

## Duanaire Finn

THE BOOK OF THE LAYS OF FIONN

PART I

IRISH TEXT, WITH TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

BY

EOIN MAC NEILL

•  
Origin of the Fenian Epic Cycle.

In seeking to trace the Fenian cycle to its source, we cannot expect much guidance from its later developments. The history of this body of literature is altogether in contrast to the history of the Ulidian sagas. Táin Bó Cualnge was “recovered,” we are told, by the literati of Ireland in the reign of Guaire, king of Connacht, about the middle of the seventh century. There can be no doubt that the Táin Bó Cualnge was the work of Ulidian authors, and was preserved by the literary caste attached to the Ulidian dynasty. In the seventh century, the once powerful Ulidian aristocracy was represented by a single great sept, the Dál Fiatach, then settled in the Pictish territory of Dál Araide. By the time when the political order set forth in the Book of Rights had come about — that is, in the tenth century — the Dál Fiatach was no longer a ruling race, and the Ulidians had become completely fused with the Picts. The decline of the Dál Fiatach probably dates from the Battle of Ard Corann, a.d. 627, in which Fiachna (son of Deman), king of Dál Fiatach, was overthrown and slain by the Dál Riatai, an Ivernian or Pictish race occupying the northern half of the present county of Antrim. It was just about this time that the poets of the dominant Milesian race,[1] who had “forgotten” the Ulidian epic, discovered it anew by the aid of the hero Fergus, whose spirit arose from the tomb and dictated to the poets the words of the lost saga. The legend indicates that about this time the literati of the northern Milesians learned the Ulidian sagas from the surviving literati of the well-nigh extinct Ulidian dynasty. As they got it, so they kept it. The Ulidian tales are the product of the Old-Irish period, and underwent little development at the hands of their new possessors. Their tradition reproduces consistently a racial and political order, dating from not later than the third century, and prior to the occupation of Meath by the race which, in the fourth and later centuries, made a gradual conquest of the northern half of Ireland, except the region now included in the counties of Down and Antrim.

On the other hand, the greater part of the Fenian cycle, as we have it, was composed from the ninth century onward. Only a few scraps of it belong to the Old-Irish period. It underwent continuous literary development down even to the nineteenth century. Most of it, as we know it, dates from the eleventh century onwards, its language being chiefly late Middle Irish, shading off into modern Irish. As in *Duanaire Finn*, we constantly find this Middle Irish in a modernised guise. But we do not find in the Fenian cycle those constant evidences of Old-Irish originals written up into Middle-Irish form which are characteristic of the Ulidian cycle. The inference is that the Middle-Irish specimens of the Fenian cycle are true contemporary products, the work of Middle-Irish authors, just as *Laoidh Oisín i dTir na nOg* is a product of the eighteenth century. In the Middle-Irish period the story of Fionn was known all over Ireland. It was growing into literature in places far apart. The under-story of Diarmaid was developing in West Munster, the under-story of Goll in Connacht. A clear light on the origin of the epic is little more to be expected from these Middle-Irish developments than from the eighteenth-century poem by Micheál Coimín.

Where, then, are we to look for the evidences of the rise of the epic? Obviously in the oldest extant specimens. The short poems published by Windisch in his “*Irische Texte*” help us

little. However, they are not without historical value. It is at once clear to anyone examining them that they are not the beginnings of a new literature, but rather overgrowths of a body of literature already in existence and considerably developed. Similar short poems in late Middle Irish will be found in the *Duanaire*. In both cases these compositions owe their existence and their contemporary interest to the co-existence of an extensive tradition with which the reader is presumed to be familiar. Hence the presence of a single such piece in Old Irish seems to dispose once and for all of the notion that the Fenian epic owes its origin to the Norse invasions.

Next, or beside these poems, the most ancient specimen of the Fenian cycle that has reached us is apparently the tale called “*Macgnímartha Fíon*,” “*The Boy-deeds of Fíonn*.” The evidence borne by this tale is very striking and, in my opinion, quite decisive. The tale is preserved in a Bodleian ms. which professes to be an excerpt from the *Psalter of Cashel*.

The date of the *Psalter of Cashel* is traditionally the time of the king-bishop of Cashel, Cormac son of Cuilennán, by whom the *Psalter* is said to have been compiled, that is to say, about a.d. 900. This famous compilation has long since disappeared ; but many extracts from it, some of them of considerable extent, have been preserved by transcription into later mss. Of these extracts, one of the most notable is the *Book of Rights*, which affords, I think, decisive evidence of the date of the *Psalter*.<sup>[2]</sup>

The *Book of Rights* contains three poems written, as O'Donovan recognized, in support of the claim of a king of Cashel to the suzerainty of all Ireland. These poems commence respectively on pages 32, 52, and 124 of O'Donovan's printed edition. O'Donovan, in his Introduction (p. xv), points out that this claim can only be ascribed to one of three kings of Cashel — Cathal, who died in 742 ; Feidlimid, who died in 847 ; and Brian Bórama, who made good the claim. O'Donovan does not decide between them, but there can be no doubt upon the matter. The second of the three poems in question appeals to *Selbach in sai*, Selbach, the man of letters, who, as the note on p. 60 says, was contemporary with Cormac, the bishop-king. As Cormac reigned half a century after Feidlimid, the mention of Selbach shuts out both Cathal and Feidlimid, and makes it certain that the three poems were composed in the interest of Brian, and during the period when he was aiming at the high-kingship, which he secured in 1002.

The third poem enables us to date still more closely these political manifestoes. It is written in hostility to the dynasty of Tara, the *Ui Néill*, and in friendship to the Norse of Dublin, in whose favour it commits a flagrant and daring falsification of history. The Norse of Dublin at this period were in alliance with the king of Leinster ; and Brian was at war with both as late as 999, when he defeated the allies at Glenn Mama. After this victory he adopted a new policy, securing an alliance with the Dublin Norse against the high-king Mael Sechnaill. In furtherance of this policy he gave his daughter in marriage to Sitric, king of Dublin, and himself married the mother of Sitric. In the year 1000, in conjunction with the Norsemen and the Leinstermen, Brian invaded Meath. We cannot be far wrong in setting down 1000 as the date of this third poem and the approximate date of the other two. These portions of the *Book of Rights* have their date thus ascertained.

The first and second of the three poems are found in the section of the *Book of Rights* devoted to the political order of Munster. But it can be shown that they were interpolated in this section. Each of the overkingdoms of Ireland has a separate section in the work, containing in each case two poems,<sup>[3]</sup> one of which recites the tributes due from the subject states to the overking, the other the “*stipends*” or suzerain gifts accepted by the petty kings from the overking in token of allegiance. In addition to the two poems composed in furtherance of Brian's policy, the Munster section contains a poem of tributes and a poem of

stipends, neither of which makes any allusion to such a policy. These poems were therefore the original Munster section, and were of older date than the poems written in Brian's interest. Indeed, one of the latter is a new edition of the poem of tributes. Cutting out the two poems of policy and another poem reciting the strongholds of the king of Cashel, the Munster section becomes exactly analogous to the sections for the remaining overkingdoms ; and this was obviously the original form of the book. The poem of the strongholds may have been part of the original book, which, being compiled in Cashel, may well have devoted more attention to the king of Cashel than to the other overkings ; or, what is more likely, it may also have been added through policy, claiming not only overlordship, but the control of fortresses in every part of Munster — a claim for which there was no precedent elsewhere in Ireland, and which seems to bear the mark of the strong hand of Brian.

Thus it is seen that there was a Book of Rights older than Brian's policy, and in which the poems in favour of that policy are evidently interpolated. What was the date of the older Book of Rights ? Here, again, there is little room for doubt. One of Brian's poems professes to be dictated to Selbach, the poet of Cormac. This allusion, like the fabricated history of the Dublin Norsemen, is due to the daring invention of Brian's poet. It proves that he believed the original Book of Rights, or the original Munster section thereof, to have been written by Selbach. As less than a century separated the two writers, and as moreover the later writer had the evidence of the Psalter of Cashel before him, we may take it as proved that the original Book of Rights dated from the time of Cormac, and therefore that the tradition which ascribes the Psalter of Cashel, containing the original work, to Cormac is quite accurate — at least, as concerns the date of compilation.

Cormac fell in the Battle of Belach Mughna in 908. The Psalter of Cashel may be dated somewhere about 900. From it the tale *Macgnímartha Find*, it is claimed, was transcribed. The language of the piece, if I am not mistaken, in point of its antiquity, justifies the claim. At all events, the tale is the oldest piece of prose, and the oldest extensive piece in any form that we possess of the Fenian story.

The most remarkable trait of the *Macgnímartha* is that, like the whole Ulidian epic, it deals with an Ireland in which the dominant “ Milesian ” race of history does not exist. We cannot suppose this trait to have been accidental. In the later developments of the legend, the Milesian dynasties of Tara and Cashel are prominent in the action. In this tale, they are not even the subject of the remotest allusion. And yet there is abundant opportunity for introducing them. We find Fionn going northwards to Slane on the Boyne. He must have passed near Tara. Slane itself was in the home territory of the high-king, the magnificent Conn of the Hundred Battles. Mere dramatic instinct, one imagines, would have compelled some mention of so distinguished a neighbour ; but there is no such mention. Fionn journeys southwards from Slieve Bloom. He must have traversed the particular domain of the king of Cashel, yet there is no word of Mugh Nuadhat or his famous son and successor Ailill Olom.

The negative evidence is still more complete. The story of Fionn begins with the Battle of Cnucha, in which his father Cumhall is slain. In later versions,<sup>[4]</sup> the chief enemy of Curahall, the antagonist at whose instance this battle is fought, is the monarch Conn. In the *Macgnímartha*, there is no mention of Conn or of his party in connexion with the battle, and no room left for them. The battle is fought between Cumhall's people on the one side, and the Luagni of Tara and the Clanna Morna on the other. The subject of dispute is in no way connected with monarchical policy. It is a contention for the fianship (*fianus*, *fianaidecht*) of Ireland, between chieftains fighting for their own hand.

The same thoroughly negative evidence is borne by the incident in which the boy Fionn, like the boy Cú Chulainn, vanquishes singlehanded a whole team of lads at the game of *iomáin* or

“hurley.” In the later versions, this incident takes place in the presence of the monarch Conn at the great national games of Tailtiu. In the *Macgnímartha*, it takes place on the green of “a certain fort” in Leinster, neither Conn nor any other king being present. In short the *Macgnímartha*, like the Ulidian epic, supposes a period when the Milesian sovereignty of Tara and of Ireland was still unknown, when the Boyne was the boundary between the Ulidians and the Leinstermen. This tradition demands for the Fenian story an antiquity dating at all events farther back than the legend of the pagan high-kings. I have shown elsewhere that the Milesian regime in Tara has for its anterior limit the so-called “restoration” under Tuathal Techtmar, and that the high-kingship cannot reasonably be supposed to have existed before Niall of the Nine Hostages. The modernity of this dynasty was well known to the author of the *Macgnímartha*, as it was to the authors of the Ulidian sagas; and to have introduced the Milesian line or the hegemony of Tara into either story would have seemed to these writers almost as much out of place as the introduction of the Lord Lieutenant would have seemed to Micheál Coimín.

The positive evidence of the *Macgnímartha* is no less striking. The chief contending parties in the story are the Luagni, the Clanna Morna, and the people of Cumhall. The Luagni have often been confounded by modern annotators with the Luigne of Meath. They were distinct races. Luigne means the descendants of Lugh, the Celtic god. Luagni means the descendants of Loch. The Luigne and the Luagni both existed in Meath in historic time. The Luigne occupied a definite small territory near Navan. The Luagni were a vassal race (*aithechtuath*) scattered over the region of Meath (including Westmeath) from the Shannon to the sea. They were, in fact, the servile remnant of an ancient Leinster race. Even in the period presumed by the Ulidian epic, the Luagni were a subject people. Their king was Coirbre Nia Fer, king of Tara; but he was not of their race, being of the Lagen or dominant race of Leinster. The Luagni were his vassals. In the story of the Battle of Rosnaree, Conchobar taunts his Ulstermen with being inferior in valour to these vassals. The Ulstermen were getting worsted. “Truly, Ulstermen,” said the king, “I was not aware till to-day that the Galians of Leinster or the Luagni of Tara were braver than ye.” As to the status of the Galians, here linked with the Luagni, there is no doubt. Like the Luagni, they were subjects of a Lagenian king, Find, king of Ailiu, brother of Coirbre Nia Fer; but he was not of their race. They were vassals. Hence, when they join Medb in the expedition of the Táin Bó Cualnge, she first proposes to destroy them, fearing their power, but afterwards breaks them up into small bands, and distributes them among the other forces. This she could not have done if they had been led by their own king. In fact, they had no king or chieftain on the occasion, being merely the vassal levies of her ally, the king of Ailiu. Like the Luagni, the Galians still existed in historical time as vassal tribes, *aithechtuatha*, being distributed over the northern parts of Leinster east of Ossory. The distribution of the Luagni and Galeoin is given in the tract on the *aithechtuatha* in the “Book of Ballymote.”

Regarding the Clanna Morna, there is but one tradition, that they belonged to the Fir Bolg of eastern Connacht, who were also a vassal people.

We now come to the third section of these early *fiana*, the race to which Cumhall and Fionn belonged. The *Macgnímartha* tells us that Cumhall was a member of the sept Uí Tarsig, a branch of a people called the Corco Oche of Cúil Chontuinn. The annotator of the Ossianic Society's text, whose authority was probably O'Donovan, places this people in the north of Meath. I have not found this location confirmed by any other evidence; nor have I found any tradition connecting Fionn with northern Meath. On the other hand, Mac Firbis, in his tract on the Fir Bolg (Genealogies, R.I.A. copy), and Keating, in his History (chap. ix), agree in saying that the Uí Tarsig were located in Uí Failge (Offaly, Co. Kildare), and also that they belonged to the race of the Fir Bolg. Fir Bolg here is a general name for the early races reduced to vassaldom, and includes the Fir Domnann and the Galeoin. But what is more

definite, Mac Firbis (p. 55) quotes an older writer to the effect that the Uí Tarsig were a sept of the Galeoin, and that Fionn, chief of the Fenians, was of that race. Again, the tract on the *aithechtuatha*, or vassal peoples, in the “Book of Ballymote” states that one of the three later divisions of the Galeóin, the Tuath Fochmuinn, was located in Uí Failgi, in Fotharta Airbrech, and *upon Almu and all that are proper to Almu of septs* (anas dir di [d]ji finib). Almu, according to all tradition, was the chief seat of Fionn. It is shown as the Hill of Allen on modern maps, about a mile east of the borders of the modern barony of West Offaly. It seems certain, then, that Cumhall and Fionn were leaders and heroes of the Galeoin, and that these two races, the Galeoin and the Luagni, linked together in the story of Rosnaree, were the chief antagonist parties in the original version of the Battle of Cnucha, with the Clanna Morna of Connacht as interlopers on the side of the Luagni. It is perhaps no mere coincidence that the king over the Galeoin, though not of them, in the Ulster epic, is also named Fionn.

There need be no hesitation, therefore, in drawing the conclusion that the Fenian epic originated among the Galeoin who dwelt in the neighbourhood of Almu. What chiefly distinguishes it from, I think, almost every other primitive epic is that it is the hero-lore of a subject, not of a ruling, race. In view of the origin here traced for it, this peculiar character is quite natural. For centuries before the Irish Christian period, the Galeoin were a subject race, compelled to do battle for their rulers. There are, of course, in the Fenian story certain features common to early epopee, such as the conflicts of the heroes with fierce monsters, their close relationship to the gods, &c. But the distinctive features of the Fenian legend, and, I think, the fortunes of the legend itself, are traceable to its origin among a vassal race and its early shaping at their hands.

The status of subject races receives little light from the Ulster epic, which is our chief source of pre-Milesian tradition. The rise of the Milesian power, and the fuller history connected therewith, bring into the clearest contrast the comparative rights and powers of the dominant and subordinate races. The Book of Rights shows the chief Milesian dynasties exacting heavy annual tributes from the subject peoples, but holding their own minor branch dynasties exempt from all tribute. Going farther back, we find Dúí Tenguma, king of Connacht at the close of the fifth century, expatriating a whole petty kingdom of Fir Bolg race, and planting in its stead the Milesian colony of Uí Maine. The power which could thus exterminate a race, could also subject it to unlimited exactions. Among the things it could exact were armed levies. The freemen of the dominant race could not be compelled to serve in the field for more than a few weeks every year. “If the hosting of Connacht should remain [in the field] longer than a fortnight and a month, the Uí Maine have liberty to return home” (Hy Many, p. 67). “These septs are freed from the hostings of spring and summer, and there is no power to ask them against their will” (*ib.*). Such exemptions of the dominant race by name imply that there were other races not so exempt. The subject races, therefore, were liable to longer military service than six weeks; and their levies could be called out even during seed-time and harvest. The subject peoples might thus be required to furnish forces at any time, even when the free population was engaged on the most urgent works of agriculture. This demand could only be met by the creation among them of a warrior caste, living by the chase and by the plunder of their enemies in war. Bands of such professional soldiery were called *fiana*. The professional soldier was called *féinnid*, *féindid*. We can thus understand how, as the Book of Rights makes clear, the powerful kings of Tara and Cashel kept the territories around those strongholds in the occupation of subject states, instead of colonizing them with branches of their own race. By this means they held at their disposal, at all seasons and for indefinite periods, the forces of the subject peoples almost in the condition of a standing army.

That *fiana* meant levies of inferior political status is, I think, apparent in the verse from a poem on the death of Brian Catha an Dúin (a.d. 1260) — *do ghoin a bfian ar mbrandán* — which has reference to the game of *brandub*, resembling chess, and is translated by

O'Donovan “ their *pawns (fian)* have checkmated our king. ” Here *fian* denotes the pieces of inferior status in the game. The epithet *ri for fianaib*, which occurs several times in Gilla Coemáin's poem on the high-kings, is seen to have a special significance. It means an *over-king* for such alone had power to call out the *fiana* of the subject states. The *fiana* were not mercenary troops. A mercenary was called *amus* ; mercenary service, *amsaine*.

We do not hear of contemporary *fiana* in the Annals. They probably belonged to no later period than the completion of the Milesian conquests, which virtually came about in the fifth century, before our contemporary political records begin. By that time the subject states had probably attained the fixity of conditions indicated in the Book of Rights. When the stress of conquest had passed away, the existence of professional armed bands on an extensive scale must have been felt to be a burden and a danger. The *fiana*, therefore, are prehistoric ; but that such a class could have been invented for literary purposes is inconceivable. Their existence is a fact preserved by a genuine and vivid, if somewhat idealised, tradition.

How and by whom was the literary tradition of the *fiana* maintained ? We can answer with certainty that it was not maintained by the literati of the dominant race. The great list of 187 tales in the Book of Leinster contains only four or five titles that can be taken to refer to the Fenian cycle. The almost complete absence of pieces in Old Irish, or bearing linguistic evidence of an earlier than Middle-Irish casting, confirms the testimony of the list. The Fenian literature, as a body, came into the great literary schools no earlier than the Middle-Irish period.

Does not this prove too much ? If hardly any traces of Old Irish are found in the earlier Fenian literature, must we not conclude that the Fenian story itself is a Middle-Irish development ? I do not think so. We have to consider the different circumstances in which the dominant Milesians,[5] or Scots, adopted the two heroic cycles. This race appears to have had no body of ancient hero-lore peculiar to themselves. The romance of their past grew up around a skeleton of artificial history, pieced together by the schools. Upon this structure were overlaid various patches of the traditions of the older races.

It was apparently during the seventh century that the Milesian poets adopted the Ulidian hero-lore.[6] We find them about the same period adopting the Ulidian scheme of history. Dr. MacCarthy (Todd Lectures, vol. iii) finds the oldest traceable effort to devise a history of pre-Christian Ireland in one of the “ Synchronisms ” preserved in the Book of Ballymote. Applying chronographical tests, he says that this document “ may date from the end of the sixth century. ” The only detailed piece of Irish “ history ” in the document is a list of the Ulidian kings from the foundation of Emain to the period of the Ulidian epic. In it, and not in Tigernach, occurs originally the statement that nothing of Irish history is known or credible prior to the foundation of the Ulidian capital. Clearly this earliest history is of Ulidian origin, and is copied into a document embodying in a crude form the Milesian theory of ancient Ireland. 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 St. 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 crystallized, and ceased to evolve. Most of the changes they afterwards suffered were due, not to invention, but to the limitations of the scribes.

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. As the Milesians, though masters of nearly all Ireland, never colonized more than about one-third of the country, the remaining two-thirds continuing in the occupation of the older races and under the rule of their native kings, it is evident that this epic of a subject race had an extensive public to whose sympathies it could present a strong appeal. Thus 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 Ivernian population of West Munster, the region around Loch Léin becoming a second home, not only for the cultivation of the epic, but for the life and actions of the heroes. The story of Diarmaid must have been developed among the Corcu Duibne, whose territory embraced the modern baronies of Corcaguiny and Iveragh, and extended eastward to Loch Léin.

In the published portions of the cycle previous to this present volume, the part of Goll and his kindred has not been relatively prominent. But one has only to go upon the track of Fenian folklore 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.[7] 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 also was Fir Bolg territory until its conquest by the sons of Niall, and after conquest was largely peopled by vassals of the Fir Bolg race. The Duanaire shows that the western and north-western sub-cycle of Goll and his kindred found full expression at an early date in written literature. As in the western folk-tales, so in a number of these poems, Goll is made superior to Fionn in valour and truth.

It may be asked why, if the Fenian cycle was thus spread over Ireland, and accessible to the Milesian writers at all points, it was not taken up by them in preference to the Ulidian cycle, which, until the seventh century, was confined to one remote district. The question has already been partly answered. The Ulidian cycle came armed with the great prestige of letters. But a still more potent reason must have operated. In the seventh century the Ulidians were a free race. There is no sufficient proof that, at this period, they accepted even the suzerainty of the Uí Neill. Their hero-lore invariably represents them as something more than free, holding their own against “ the four great fifths of Ireland. ” In order to bring the scene of action within their own familiar bounds, the author of *Táin Bó Cualnge* had to adopt the dramatic device of casting on his heroes a spell of sickness,[8] during which the otherwise impossible is accomplished — the Ulidian territory is overrun by enemies. A conquering and dominant aristocracy could appreciate such a story of freemen coming from freemen. On the other hand, the Fenian epic was in form and essence the story of a vassal race. We have seen that it was distinctive of freemen that they could not be kept in military service beyond a stated short period in each year, and could not be called out during seed-time or harvest to go upon expeditions. To belong to a permanent military service was the part of vassaldom ; and vassaldom therefore was the most prominent character of the Fenian story. The whole Fenian

tradition must thus have been repugnant to the sympathies of the free Milesians. Again, the Fenian hero-lore was kept up and cultivated by the conquered races, whom, even in the tenth century, the conquerors still called *doer-thuatha*, unfree peoples, reserving the title of *soer-chlanda*, free races, for themselves. When we see the deep repugnance with which a modern few, identifying themselves with a bygone era of conquest, regard the native language and literature of the Irish people, we can understand how the Milesian conquerors, while the memory of conquest was still green, must have looked upon a literary tradition, not only peculiar to the subject peoples, but itself redolent of their subject status.

The inclusion of a Fenian tale in the Psalter of Cashel (about A.D. 900) is the first evidence we have of the adoption of the cycle by the ruling race ; and the context of this tale proves that it came fresh and unchanged from non-Milesian hands. By this time a new school of Irish learning had come into being, presided over by the chief *filidh* of the Milesian courts. The main work of this school was to reconstruct the early history of Ireland, and the central theory of its Irish history was that Ireland had been subject to the Milesian race for ages before the Christian era. The method of work was to make a study of the whole mass of popular mythological and heroic tradition, assigning to it a chronology which did not exist within it, and arranging all the events of tradition in a definite order of succession. It was for this reason that a knowledge of tales by the hundred became such an extraordinary feature of Irish secular learning. The note appended to the list of tales in the Book of Leinster is fairly decisive on the point. The *fili*, or man of letters, took rank according to the number of traditional stories at his command. But, says the note, " he is no *fili* who does not *harmonize* and *synchronize* all the stories. " [O'Curry is responsible for this rendering of the technical verbs employed. Whether or not he has given their exact meaning, there can be no doubt that they refer to some sort of correlating process, and, as a matter of fact, the schools did endeavour to harmonize and synchronize the stories, and presented them as a continuous history with dates.]

The prejudices of conquest had by this time grown feeble. Christianity, apart from its principle of universal brotherhood, had contributed in two ways to elevate the conquered. The territorial organization of the Church was based on the political order of the fifth century. It was contrary to the Church's interest that this order should be disturbed. Hence we find that, in the tenth century, the petty states were, in most cases, ruled by the same dynasties as in the fifth. Two-thirds of these dynasties were of the older races. They remained tributary to the conquerors, but otherwise were apparently equal in franchise. Five centuries of dynastic permanence were in themselves a patent of high nobility. In the second place, a great number of the famous churchmen and religious men of letters were, from the first, drawn from the subject peoples. This fact alone must have tended strongly to equalize the status of conquering and conquered.

Intermarriage with the older dynastic families must have done much to abate racial prejudice. In course of time, the distinction between free and unfree necessarily lost its racial significance, for even an unpaid debt might suffice to disenfranchise the debtor, though of free race.

But the new theory of history made it absolutely necessary to associate the conquering people with the traditions of the conquered. It was from these traditions that the early history was manufactured. It was not possible to set up a Milesian dynasty in remote antiquity, and yet to hold it detached from all antiquity. Thus at first the Ulidians, though their own story tells nothing of it, and all the other ancient dynasties in turn, were woven into the kindred of Milesius of Spain. The whole Irish aristocracy was grafted on a single genealogical tree. Having transcribed all that I could find of the pre-Christian genealogies, having analysed them, and compared them name by name, pedigree by pedigree, I state here the conclusion — it would be too long to state the argument leading to the conclusion — which, in my

opinion, is established beyond a shadow of doubt. The authentic genealogies reach back in no instance beyond the year 300 a.d. All the material referring to any earlier date, and therefore the whole genealogical scheme uniting the earlier lines to the Milesian main stem, is the work of the synchronizing and harmonizing school.

It is rather remarkable that the oldest and chief authority which I have found cited for early composite genealogies is the Psalter of Cashel. This compilation, therefore, particularly belongs to the harmonizing school of history. Thus already in the tenth century, the new theory of racial unity, of a common descent for all the free Irish, had found acceptance in the Milesian courts. The establishment of this theory must have marked the final disappearance of race prejudices. The only races excluded from the genealogical unity were the Galeóin, the Fir Domnann, and the Fir Bolg, for these races had sunk into complete vassaldom, and their dynastic lines had disappeared. If any petty kingdoms of these races had survived, they would almost certainly have been included in the Milesian comity.

It is, therefore, not merely a coincidence that, in the Psalter of Cashel, the hero-lore of the subject peoples makes its earliest appearance known to us in the hands of the dominant race. The time had arrived when the racial and political import of the Fenian sagas could be ignored, and their wider appeal could be accepted without prejudice. Nevertheless, even in the further developments of the cycle, there is a clear note of sometimes covert, sometimes unconcealed, hostility to the masters of Ireland.

It only remains to point out the traces of the later manipulation of the story from the specially Milesian standpoint. We have already seen that there is the Battle of Cnucha without Conn and the Battle of Cnucha with Conn ; the hurling match on the green of a certain fort and the same hurling match in the presence of Conn at Tailtiu. On the other hand, we find events peculiar to the Milesian story ; and in one version the Fiana are absent from mention, in another version they take a leading part. The Battle of Mucrama is one of these. The death of Coirbre Lifechar is another. It is usually told that Coirbre fell by the hand of Oscar, and Oscar by the hand of Coirbre, in the Battle of Gabair. I once imagined that this event was almost certainly historical, as the tradition of the death of a high-king and the manner of his death about a.d. 300 was likely to have been faithfully preserved. My faith in traditions dating from A.D. 300 was shaken by the discovery that the three joint kings who succeeded him, the Fothads, were a triad of divinities whose father was Lugh Lámfada ; it was further shaken on learning that Coirbre, according to another story, was slain by a Munster prince. Wherever we find the Milesian kings of Meath or Cashel in the Fenian tales, or the Fiana in tales of the Milesian rulers, we find a story shaped or revised in the tenth century or later.

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. Even a writer schooled in the Ulidian tradition might endeavour to archaize the story. One at least of the poems edited by Windisch is, I feel sure, a *tour de force* produced in this way.[9] But in general the Fenian tales and poems were composed in the current language of prose and poetry, requiring no gloss. This fact, combined with the circumstances of their earlier history, enabled the Fenian sagas to oust completely from popularity the far grander and more impressive epic of the race of Rudraige.

The history of the Fenian epic, as I have essayed to reconstruct it, offers an easy solution of several problems. It explains the form of the heroic narrative, and the peculiar role of the heroes. It explains the long-deferred appearance of the epic in written literature, and its forward state of development when at length it does appear. It explains also the almost exclusive

popularity of the epic — its position for many centuries as the chief hero-lore of the Gaelic-speaking races of Ireland and Scotland.

The legend of the Fiana, as it spread from race to race, from the Galeoin to the Erneans and the Fir Bolg, from these to the ascendant Scottic aristocracy, was constantly undergoing reformation, and at no time acquired, like the Ulidian story, a classic and final form. It remained always modern, not only in its language, but in the sense of being entirely the property of each succeeding generation of story-tellers and ballad-makers. In this way, it retained the power of constantly and freely assimilating new elements. A bold device — the addition of more than a century to the lives of two of the heroes— enabled the 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. The hitherto published examples of this development belong to the modern period ; but a number of much earlier specimens will be found in this volume. It is somewhat amusing to find some present-day writers themselves so deficient in humour as to imagine that, in the debates between Patrick and Oisín, the laugh is turned against Christianity. In the older examples, as is usual in the older literature, the humorous aspect is never stripped to the skin.

The survival of Oisín and Caoilte until St. Patrick's mission probably did not originate in the conscious purpose of introducing the Christian element. Its motive was similar to that which endowed Findtan and Tuan with a still more marvellous longevity. The early native writers were well aware that the art of writing, to whatever extent it may have been practised in pre-Christian Ireland, was not commonly applied to general literary purposes before the time of the Christian scribes. St. Patrick himself taught the alphabet. Oisín and Caoilte lived on, so that they might meet those who were able to write the story of the Fiana. Thus we find that two of the poems in the Duanaire commence with the injunction addressed to a Christian scribe, “ Set this down, Brogan, in writing. ”

The same power of assimilation enabled the story to attach to itself the legends of the mighty ancestor-kings of the Milesian race. Conn and his successors in Tara, Cathair Mór in Ailiu, and Ailill Olom in Cashel. So thoroughly popular, too, was the development of the epic that it found no difficulty in admitting the Norsemen into the narrative — a glaring anachronism which must always have been patent to the learned. The history of Alexander the Great compelled the admirers of the Fiana to make them also the conquerors of distant Oriental regions. Thus arose the *echtra* or oversea expedition, of which the Duanaire contains two elaborate specimens — the least interesting of all its contents, their virtue seemingly comprised in exciting popular wonder about distant and unknown lands. (At present the term *eachtra* seems to denote any prose tale of a heroic nature or connected with heroic legend, a tale in verse being called *laoidh*.)

The Norman invaders were too modern and familiar to find a place in the action of the epic, which nevertheless has ingeniously contrived to work them in by way of prophecy. Two of the poems in the Duanaire are devoted to prophetic accounts of the Normans in Ireland.

To sum up, the story of Fionn appears to have arisen, like most primitive hero-lore, in the region of mythology. It obtained a peculiar development among the ancient vassal race of North Leinster, the Galeoin, who impressed on the life of the heroes the character of professional warriorship, permanent military service being a special obligation of unfree races only. 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. The old ideas of racial inequality had then lost most of their force ; the status of permanent military service had long ceased to be prevalent ; and so the stories of the Fiana came gradually to be accepted even by the dominant race on their merits as literature.

Unfettered by prestige, the sagas were susceptible of unlimited development, and were free to adapt themselves to popular taste. In time they ousted all their rivals.

[1] In the Christian and Pre-Norman Period, Ireland was dominated by two great dynastic families, one having Tara, the other Cashel, as chief centre. In a series of papers in the *New Ireland Review* during 1906, I have shown that these two dynastic races appear to be of comparatively recent pre-Christian origin, the story of the “ Mylesian invasion ” being devised to credit them with a spurious antiquity. As the doctrine of descent from Mile or “ Milesius ” of Spain seems in its earliest form peculiar to these laces, I have called them Milesians for want of any better term that would describe them in common.

[2] The title of psalter, *Irish Saltair*, appears applicable in Early Irish to any considerable compilation in verse. But the *Psalter of Cashel* seems to have contained also prose tales and pedigrees.

[3] Except in the case of the overkingdom of Oriel, which has no poem of tributes. This may be explained by the fact that Oriel had long ceased to enjoy suzerain powers, having become a dependency of *Cineal Eoghain*.

[4] *L.U. Fotha Catha Cnucha, &c.*

[5] I use this term to designate the dynastic races of Tara and Cashel in the historical period. They cannot have risen into prominence long before St. Patrick's time.

[6] The occurrence is symbolised in the story of the “ recovery ” of *Táin Bó Cualnge*.

[7] *Magh Maen*, in south *Connacht*, was their home.

[8] The episode of the sickness, as Mr. Nutt urges upon me, can hardly have been a mere literary device. The device lay in the use made of the episode.

[9] “ *Irische Texte,* ” p. 162.

[Publications] (1899) Volume: 7  
Author: Irish Texts Society

**EOIN MAC NEILL**

Source : **Internet Archive**  
<http://www.archive.org/details/publications07irisuoft>