

Leabhar na Laoitheadh

A Collection of Ossianic Poems

Edited by J. J. O'Kelly

Native tradition, written and oral, affords many examples of the anachronism by which Oisín is made contemporary of Saint Patrick. One of the most widely known is the popular legend in its various versions which places Oisín in the Land of Perpetual Youth from a period subsequent to the Battle of Gabhra to the coming of the National Apostle. In *Agallamh na Seanorach* we have a different theory : A score of the Fiana, including Oisín and Caoilte, have survived the battles of Comar, Gabhra, and Ollarba, and, having roamed and re-roamed around the country, they find themselves after a century and a half, on Breaghmhagh. Here they separate, Oisín taking a northerly direction, and Caoilte moving south until he meets Patrick pronouncing benedictions on the rath of Dromdearg, in which Fionn Mac Cumhaill had been. Fear seizes Patrick's clerics on seeing the tall men with their huge wolf-hounds draw near. But Patrick blesses the Fiana, and enters into conversation with Caoilte, who accommodates himself to the new situation, and accompanies the saint on his mission. Having made the circuit of Ireland they get back to Tara, where they find Oisín at the court of the High King, and the Feis of Tara in progress.

Keating is by no means discursive in his treatment of this period. His brief account of the Fiana is pretty much on the lines of popular tradition :

Whoever should say that Finn and the Fian never existed, thought the great historian, would not state the truth. To prove that the Fian existed we have the three things that establish the truth of every history in the world except the Bible, namely, oral traditions of the ancients, old documents and antique remains. For it has been delivered to us from mouth to mouth that Finn and the Fian did exist ; and, moreover, there are numerous documents that actually testify to this. There are also antique remains named after them in plenty.

Now, the Fian used to be quartered on the men of Ireland from Samhain to Bealtaine, and it was their duty to uphold justice and prevent injustice for the kings and the lords of Ireland, as also to guard and preserve the harbours of Ireland from the violence of foreigners. From Bealtaine to Samhain they were engaged in hunting and the chase, and in such other duties as the king of Ireland might impose on them, as, for instance, preventing robbery, exacting the payment of tribute, putting down malefactors, and so of every other evil in the country. For this they received certain remunerations, as every king in Europe remunerates the captains and the generals who serve under him. However, from Bealtaine to Samhain, the Fian were obliged to depend solely on the products of their hunting and of the chase as maintenance and wages from the king of Ireland : thus, they were to have the flesh for food and the skins of the wild animals as their reward. They took but one meal every twenty-four hours, and that in the afternoon. It was their custom to send their attendants about noon with whatever they had killed in the morning's hunt to an appointed hill, having wood and moorland in the neighbourhood. There they kindled raging fires and put into them a large number of emery stones. They then dug two pits in the yellow clay of the moorland, and put some of the meat on spits to roast before the fire. They bound another part of it with *súgáns* in dry bundles, and set it to boil in the larger of the two pits, and kept plying them with the stones taken from the fire, making them seethe often until they were cooked. And these fires were so large that to-day their sites are burnt to blackness, and they are now called *Fulachta Fian* by the peasantry.

When the body of the Fian had assembled on the hill they ranged themselves round the second pit, bathing their hair, washing their limbs, and removing their sweat, and then exercising their joints and muscles, thus ridding themselves of their fatigue. After this they took their meal, and having taken it they proceeded to erect their hunting tents, and so prepare themselves for rest. Each of them made himself a bed of three things : the tops of trees, moss, and fresh rushes ; the tree tops on the ground, the moss on these, and the fresh rushes on top. These are called in the old books the three tickings of the Fian.

The ordinary host that served under Fionn consisted of the three battalions of the Gnaith-fhian, having three thousand in each battalion when the men of Ireland were at peace with one another. But whenever any party of the nobles of Ireland were at enmity with the high king, or whenever it became necessary to send a host to Alba to help the Dal Riada against the foreigners, Fionn used to have seven battalions to enable him to aid Dal Riada and protect Ireland at the same time.

There were many chief leaders of the Fian, a *caith-mhileadh* in charge of a battalion, as a colonel is in charge of a regiment, the leader of a hundred like the modern captain, the chief of fifty like the lieutenant, the head of thrice nine like the corporal, and the head of nine like the decurion of the Romans. For when the hundred were divided into ten divisions there was an officer over each who was called a leader of nine. And when mention is made in the records of Ireland of a man being match in battle for a hundred, or fifty, or nine, we are not to understand that such a man would vanquish a hundred, or fifty, or nine, with his own hand, but that he was leader of a hundred, or fifty, or nine, and was with his following a match in battle for a similar leader in command of a corresponding following.

There were four injunctions placed on everyone admitted to the ranks of the Fian. The first not to accept a dowry with a wife, but to accept her for her good manners and her accomplishments ; the second never to deceive a woman ; the third, not to refuse a request for valuables or food ; the fourth, that none of them should flee before nine men. Fionn attached ten further conditions to the degrees in valour which one was bound to obtain before being received into the Fian. Under them no man was received into the Fian, or the great assembly at Uisneach, or the Fair of Tailte, or the Feis of Tara, until his father, mother, clan and relatives gave guarantees they would never demand retribution from anyone for his death, so that he might look to no one to avenge him but himself. No man was admitted until he had become a *file* and had made up the twelve books of *Filidheacht*. No one was admitted until a large trench reaching above his knees had been made for him, and he was placed in it with a shield and a hazel staff as long as a warrior's arm in his hand, Nine warriors with nine spears then approached him to within the space of nine furrows ; they hurled nine spears together at him, and if he was wounded in spite of his shield and his hazel staff he would not be received into the Fian. No man was admitted into the Fian until, with his hair plaited, he was sent through several woods and all the Fian in pursuit of him with a view to wounding him, while he got but the odds of a single tree over them, and if they overtook him they might wound him fatally. No man was admitted into the Fian whose weapon trembled in his hand. Nor was any man admitted if a branch of a tree in the woods unloosed from its plait even a single braid of his hair. No man was admitted among them if he broke a withered bough beneath his feet in running. Again, no one was admitted unless he leaped over a tree as high as his forehead, and stooped when running at top speed beneath a tree as low as his knee through the great agility of his body. Neither was any one received unless he could pluck a thorn from his foot with his hand without stopping in the race for the purpose. Finally, no man was admitted among them unless he had sworn to the Ri Feinidh that he would be faithful and submissive to him.

The reason why Fionn was made Ri Feinidh over the warriors of Ireland was that his father and grand-father before him occupied the same position. Another reason was that he surpassed his contemporaries in knowledge and learning, in skill and in strategy, in wisdom and in valour on the field of battle. [1]

There is nothing in these conditions to render it improbable that they obtained at the period to which they are said to refer, nothing in them to render compliance with them beyond the ambition of the flower of an Irish national militia to-day, if circumstances only favoured its existence. In our own time, athletes have not only jumped over a bar the height of their forehead, but have walked erect under a bar and in a twinkling jumped clean over it. Many of us, too, have known more than one native *seanchaidhe* who had stored in his memory perhaps more native lore than candidates for the Fiana were required to know. And it was quite the normal thing for the passing generation of fishermen in Kerry, and probably in other places, to subsist on one meal a day even as the Fiana did. Thus, in athletic achievements, as in endurance and intellect, our own diminutive people seem not far behind the heroes of mac Cumhaill. [2] Extravagant language has been indulged in to describe some of the greater feats of the Fiana ; struggles with reptiles, monsters, magic swine, which tax our credulity, often form the burden of Ossianic lays. Details of combats surpassed by nought in Trojan story are not infrequent ; many a page is brightened up by flashes of chivalry which seem incredible to the modern man, and evidences of fidelity and fraternity are met with before which the loyalty of Muiron in sacrificing his life at Arcola to save Napoleon fairly pales. Daire cannot play ravishing music while his comrades of the Fiana lie in anguish near by ; the children of Fionn will not prove untrue to Diarmuid O Duibhne, though their father is his deadly and sworn foe. Most of ourselves have witnessed examples of the Irish peasantry coming to the rescue of the neighbouring widow and the stricken and the helpless. In the battle of the Sheaves we are told of twenty hundred of the Fiana and ten hundred in one array reaping wheat for the widow of Caoilte of Collamair. Fionn had a four-pronged fork piling up the sheaves, and there were but three swords guarding the reapers. For the Fiana always relied on the strength of their arms, their love of truth, and their mutual fidelity to bring them triumphantly through life's ordeals. Their bounty was unbounded, their means virtually common property.

No wonder Oisín, in contrasting their prowess and their period with the subdued and ordered civilisation of a more austere age, should utter a lament calculated to stir men's hearts to sympathy until time is no more.

Fr. Edmund Hogan in his excellent work, "The Irish People : Their Height, Form and Strength," dedicated to the Gaelic League, quotes both those fourteenth-century writers and various other authorities, including Carew, as evidence of "the fine physical form of Irishmen."

It may be assumed as but natural that such a race were as ardent in their love as they were intense in their hate, that their partings were attended by more than the grief associated with partings in our day, that their death scenes were such as to move the stoutest hearts to sorrow and to tears. Nor are we without pictures of those scenes. A typical example is Caoilte's description of the passing away and death of Oscar on the fatal field of Gabhra. No canvas could present a more realistic picture than has been visualised by the quill which first recorded in immortal verse the details of this ancient Irish scene. In it generations without number can see Oscar lying on his left arm, his lance still held in his right hand, his heart's blood gushing over his tunic, his body literally covered with fatal wounds, and not a palm's breadth of it whole save only his face. Caoilte essays to revive him by calling to mind the memorable day at Drumcliff when he was able to count whole hosts in the distance through the hacked and

gaping wounds in Oscur's body, and still restored him to his original vigour. Next, Oisín stoops over Oscur, and holds the faltering hand of his dying son, with all a father's feverish affection. The gods be eternally praised, father, that you are alive and well, gasps Oscur. And, on seeing the spirit of Fionn, his grandfather, appear, Oscur again gasps : My head at death's disposal now that I have laid eyes on you, valiant Fionn. Hereupon life ebbs away, the hands extend and grow rigid, the once bright eyes grow dim, and close in death. The Fiana present raise three shouts of grief that reverberate through Ireland. Fionn's spirit turns from the sad spectacle to weep and mourn for the departed hero.

Interspersed all through the Ossianic literature as settings for those incidents which arouse our wonder and admiration are pictures full of minute details of the life and character of the Fiana and the general features of the age in which they moved and had their being. Contrary to a widely-accepted theory from which Keating does not seem to have deliberately dissented, these pictures represent them as by no means exclusively nomadic. For we learn from one fairly venerable poem published in *Dunaire Fhinn* that

Fionn made a feast for Cormac at Sidh Truim, the king of Alba, the king of the Greeks, and the two sons of the king of wealthy Lochlainn having come on a visit to Cormac. The king of the Greeks and the king of Alba sat side by side at the shoulder of Cormac, the sons of the king of the Lochlainn on his right, the kings of Ulster, Munster, and Cruachain all around him. The king of Leinster was likewise there. In all, eight men and eighteen score leaders of hosts were around the king of Ireland. On the farther side sat the high-king of the Fiana, Fionn, a better man than all in the mansion. Goll, Oscur, Diarmuid, Oisín, Garaidh, Conan, and all the nobles of the Fiana are there. Thirty poets grace the company with their presence, each man wearing a silken cloak. Men of wisdom are in attendance ; and the feast goes on gloriously. In time a merry *Gruagach* enters with a sweet-stringed harp, followed by a slave with a cauldron large enough to cook for seven hundred. Conan takes a part in the conversation, as a result of which there is friction. Anger seizes Oscur, and he accepts the challenge of the *Gruagach*. Up springs the man that usually shook the chain. and shaking it now, silence falls on the company.

The normal order of the Fiana at a festival is thus set out :

The head of the handsome host sat down—Fionn, son of Cumhaill from Formaol. On his right hand Goll mac Morna the terrible. Next, Oscur at the shoulder of Goll, and Garraidh, with a grip Uke a griffin's, beside Oscur. Beside mac Lughaidh, probably on the left, sat obstinate Conan. After them sat the Fiana, beautiful company with waving hair. Ten score sons of kings are at the feast, and before them gold and silver in profusion. When they are all seated the door-keeper enters, and shakes a dangling chain to announce a visitor.

Evidently the chain was in frequent use, and its tingle a signal not to be disregarded.

Fionn's Household of Almha, as we gather from *Agallamh na Seanorach* and other sources, contained twelve musicians, six doorkeepers, three butlers, two stewards of hounds, two masters of horse, two over-seers of the hearth, two bedmakers, two keepers of vessels, two horn-players, two spear-bearers, a shield-bearer, a strong man, a master of the banquet, a candle-bearer, carver, metal-worker, smith, carpenter, charioteer, barber, comber, three clowns, three jugglers, three fools, a chief poet, and a just judge.

Further, three hundred golden cups for strong drinks, thrice fifty golden vessels, thrice fifty silver goblets to hold the mead of May, a vat for six hundred to drink from, drinking horns, a gold cup, a candelabrum seven feet high with gold and silver and precious stones.

Besides these, a hundred spotless couches and thirty warriors to every bed around Fionn's carved couch of gold ; ornaments of gold throughout with golden pillars ; and couches of wattle and plank. The youthful soldiery are on the floor. The Fiana come with packs of hounds in beautiful leashes, each man bearing the spoils of the chase. Fair-haired women are there with rings of gold and warriors with multi-coloured clothing.

The dress of the Fiana, we are told elsewhere, was of various colours, and according to the *Book of Lismore* not unlike the Highland garb of the present day. At the feast by Aonghus at Brugh na Boinne, the Fiana are represented as wearing green mantles and purple cloaks, and the mercenaries scarlet satin. In the hunt on Shabh na mBan Oisín describes their uniform and accoutrements thus : not one of them but had a satin shirt, tunic, silken robe, glittering breast-plate, green shield, lance, two spears and two hounds. Like Telemachus :

“ A royal robe he wore with graceful pride,
A two-edged falchion threatened by his side.

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Bright in his hand a ponderous javelin shined,
Two dogs, a faithful guard, attend behind.”

The hounds most favoured by the Fiana were Bran and Sceolan, particularly Bran, though hundreds of other famous hounds are enumerated in the hunting lays. Some three hundred hounds are named in the Chase at Loch Lein, and Oisín says there were a thousand additional hounds besides those mentioned. Minute details are given of Bran. Her back over the loins was speckled, her belly snow-white, her sides jet black, her legs yellow and her ears crimson. Fionn was wont to lavish praise on Bran, as Oisín would on Oscur, to incite her to greater effort in a critical struggle. Such was his attachment to his favourite hound that he was never known to weep, except over Bran, save when his spirit wept over Oscur : —

Acht fó Oscur is fó Bhrain
Níor chaoín fó neach ar thalmhain.

Nor can Oisín have been less attached to the hounds ; for when Patrick told him heaven was not for the Fiana, he is reputed to have rejoined :

“ Tell us in confidence, oh priest,
If Fionn be kept without, at least,
Will they let Bran and Sceolan in
Those gates of heaven fast shut on Finn ?”

The horses of the Fiana, we are informed, were brought from England by nine of the Fenian leaders, who went to England to recover Bran, Sceolan and Ardnuaill from Arthur, son of Beinne Brit, and brought the same Arthur prisoner with two horses, male and female. In time, the horses of the Fiana, as we read in “ The Head-less Phantoms,” would come to the race, and the horses of the Munstermen of the great races : they once held three famous contests on the green of the Sons of Murrídh. A black horse belonging to Dil, son of Da Chreag, in each race that they held at the rock above Loch Goir, won the three chief prizes at the fair. Fiachra then besought the horse from the druid, and gave him a hundred cattle of each kind, that he might give it in return. There is the fast black horse for thee, said Fiachra to the Fiana's chief, here I give thee my sword of fame and a horse for thy charioteer.

Take my helmet equal to a hundred, take my shield from the lands of the Greeks, take my fierce spears and my silver weapons. . . Three days and three nights we spent in Cathair's hospitable house. Fifty rings Fionn gave him, fifty horses, and fifty cows.

Fionn went to try the black steed to the strand over Bearramhain. [3] . .

Later the churl kills their horses, cooks them, and offers them as food. Horseflesh I have never eaten, quoth the Fenian chief, and never yet will I eat at the fair of Maigh Eala.

Their banners [4] were magnificent, being made of *srol*, in the manufacture of which the ancient Irish, like the Egyptians, are said to have excelled all other nations. They were of various colours—blue, green, red, white, and had representations of trees, animals, military weapons : the yew tree, oak, ash ; the wolf dog, stag ; the sword, the spear ; the bagpipes and the harp were particularly favoured. Fionn's standard, called the *gal greine*, had on its bosom a representation of the sun shooting forth its dazzling rays.

The arms of the Fiana were battle axes, swords, spears, javelins, slings, arrows. We are told of Oscur's sword in the Address to the Shield of Fionn, that Minelus passed it to Saturn, son of Pallor ; later it descended to Dardan, son of Electra ; through his son Mana to Tros, and thence through Ilus to Laomedon. Hercules having defeated Laomedon, and lost, the sword duly passes on to Priam, from whom it passes, through Hector, Eneas, Silvius, Julius Caesar, Cu Chulainn, Fearghus, Conall Cearnach ; having been 116 years in Lochlainn it passes on to Oscur, and is used later at Cul Dreimhne.

Fionn, Lord of the Shield, is here referred to [5] as a poet, a man of science, a battle hero of assemblies, a prince without a peer in bestowing gifts, a brave warrior in stern battles. He is, moreover, a craftsman, an excellent metal-wright, a happy ready judge, a master in every free craft. Woe to him who met him in conflict.

In the Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne, we are told that Fionn while at Tara held the keys of Tara. And *Silva Gadelica* [6] says of him : —

Now, he whom Cormac had for chief of his household and for stipendiary master of the hounds was Fionn, son of Cumhall. . . Warrior better than Fionn never struck his hand into a chief's ; inasmuch as for service he was a soldier, a hospitaller for hospitality, and in heroism a hero ; in fighting functions he was a fighting man, and in strength a champion worthy of a king, so that ever since, and from that time until this day, it is with Fionn that every such is co-ordinated.

This co-ordination was a favourite practice with Irish writers. In the account of the Battle of Clontarf ascribed to Maelsheachlainn, the co-ordination is extended to Murchadh, son of Brian, metaphorically the Hector of Eirinn.

That Fionn was not without refinement is obvious :

The wish of the son of Cumhall, as explained in our notes, was to listen to the moaning of the bleak winds, the murmuring of the rippling streams, the crooning of the billows on the shore, the creaking and straining of ships' hulls in a storm, the warbling of the blackbird, the screaming of the seagulls of distant Erris, the croaking of the vultures over serried hosts, the lowing of the kine, the noise of young deer in their gambols, the music of the chase, the cry of the hounds, Bran's barking, Oscur's call, an easy seat amid the bards, sleep by the stream at Assaroe.

Oisín is described in this wise : In the matter of gold or silver, or concerning meat, *Oisín* never denied any man, nor though another's generosity were such as might fit a chief, did *Oisín* seek aught of him. [7]

Caoilte was a soldier, a guide at need, a burgher that entertained all men, a hero that carried the battle, a man constant and right proved. Elsewhere, we read of *Mac Ronain*, whose chief function was casting of lots, or *crannchur*, when matters of dispute arose among the *Fiana*. [8]

Conan Maol is unquestionably the outstanding character of the period. Originally courageous to a degree, he becomes by stages braggart, laggard, renegade, traitor, coward, all but buffoon, the butt of the satire and ridicule of bards and chroniclers—whom foes seem to have regarded with contempt and comrades with anything but confidence.

Seven battalions there were of the *Fiana*, and each legion consisted of three thousand men. They are referred to as *Seacht gcatha na Féine* : *cath mionúr*, *cath na dtaoiseach*, *cath na bhfear meadhonach*, *cath na bhfear bhfeósach*, *cath na mbunfhear*, *cath na bhfear mbeag agus cath na n-iarmharán*.

The Leinsier and Meath Fian were composed of the *clanna Baoisgne*, and called after one of the ancestors of *Fionn*, They seem to have been established by *Fiachadh*, brother of the monarch, *Tuathal Teachtmhar*.

The Connacht Fian consisted of the *Gamhanraidhe* and *Fir Domhnann* of *Erris*, *Mayo*, and *Roscommon*. Their best known leader was *Goll mac Morna*. This *Morna* was son of the daughter of *Fiachaidh*, founder of the *Fian* of *Leinster*, and for twenty years their ruler.

The Men of Munster seem to have taken a subordinate position in the *Fiana*, and to have rendered loyal allegiance, the *Fiana* of *Connacht* and *Leinster* being prominent at *Ventry Harbour*, *Cnoc an Air*, and all the great battles of the South. *Desmond's* early Heroic period, like that of *Ulidia*, appears to have passed away with the advent of the *Fiana*.

According to the battle of *Ventry Harbour* the *Fiana* were able to communicate with each other by means of beacons or signals from *Cathair Chonroi* to *lorrus Domhnann*, and thence to *Eas Aodha Ruaidh*. This must have demanded pretty keen vision. But the chroniclers of the early achievements of the Gael might be entrusted with a little detail of the kind. They saw much farther afield, indeed, and even conquered distant regions—at least on parchment. The opening lay of this volume records that *Fionn*, with a few of his followers, made the king of the Saxons prisoner, fought successfully against the king of the Greeks, was king of Lesser Greece, invaded Eastern India, compelled the Indian Empire, Scandinavia, Denmark to send tribute of gold to his house, fought nine battles in Hither Spain, eight in Farther Spain, and so on. Evidently the history of Alexander the Great tickled the fancy and the ambition of the chroniclers of the early modern Irish period, and induced the admirers and panegyrists of the *Fiana* to make them also the conquerors not only of the most distant Oriental regions reached by the son of Philip but of occidental and northern regions of whose very existence Augustus was scarce aware.

Oscur has some foreign conquests to his credit, too. He and his followers, we are told, go to *Dun Monadh* : here the men of Scotland submit to *Oscur*, Thirty-five ships he brings from Scotland to London of the red ramparts, where he is met by a ready army. *Oscur* ruthlessly overthrows the Saxons all on one field. He got thirty ships, men and provisions from London.

Thence he goes with sixty ships to Rheims. The natives assemble vauntingly, and oppose him, but the ambitious Franks are overthrown in this northern expedition of Oscur. They then go forth from France, and tarry not till they arrive in Spain and vanquish the Spaniards, so that the high tribute of Spain is paid into the hands of Oscur. From Spain they go to great Almain. The valiant king of the two Almans is slain by Oscur, his host overthrown, and the gold and treasure of the two Almans a fixed tribute, and the command of their cities ceded to Oscur and his followers. There was not from Almain to Greece a land whose tribute, wealth and booty they did not capture. A terrible struggle ensues in Greece, but Oscur in time vanquished the high king and compelled seventeen kings to submit to tribute. Thence they go to India, and are opposed. Oscur slays the king, and bestows the gold of the Indians on his followers. Seven shipfuls to be paid him every year, a great tribute to Oscur. Thence again they go to Sorcha, where they meet a great army. The kings of Sorcha, Hesperia, Italy, Lochlainn, Wales are all visited, attacked, vanquished, and placed under tribute in turn in the course of this voyage to the East by Oscur. [9]

Goll makes a voyage of conquest also, and subdues the Welsh, Lochlannaigh, Scotch, Saxons and French in succession before returning to Ireland. [10]

Thus we gather that neither in ambition nor in achievement were the pre-Patrician Irish hemmed in by the narrow horizon within which hostile and prejudiced historians would confine them. Intellect, refinement, achievement, empire, all on a vast scale, have been awarded them by tradition, and authentic history cannot do otherwise than take cognisance of their existence and their civilisation. It is, therefore, with no little surprise we find that the two volumes of Fenian lore most recently issued from the press have been utilised as media for the diffusion of theories entirely at variance with the traditions and the history which must have found favour with the Irish people from time immemorial. One distinguished editor says of the Fiana :—

“ Though it might not be pleasant to come across them, and though the Church had little good to say of them as of the whole profession of arms, they were by no means held in abhorrence ; their deeds and adventures were celebrated in songs and stories, and their existence was even considered essential to the welfare of the community. [11]

And he says further : —

The first authentic rig-feinidh of whom we read in Irish history was Maelumai mac Batain, surnamed Garg, the Fierce, or the hero. . . He was the son of Baitain mac Muirchertaig . . . and thus belonged to the royal race of Ailech. His death is mentioned in the annals under the year 610. [12]

Later we are told that as early as the seventh century Leinster claimed Find ua Baoiscne as a scion of its royal race. [13] And again we read : “ Here for the first time (in a ninth century poem) Fionn is called, not mac Cumhaill, but *mac Umaill*.” [14]

In the tenth century poems he is called Finn mac Umaill and mac Cumaill, and in an eleventh century poem Finn is named mac Cumaill Almaine and addressed as *a ardri a fhlaith na fian*. [15]

This practically implies that the full-blooded Fionn mac Cumhaill is a literary creation of the eleventh century. If so, or whether so or otherwise, what becomes of the assertion that the Church had little good to say of the Fian as of the whole profession of arms ? The Fiana of tradition, annihilated at the battle of Gabhra, had virtually disappeared from history before

the advent of the Church. Is it likely that the Church, in the circumstances, gratuitously denounced the ghost of a military organisation with which it could not even have come into conflict? If the Church were opposed to the Fiana and to the profession of arms from, let us say, the fifth to the eleventh century, is it conceivable that a heroic legend made up in great part of such elements as magic, metamorphosis, mythology, paganism, would have sprung up, as implied, and developed at the very time when the hostile native church advanced towards its meridian splendour, and shed its rays not only on the remotest glens and fastnesses of Ireland but over the entire of western Europe? And, for the sake of Dr. Meyer's argument, let us assume, a military profession to have co-existed with the early Irish Church. The Dail gCais and similar tribes would be survivals or component parts of it, and surely they would be fit subjects for the censure or the wrath of the contemporary native Church, as Dr. Meyer alleges. But what do we find to be the attitude of the Irish Church towards the profession of arms as here represented from the coming of Patrick to the coming of Strongbow? The lives of Colm Cille, Cormac mac Cuileannain, Flaithbheartach, Brian Boirmhe, Saint Lorcaín O Tuathail and many others will answer abundantly. Admittedly, in some of the dialogue that has come down in our Irish lays, language of an uncompromising, undignified and all but offensive tone has been put into the mouth of Saint Patrick, and sentiments of an irreverent and un-Irish character have been put into the mouth of Oisín by way of reply. But surely the editor of *Fianaigecht*, from which the extracts quoted have been taken, does not pretend—critical reviewer of Irish history and Irish historical methods that he is—that these dialogues, consisting often of obvious interpolations, afford an adequate basis for the statement he makes as to the attitude of the Irish Church towards the Fiana and the profession of arms in general. The distinguished doctor's opinion seems to be merely the expression of a prejudice which manifests itself whenever there is question or mention of the native faith of Ireland. 'Twere better be less on the alert for such contingencies.

Mr. Eoin MacNeill, editor of the second volume referred to, seems disposed to locate all the culture and the heroism of Early Ireland east of the seventh degree of longitude and north of the forty-fifth parallel. He is of opinion that about the middle of the seventh century the literati of the northern Milesians learned the Ulidian sagas from the surviving literati of the well-nigh extinct Ulidian dynasty. As nearly as possible in his own words his theory is briefly this :

It was apparently during the seventh century that the Milesian poets adopted the Ulidian hero-lore. We find them about the same time adopting the Ulidian scheme of history. It would appear from all this . . . that the Ulidian remnant was the first section of the Irish to cultivate a written literature dealing with matters Irish and secular. For this purpose they were specially advantaged. They had a rich hero-lore, a proud tradition, and their country was the scene of Saint Patrick's earliest and most thorough labours, which brought the new stimulus of Christian and Roman literary culture, of thorough familiarity with the arts of writing and reading. Between their conversion to Christianity and the seventh century the Ulidians appear to have secured for themselves a literary primacy amounting nearly to a monopoly of Irish secular literature.

Hence the Milesian writers, when they adopted the Ulidian hero-lore, adopted it as a classic with all the extreme reverence shown by people new to any form of culture towards those from whom that culture is received, and by whom it has been developed. The Ulidian sagas having once passed into the hands of the dominant race became rigidly crystallised, and ceased to evolve.

The early history of the Fenian hero-lore was quite different. This cycle remained in the

possession of the subject races apparently until about the tenth century. . . It must have spread from North Leinster where it first took shape, through a large part of Ireland, ultimately reaching the furthest bounds of Gaelic speech. The period I postulate for this extension is the early centuries of Milesian domination, mainly between the years 400 and 700. During this time the Fenian tradition must have been purely oral, and therefore susceptible of local development to any extent. It seems to have taken a particularly strong grip of the Iverian population of West Munster, the region around Loch Lein becoming a second home not only for the cultivation of the epic but for the life and actions of the heroes. The story of Diarmuid must have been developed among the Corca Duibhne, whose territories embraced the modern baronies of Corcaguiney and Iveragh, and extended to Loch Lein.

In the published portions of the Cycle, the part of Goll and his kindred has not been relatively prominent, But one has only to go upon the track of Fenian folk-lore among the Connacht peasantry of to-day to find that in that region Goll is the foremost hero of nearly every tale. The race of Goll, the Clanna Morna, as already stated, were believed to have been a sept of the Connacht Fir Bolg. Naturally, this branch of the Fiana was not made much of either in North Leinster or West Munster. These regions adopted Fionn as their chief hero, and the Clanna Morna were his hereditary foes. It was the descendants of the Fir Bolg who then and since then were numerous in the western province, that magnified the part of Goll. In Donegal, as in Connacht, Goll is the chief popular hero of the Fiana, the paragon of valour. Donegal was Fir Bolg territory until its conquest by the sons of Niall, and after conquest was largely peopled by the vassals of the Fir Bolg race. [16]

Unlike the Ulidian epic, the Fenian cycle thus became the property of the whole nation, without any burden of learned prestige. Its credentials were solely popular. Its general character and scheme were, indeed, too firmly fixed in the popular mind to admit of change. Otherwise, it was open to every kind of development as the taste of the author and the public might dictate. [17]

A bold device—the addition of more than a century to the lives of two of the heroes—enabled the (Fenian) epic to secure for itself the most commanding figure in Irish history, St. Patrick, and to develop a humorous side in the contrast between Pagan and Christian ideals. [18]

To sum up, the story of Fionn appears to have arisen like most primitive lore in the region of mythology. It obtained a peculiar development among the ancient vassal race of North Leinster. . . Ignored by the dominant peoples, the story in this form spread widely among the subject States, and received various local developments. By the ninth century it had begun to be written down. [19]

Here we have conflict between the two editors. According to the one the first righ-feinidh known to history belonged to the royal house of Aileach and died in 610 while Leinster claimed Fionn ua Baoisgne as a scion of its royal race as early as the seventh century, According to the other the story of Fionn began to be written down in the ninth century, and between the years 400 and 700 the Fenian tradition must have been purely oral. The edifice so elaborately set up by Mr. MacNeill in *Dunaire Fhinn* and elsewhere is not uniformly indestructible. Let us admit the Ulidians had a rich hero-lore—dating practically from the Incarnation—and let us further admit that their country was the scene of Saint Patrick's earnest and most thorough labours : it hardly follows that they could have secured a literary primacy for two hundred years, or that the Milesian writers adopted the Ulidian hero-lore as a classic with all the extreme reverence shown by people new to any form of culture towards those from whom that culture has been received. It has to be remembered that Corca Duibhne, too, is credited with a heroic and bardic tradition, centring round Curoi mac Daire,

contemporary and more than peer of Cu Chulainn, and Feircheirtne the faithful bard of Curoi. Cathair Chonroi remains to prove the Southern tradition, though antedating the Fenian tradition, did not originate altogether in the region of mythology. Aileach is noted by Ptolemy as existing in the second century. That it existed much earlier is one of the commonplaces of history. Cathair Gheal, in a fine state of preservation twenty years ago, and even yet worth travelling to Iveragh to see, is of similar outline and plan to Aileach, and just as ancient. The existence of two such structures argues a common civilisation as having obtained at the two extreme points of the western seaboard in the earliest centuries of our era. It argues more. It argues culture, an advanced state of society, corresponding lore and a trade route with its back on, not its face to, Britain. What tangible traces have we of the Ulidian civilisation of that period ?

And coming to the Patrician period, what do we find ? First, on its eve royal students like Niall, monarch of Ireland, and Corc, king of Munster, among the pupils of the distinguished poet, Torna Eigeas, at O'Dorney in Kerry. Next, a well-verified tradition that there were at least three ecclesiastics preaching the Gospel in the South before Patrick's arrival ; a host of saints and sages there, who had little, if anything, to learn from the culture of the Ulidians at any epoch of the long period under survey ; a series of ruins dating from the sixth century by which we can trace the development of native ecclesiastical architecture step by step from its earliest stages down to its appropriation by the anglo-Normans—from the house of Fionan Cam to the Chapel of Cormac ; — an epic literature based not on the Tain Bo Cuailnge but on the hero-deeds with which it deals and is associated ; traces of common institutions and friendly intercourse along the whole western coast from Toraigh to Cliodhna Cais, in striking contrast to the friction and jealousy inseparable from the system of succession to the throne which long agitated the Ulidian neighbourhood. Whoso takes the trouble to investigate the matter will find it easier to establish from existing memorials, hoary though many of them be, the credibility of the history and traditions that have been decried as deliberately coloured and distorted where not actually prophesied to justify the pretensions of Brian Boirmhe than it has been found to erect on the assumption of a gigantic Southern conspiracy against history and truth an edifice which, while it commands our attention and admiration for its many excellent features, seems unfortunately to rest on bubbles at vital points. Though it bespeaks more than ordinary candour and freedom from prejudice in the author, it is still rather a poor compliment to the Ulidians and their neighbours, militant from Rudhraighe, dominant to Brian, tenacious, earnest, patriotic to this hour, to suggest that notwithstanding the advantages of early Roman culture their hero-lore became rigidly crystallised on passing into the hands of a dominant though once vassal race, while neighbouring tribes continued to progress intellectually and physically, as well as socially and politically,

An introduction to a volume like this, which can itself be regarded as nothing more than an introduction to the vast subject of Ossianic literature, is not the place to discuss fully the age and authorship of the pieces that constitute it. Suffice it to say the tradition among the unlettered that they were extempore utterances of Oisín, Caoilte, Patrick, and others, but particularly of Oisín, obtains nowhere or next to nowhere now. The truth seems to be that they were the work of successive generations of bards, who handed the traditional lore on to posterity, and amplified it, through no love of reward or of repute, but as the spontaneous expression of what may be called inherited convictions. All that is aimed at here, therefore, is to place within the reach of young students of modern Irish, appropriate extracts from the more representative Ossianic poems that happen to be available in the modern language, and to classify the more distinctive traditional features of an ancient civilisation to which our race may always turn with profit and with pride. The editing of such material, particularly if intended for young readers, needs to be done with sympathy and care, for naturally there is much in the general body of the literature not quite intended for persons of tender years or

immature judgment. Exceptionable matter, like some of the language used by Oisín in contrasting the old with the newer order of things, the functions and the character of the *leanain sidhe*, the procedure followed in converting a poet into a druid,^[20] theories in relation to oracles like *Binn-each Labhra*, and to metamorphosis like the story of Tuan mac Caireall, has its interest for the advanced student and its uses for the historian, but no good purpose is served by its indiscriminate circulation. So, too, parsimony of notice best befits the status of woman in early Ireland. For, notwithstanding the high standard of conduct enjoined by the code of rules that governed the Fiana, and the striking superiority of the Irish female character by comparison with contemporary female character elsewhere, the status of woman, as disclosed by certain passages in Irish literature, sometimes left much to be desired, judged, that is, by our conception in rural Ireland of the relations that should exist between the sexes.

To some extent, the volumes issued by the Ossianic Society over half a century ago have been made the basis of this collection. Mention of that series recalls the excellent but ill-requited work quietly accomplished in face of difficulties by the Ossianic Society and kindred bodies and by individuals of surpassing intellect and industry like O'Curry and O'Donovan whose successful labours have never been acknowledged adequately. Further, it emphasises the want of aim and cohesion in the efforts being made in our time for the perpetuation of our native literature, and suggests the urgent need for the rapid publication, through popular channels, of the volume of modern Irish prose and poetry so long awaiting the light, if only to serve as safe models of composition and speech for the rising writers and students that are fast growing up on all sides. How much might not be done in this way if the sympathetic daily and weekly and provincial press were utilised systematically and to the full, how many a person young and old permanently interested in the language of our race, how many a historic place-name identified by the generation of native speakers best equipped with traditional lore that we can hope ever to see again, how many a precious tradition recalled by mention of another and placed on permanent record. A good deal has been done by various bodies to bring certain Irish texts within the reach of students, a great deal more might be done with a little more order and some understanding between the bodies and individuals that interest them-selves in this work. Uniformity and method are yet required, a common plan to be adhered to by everybody so as to obviate unnecessary duplication of work. The matter is urgent, and fortunately calls for no exceptional skill. The means, moreover, are at hand. Many helpers are available, who, at least, are capable of preparing material in modern Irish for the press. The really important thing is to get it in type with the necessary accuracy and care, and thus incalculably lighten the labour of the lexicographer, the historian and the student, who hitherto have had to wade through musty manuscripts for almost everything. Until the literature has been published our Irish dictionary must remain incomplete, as must our national history, social, political, ecclesiastical. If we have to wait for the professional editors who, while hailing the best efforts of sincere and competent workers with a shrug of the finger-tips, will themselves venture to do no more for our native literature than hand out fragments or experiments at long intervals from behind the shelter of some great name—with the maximum of advantage to themselves—the generation that have inherited the traditional lore and uncontaminated speech will pass away unutilised, possible writers will not only be deterred but driven to utter inaction, eager students, having as a consequence only the minimum of Irish matter to read, will turn to some other study, and, finally, the almost universal ardour and sacrifice which have brought Irish studies to the position they occupy today will be damped and their effect nullified by the example of the privileged professional spirit disposed to manifest itself in places of influence and the organised glorification of certain names to the general detriment. Irish literature is worthy of a better fate, and, as there is really no Fursey in *our* midst, no Keating, no Gallagher, it is hardly necessary to argue that all Irish writers who realise their duty to their native tongue are entitled as a right to equal facilities in placing be-

fore students and readers of Irish appropriate matter against which no fault can be alleged even in a negative way.

leathanmír uile an ghlan-Ghaedhilg mar soin.

Seán Ua Ceallaigh

[1] See *Forus Feasa ar Eirinn*. Edited by Rev. P. S. Dinneen, M.A., for the Irish Texts Society.

[2] Dr. O'Donovan (in the twenty-third number of the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*) quotes a French author who visited Ireland in the time of Diarmuid Mac Murchadha, as saying : —
“ They assailed us both in van and rear, casting their darts with such might as no habergeon or coat of mail were of sufficient proof to resist their force, their darts piercing them through both sides. Our foragers that strayed from their fellows were often murdered (killed) by the Irish, for they were so nimble and swift of foot that like unto stags they ran over mountains and valleys, whereby we received great annoyance and damage.”

And again, quoting Froissart : —

“ But I shewe ye because ye should know the truth. For a man of armes beying never so well horsed, and run as fast as he can, the Irishemen wyll run afote as faste as he and overtake hym, yea, and leap up upon his horse behynde him, and drawe him from his horse.”

—*Trans. Oss. Soc.*, 77—iv.

[3] *Duanaire Fhinn*, p. 28.

[4] They are described by Oisín in the poem of the Sixteen Chiefs.

[5] *Duanaire Fhinn*, p. 34.

[6] *Silva Gadelica*, 107—ii.

[7] *Silva Gad.*, 106 — ii.

[8] *Trans. Oss. Soc.*, 20—iv.

[9] *Duanaire Fhinn*, p. 170.

[10] *Ibid.*, 200

[11] *Ibid.*, ix.

[12] *Fianaigeacht*, xiii.

[13] *Ibid.*, xviii.

[14] *Ibid.*, xxi.

[15] *Ibid.*, xxv.

[16] *Duanaire Fhinn*, xxxv.—xxxviii.

[17] *Ibid.*, xli.

[18] *Duanaire Fhinn*, xlii.

[19] *Ibid.*, xliii.

[20] *Trans. Oss. Soc.*, 76 — iv.

Leabhar na Laoitheadh, a collection of Ossianic poems (1911)

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