidhe came there from the east with the Ulster gathering. And one morning, while he was there, he saw Mève bathing, as was her wont, in the fore-mentioned well ; and with that he fixed a stone in his sling and hurled it at her, and struck her in the forehead, so that she died on the spot, having been ninety-eight years on the throne of Connaught, as we have said above.” [15]

Of Fraoch’s mother Boand, elsewhere spoken of as from the *Sídhe*, the Bodleian Dindshenchus gives the following account : [16] —

“ Bóann, wife of Nechtán, son of Labraid, son of Nama, went with the cupbearers to the well-of-the-green of the fortress. Whoever went alone to it came not from it without disgrace. Now these were the names of the cupbearers whom Nechtán had, even Flesc and Lesc and Luam. Unless the cupbearers went to the well, no human being would come from it without disgrace.

“ Then, with pride and haughtiness, the queen went alone to the well, and said that it had no secret or power unless it could disgrace her shape. And she went round the well withershins thrice, to perceive the well’s magic power. Out of the well three waves break over her, and suddenly her right thigh and her right hand and her right eye burst, and then she fled out of the fairy mound, fleeing the disgrace and fleeing the well, so that she reached the sea with the water of the well behind her. And the Inber Bóinne (river-mouth of Boyne) drowned her. Hence ‘ Bóann’ and ‘ Inber Bóinne.’ ”

“ One day Boyne of the mark of Bregia  
Broke every fence as far as the White Sea ;  
Bóann was the name on that day

Of the wife of Nechtán, son of Labraid.”

Nechtán, the mythic owner of the fairy precinct now called Trinity Well, into which one could not gaze with impunity, and from which the river Boyne first burst forth in pursuit of the lady who insulted it, may be cognate, Rhys thought, with Neptune, which certainly seems cognate with Irish Nuada *Necht*. [17]

How rivers came to be personified may be illustrated by an enigma which a poet puts to Finn in the tale of the Fairy-Palace of the Quicken Trees : [18]—

“ I saw to the south a bright-faced queen  
With couch of crystal and robe of green ;  
A numerous offspring sprightly and small,  
Plain through her skin you can see them all ;  
Slowly she moves, and yet her speed  
Exceeds the pace of the swiftest steed !  
Now tell me the name of that wondrous queen,  
With her couch of crystal and robe of green.”

To this Finn answers : “ The queen you saw is the river Boyne, which flows by the south side of the palace of Bruga. Her couch of crystal is the sandy bed of the river ; and her robe of green the grassy plain of Bregia, through which it flows. Her children, which you can see through her skin, are the speckled salmon, the lively pretty trout, and all the other fish that swim in the clear water of the river. The river flows slowly indeed ; but its waters traverse the whole world in seven years, which is more than the swiftest steed can do.”

A booklet entitled *The Death of Fraoch*, a Gaelic poem, was printed at Iona in 1887, by J. MacCormick and W. Muir, and published there by F. Ritchie. In 1888 a copy of the same appeared at Iona, with illustrations by W. C. Ward. For a perusal, after my own rendering was finished, of these now rare editions I have to thank Mrs MacMillan, the Manse, Iona. The Preface is of special interest, as telling that the events narrated “ occurred in Mull, in the district surrounding Loch Laich. . . . The local tradition is that Fraoch lived at Suidhe, near the village of Bunessan. Opposite him, in an oblique direction on the other side of the loch, lived Mev, through whose treachery Fraoch was slain ; the place is still known as *larach tigh Meidhe*. The island where the rowan tree grew is called after her, Eilean Mhain [19] (the isle of Main). It is right opposite to Bunessan.

“ The local tradition asserts that the monster which guarded the rowan tree, and by which Fraoch was slain, was a great serpent ; but we take leave to doubt this, because great serpents were not known in Scotland. We think that the creature was the *torc nimhe* (wild boar), which undoubtedly was common in the Highlands. Some who possess the tradition say that Fraoch was found dead with the heart of the beast in his hand, on the strand of the ‘ Bay of the heart’ (*Camus A’ Chridhe*), The bay is there to witness this, but we do not read in the poem that the monster’s heart was really torn out.” The writers take exception to translating *Cruachan* in the third verse by Ben Cruachan, Loch Awe, and simply render *cruachan soir* “ the hill in the east.” They hope this rendering “ effectually” dissipates “ that myth”—*i.e.*, of associating the scene with Loch Awe. They have no recollection of the celebrated Cruachan in Roscommon. Fraoch they associate with *energy* : “ Fraoch is seen to be an appropriate name for an eager, impetuous, generous, affectionate, strong, young man.” The writers add that the strength of Fraoch is still proverbial. It is common yet to say *nam bithinn-sa cho làidir ri Fraoch spionainn craobh as a bun* — *i.e.*, “ were I as strong as Fraoch, I could pull a tree from its roots.”



A tune is added “ as it was sung in Mull fifty years ago,” on the authority of Mr Neil MacCormick of Fionn-phort—the first verse being repeated after each of the others, as a chorus. “ It has the strain of a lament, and the tune to which it is sung is most melodious and melancholy.” The air there noted is different to that given in the Appendix to Dr K. N. Macdonald’s *Gesto Collection*. In Scotland the legend is also localised at Loch Freuchie, near Amulree, Perthshire ; and at Loch Awe, Argyll, where the legend has been moralised in poetic treatment at the hands of Mr P. G. Hamerton in his *Isles of Loch Awe* (1855). Mr Hamerton compares the Celtic Myth to that of Hercules : he depicts both Fraoch and the lady as dying after the tasting of the poisonous fruit :

“ Both their faces were in deepest shade  
Close to each other. Thus the pair were found.”

Mr Hamerton draws a moral :

“ There are fables full of truth  
Fraoch’s tale is sadly true !  
For how many in their youth,  
Bitten by the serpent’s tooth,  
Die or only live to rue !”

A free rendering of the eighteenth-century Lay of Fraoch, which really does not belong to the Ossianic Cycle, was given by Jerome Stone, (1727-1756) in the *Scots Magazine*, with a letter dated Dunkeld, Nov. 15, 1755. He made an unwarrantable change in heading the poem *Sir Albin and the Daughter of Mey*.

In Hamerton the fruit is poisonous : Fraoch and the “ Lady of Loch Awe” both die of it. The eating of the fruit of the Tree of Life brings death. Medb could not live without the fruit ; Fraoch could not taste of it, or even go through the perils of getting it, without dying. Fraoch must not go near the water ; otherwise there will be a conflict which will issue in his death. Boand (Boyne), his mother’s sister, cautions Fraoch’s mother against the water, according to a poem in the *Book of Fermoy*—

“ Let him not swim Black Water,  
For therein he shall shed his blood.”

According to the Highland Lays, Fraoch dies by the serpent, and Findabair laments him. In the *Táin Bó Fraich* there is only a promised betrothal with Findabair. According to the *Book of Fermoy*, his wife is Treblann, a foster-child to Coirpre mac Rossa, who belonged to Faëry. In the *Táin Bó Fraich* his healing came from the Sidhe, and he survived to take part with Medb on the foray of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, when he fell at the hands of Cuchulainn. In either case his death is connected with water. Medb was previously wife of Conchobar, who, according to a gloss in the *Book of the Dun Cow*, was formerly a god upon earth (*día talmanda*). In another account we find Conchobar as the name of a river. [20] Medb’s first husband would thus seem to have been a water-god. One might hazard the suggestion that in old Druidic teaching, Medb herself may have been a sort of sea-mother, if indeed their thought on ultimate things may have got the length of postulating a mother of mankind. The berries for which she craved were from the Tree of Life, the food of the gods, the eating of which by mortals brings death. Rowan hurdles were used in Druidic divination : [21] the rowan was a magic medicine ; a monster was thought to haunt the roots of a rowan, and typified the guardian spirit of the tree. The thought is old among the Celts ; on the second altar of Notre Dame there is a figure of the Celtic Hercules killing a serpent, [22] which the late Monsieur D’Arbois de Jubainville tried to explain by episodes from Gadhelic myth. The

dragon may be thought of as the confiner that holds captive the fruit-bearing Tree of Life. On this view he may be the winter-monster which Hildebrandt sees in the Indian Vritra, the “confiner” that holds captive the rivers, while Indra is the spring or summer sun which frees them from the clutches of the winter dragon. The rage of the sun-god may be conceived of as manifested against the cloud-dragon, or the winter-dragon, or the sea-dragon. Fraoch may thus be the Celtic Hercules Furens, the name being the same in root as *fraoch* (wrath), early Irish *fraech* (fury, rage), which is cognate with Cymric *gwrug*. [23] His quest may be a solar journey ; and he is swallowed by the monster as the sun is swallowed by the sea. On this view the dragon myth should portray the hero as being devoured by a fish, as on Semitic ground, for which the reader should consult the great Bible Dictionaries, which treat of Bel and the Dragon and allied themes. In *Fraoch* the hero is slain, which is parallel to his being swallowed by the sea ; if not cast up again, he is healed at the hands of the *Sídhe*. May we not infer that the myth is an endeavour to shadow forth some aspects of the external world, a picture, not yet moralised, of the cosmic process, an eternal tragedy of nature ?

So far as Fraoch’s conflict is comparable with that of Herakles and the Hydra, I should like to emphasise a trait in Euripides (*Ion*, v. 192) where Herakles kills the hydra with golden sickles : On an Attic vase there is depicted the conflict of Herakles against the Centaur Nessos, in reality, a river-god. Perhaps if we had the Celtic Myth in its earliest stage we should find Medb herself to have been a sort of serpent or water-monster.

The idea of a paradise or elysium among the Celts, as with the Greeks, assumes two aspects—either that of the hollow-hill (*sidhe*), that is, the fairy-mound, or that of the over-sea elysium. This contrast may have some relation to the civilisation and home of the Celts ; the former pointing, as to its origin, to their continental home, the latter to their insular and maritime abode. The berries of the rowan tree are the berries of the gods, and as connected with the other world are parallel to the idea attached to Emain Ablach, Emain rich in apples, which, from the *Book of Fermoy* and from the *Voyage of Bran*, Professor Kuno Meyer has pointed out is connected with the Isle of the Blessed, and parallel to the idea attached to the Vale of Avalon (Avalon), where “ falls not hail, nor rain, nor any snow.” Underlying the whole is the idea of the Island of the Blessed, *insula promorum quae fortuna vacatur*. As to Fraoch’s exploit, in so far as it may be parallel to that of Herakles, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, in his Commentary on the Herakles of Euripides, has pointed out that the garden of the gods, with the tree which carries the apples of life, is really quite independent of the Herakles saga, while a highly archaic variant of that story is that Herakles. leaps into the jaws of a sea-monster, the jaws of death. On Celtic ground, too, we have the contest of a hero with a water-monster quite apart from Fraoch, and the rowan tree guarded by the dragon. The continuation of the *Táin Bó Frdich* brings the hero across the sea to the Alps and to the Langobardi. Here Fraoch is represented as being of the Ultonians : after high exploits he and his friends came to the territory of the Cruithen-tuath, the Pictish people, and later on he joined Ailill and Medb on the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. It is impossible to be sure whether we have not here a hint that Fraoch was a hero of the Picts, the people whom the Gael called Cruithne (Cruithen-tuath), a word cognate in root with Cymric *pryd* in *Ynys Prydain*, and pointing to the pre-Gadhelic population of these isles as a people who practised tattooing.

Apart from the accessory of the Tree of Life, the parallel that is closest of all is the rescue of Andromeda by Perseus. On a hydriain the Berlin Museum there is a representation of Perseus in conflict with the monster fish, where there is present Andromeda, Kepheus, and another woman (Jope ?). The whole story of the Geste of Fraoch is there minus the rowan tree and the serpent, which is replaced by the monster fish. Among the Greeks it formed the subject of a lost drama of Euripides, but we know the theme from the pseudo-Apollodorus. Perseus, on having come to Æthiopia, the kingdom of Kepheus, found the king’s daughter Andromeda about to be exposed to a sea-monster. Kassiepeia, the wife of Kepheus, had

boasted of her beauty, and thus fell into strife with the Nereids, or water-nymphs. This brought on her the anger of the Nereids and of Poseidon, who sent a flood and a monster to her father's realm. The oracle of Ammon gave out that the disaster to the kingdom would be averted if the king abandoned his daughter Andromeda to be devoured of the monster. Pressed by the Æthiopians, Kepheus had his daughter bound to a rock ; in this state she was found by Perseus, who, smitten with love, promised Kepheus to slay the monster on condition that he would have the king's daughter, on her deliverance, to be his wife. This condition was agreed to, and thereafter Perseus went to meet the monster, killed it, and rescued Andromeda. This is another version of the Herakles-Hesione saga, which briefly is as follows. Poseidon and Apollo came in human form to Laomedon, King of Troy, and promised, for a certain reward, to gird his city with walls. The king would not fulfil his promise when the work was ended ; whereupon Apollo sent a pest, and Poseidon a sea-monster which used to carry off the people working on the fields. Laomedon sought the advice of an oracle, which counselled him, in penance for his guilt, to deliver his daughter Hesione to the monster. In consequence of this divine judgment, Hesione was chained to a rock. As Herakles came the way he offered to free the maiden if Laomedon would give him the horses which he formerly received from Zeus on account of Ganymede. Which being agreed to, Herakles slew the monster and freed the maid. But the stubborn king endeavoured to deceive Herakles also, which drew upon him the vengeance whereby Troy is said to have been first of all destroyed.

It is at Joppa, in Phœnicia, that the story of Andromeda has been localised of old. Pliny [24] tells us that the Phœnician Joppa is older than the flood, that it lies on a hill, in front of which is a rock where traces of the fetters of Andromeda are pointed out. And St Jerome, in his Commentary on Jonah, writes : " Here (at Joppa) is the place where on the strand are pointed out to this day the rocks to which Andromeda was bound, and from which she is said to have been freed by the help of Perseus. And on an Attic vase is a representation of Jason being vomited from out of the belly of a sea-monster or dragon at the command of Athene."

While we have no reference as to Fraoch having been swallowed by the dragon, the fisher's first son was swallowed by the mermaid, who is induced from her love of music to cast him forth once more. [25] It is also noticeable that the impostor incident, so common in the dragon stories, alongside of the rescuer, is lacking in Fraoch. But the impostor incident must have been known of old among the Celts, for we find it alluded to in the Rescue of Derfogaill, or Dervorgoil, a variant of a folk-tale introduced into the " Wooing of Emer," a text of the Cuchulainn Cycle. On coming to the dwelling of Ruad, King of the Isles, at Hallowe'en, Cuchulainn hears wailing in the fort. The king's daughter Derfogaill has been assigned in tribute to the Fomori, and she is exposed on the seashore, awaiting their coming. Cuchulainn kills three Fomori (or sea-giants) in single combat, but his last opponent wounds him at the wrist. The girl gives a strip from her raiment to bind his wound, and her rescuer goes off without making himself known. " The maiden came to the dun and told her father the whole story. . . . Many in the dun boasted of having killed the Fomori, but the maiden did not believe them." On a test having been applied, the maiden recognised Cuchulainn, it is to be inferred, from the piece from off her raiment on his wound. [26] In Brittany the impostor figures as a charcoal-burner, who professes to have killed the seven-headed serpent to which the king's daughter was to have been sacrificed, and he carries off the heads. But the herd had cut out the seven tongues, and these are tokens of the true victor. [27]

In Highland folk-tales the rescuer appears in the character of herd, [28] and the impostor as a squint-eyed, [29] carrotty-headed cook. Its parallel in Ireland is *The Thirteenth Son of the King of Erin* [30] ; here the hero also hires himself as cow-herd, and rescues a king's daughter from an *úr-féist*, a great serpent of the sea, a monster which must get a king's daughter to devour every seven years. While he slept in the maiden's lap, she took three hairs from his head and hid them in her bosom. He has three conflicts with the monster, and each time he is

victor. On the third trial the hero Sean Ruadh takes a brown apple, given him by a giant's housekeeper, and threw it into the monster's mouth, "and the beast fell helpless on the strand, flattened out, and melted away to a dirty jelly on the shore." The girl was able to identify her rescuer by one of his blue-glass boots. The hero finally put the claimants to death, and wedded the maid.

This story has been identified in Brittany and among the Basques. Mr E. Sidney Hartland says : " The indications point to a Celtic or Iberian population as the originators of the *Herdsmen* type [31] . . . a highly specialised type, differing considerably from any form of the classical story, and peculiar to the West of Europe. We have no direct evidence as to the date when the stories of the *Herdsmen* type arose ; but it will be recollected that there is reason to think the type belongs to the Celto-Iberian race, and therefore is of prehistoric age. Nor will the reader fail to note that the *Rescue of Derforgaill* (*Dervorgoil*, *Dervorgilla*) from the *Fomori* appears to be an offshoot of the same type that it is found among one of the branches of the same Celto-Iberian race, and that it is one of the oldest—nay, perhaps the oldest—post-classical variant in Europe of the *Perseus* group. All these considerations make for its independence of the classical tale ; and their cumulative weight may fairly be called decisive." [32]

On this account alone the old story is worthy of a place in our esteem. It conduces to thought, if not to thoughtfulness. Whatever its full origin may be, I suggest that human sense-perception conjoined with racial memories of contest with the raw environment of Nature, and the memory of human ills entailed upon our race by monsters of the prime, [33] along with human phantasy and imagination acting upon the reports of sense, ought to be allowed their due claims to account for some moments of the tale. But folk-tales have a compound-complex origin. I am not in favour of needlessly multiplying hypotheses. Some moments may be due to other races. Nor ought we to close our eyes to the background of the heavens. If the berries from the rowan tree have aught in common with the golden apples of the *Hesperides*, fetched by *Herakles*, it is proper to recollect that worthy scholars read herein the remains of a saga connected with the moon. *Siecke* [34] explains that, according to some ancients, *Herakles* himself plucked the apples after he had slain the snake that guarded the tree ; that he fetched the golden apple or the three apples from the extreme West, as was the case with the bull and the girdle of the *Amazons*. He holds that these are the expression of indubitable perceptions. " Who has not seen, where the sun declines, the golden horns of the bull, the golden girdle, the apple of gold ?" says *Siecke*. All of them for a while had vanished, but *Herakles* brings them back ; truly not forever ; *Athene* or some other divinity will bring them to their place, and into the power of the dragon, for the *World Order* cannot be altered. Yet the hero kills the dragon anew, and fetches the golden apples once more. And so, I would add, with *Fraoch*.

[1] *Leabhar Na h-Uidhri*, 85*b*.

[2] *Rhys*, *Arthurian Legend*, 157.

[3] *Nineteenth Century*, March 1895, p. 422.

[4] *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. *Plummer*, *Tomus Primus*, p. 15.

[5] *Bk. II.*, c. 27 (trans. *W. Huyshe*). For a dragon contest, see *Nennius*, *Historia*, xl.-xlv.

[6] *Löseth*, *Le Roman en prose de Tristan*. For variants of the dragon fight, v. *Hartland's Legend of Perseus*, vol. iii.

[7] *Tristan* and his uncle *Mark*, *Zimmer* thinks, are ninth-century Pictish chieftains. *Iseult* he takes to be the daughter of the Viking King of Dublin.

[8] From *Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan and Iseult*, by *J. L. Weston*, I., 89, 98, 123. *Cf.* also *Bedier's* French retelling, Englished by *Mr Belloc*.

[9] *Trevelyan*, *Folk-Lore and Folk-Stories of Wales*, p. 165.

[10] *MacAlister's Irish Oghams*, pt. 3, p. 213 ; *Journ. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 5 ser.

[11] *W. Faraday's* translation of *The Cattle-Raid of Cuailnge*, in *Nutt's Grimm Library*, p. 35.

Fraech was descended from the people of the Sid, his mother Behind being a fairy woman. Her sister was Boinn (the river Boyne).

- [12] Ed. Dinneen, ii., 209.
- [13] Dinneen's Keating, ii., 215.
- [14] Ed. Dinneen, ii., 213.
- [15] But see Book of Leinster, 124*b*, 125*a*, where the story differs considerably from that given by O'Curry, who evidently quoted Keating.
- [16] Trans, by Stokes, p. 34 of reprint from *Folk-Lore*, iii., 1892. Bóann now the river Boyne, which rises at the foot of Sid Nechtain, a hill in the barony of Carbury, co. Kildare. The story is versified in the Book of Leinster, 191*a*. See also Rhys, *Hibbert Lectures*, pp. 123, 556. The origin of rivers and lochs is often ascribed to mortals intruding upon secret wells. Truth lies deep at the bottom of a well, and in allegory will not be gazed upon. It is enough to eat of the fruit of the tree which is nourished by the spring.
- [17] Rhys, *Hibbert Lectures*, 123.
- [18] Joyce's *Old Celtic Romances*, 2nd ed., p. 187.
- [19] Cf. Maine, son of Ailill, in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, folio 66*b*, 67*a*, 69*a*, of facsimile of *Book of the Dun Cow*.
- [20] *Rev. Celtique*, 6, 173. With Conchobar's mother Ness, apparently seen as a goddess-name in Loch Ness, compare the Attic-Bœotian dialect Netos-Nessos in Thessaly. And compare Hesiod, *Theog.* 341.
- [21] For references, see Plummer's *Vitæ Sanctorum Hiberniæ* I., cliv.
- [22] S. Reinach, *Catalogue Sommaire du musée de Saint Germain*, p. 33, n. 354.
- [23] For the Welsh, see Rhys, notes to *Twrc Trwyth*.
- [24] *Natur, Hist.*, v., 13.
- [25] Pp. 78-80 of Campbell's retelling.
- [26] E. Hull, *The Cuchulainn Saga*, pp. 81-82 (trans, by K. Meyer.)
- [27] Quoted in Hartland's *Legend of Perseus*, iii., 6.
- [28] Cf. also MacInnes, Folk and Hero Tales from Argyll : *Lod the Farmer's Son* (properly the *Ploughman's son*, *aoirean* ; Ir. *oireamh*, genitive *oireamhan* (ploughman) ; root as in L. *aro* ; Ir. *arathar* (plough) ; Welsh *arddwr*, E. *ear* (the soil). Cf. the racial name Eremon, Airem(on), with which *Aryan* has been compared, Skr. Arjaman.
- [29] *Claon*. Hector Maclean's spelling *claghann* I would ask the reader to delete in favour of *claon*.
- [30] Curtin, *Myths and Folk-Lore of Ireland*, 157 ; Larminie, *West Irish Tales and Romances*, 196 ; quoted in Hardand, *ibid*, iii., 4-6.
- [31] Hartland, *Legend of Perseus*, iii., lo.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 177-178. I have already pointed out that Fraoch's own people are spoken of as the Cruithne (Picts), who may be supposed to have absorbed an Ivernian strain.
- [33] Cf. H. N. Hutchinson, *Extinct Monsters* (Chapman and Hall, 1910). " But none of the giant reptiles of the secondary period were contemporary with man," observes Mr Hartland.
- [34] *Drachenkämpfe*, Leipzig (Heinrich), 1907, p. 91.

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