

Origin of the Fenian Tales.

Eleanor Hull

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The tales of the Fianna fall naturally into three divisions, embodying a Leinster, a Connacht, and a Munster tradition.

The Leinster tradition became by far the most popular, and the adventures of the Leinster Fianna and of their leaders, Fionn himself, his son, Oisín, and his grandson, Oscar, and of their relative, Caeilte, form the subject of the main bulk of the legends. But the story of Diarmuid and Grainne seems to preserve traces of a Munster tradition, and the frequent localising of the scene of Fionn's exploits around the borders of Loch Lein, or Killarney, and the Kerry neighbourhood, appears to show that many of the legends originated in Kerry or West Munster. The fact that Fionn has a Munster as well as a Leinster genealogy also shows the desire to identify his legend with the Southern Province.

The Connacht Tradition and Goll mac Morna.

The Connacht legend, of which Aedh or Goll mac Morna was the hero, would seem to have originally occupied a large place in the cycle, but to have gradually given way before the more popular Leinster legend. The poems in praise of Goll form a good share of the collection known as *Duanaire Finn*, or the "Poem-book of Fionn," and are found also in Scotland; while Goll still retains his early position of importance in the folk-tradition of the north-west and west of Ireland.

In a rhapsody in praise of this Connacht leader, found in the Scottish Book of the Dean of Lismore, Goll is extolled quite as highly as is Fionn himself in the companion eulogy on the Leinster chief:

“ Highminded Goll,
Sworn foe of Finn,
Hero in might,
Bold in assault ;
Free in his gifts,
Fierce in his hate,
By all beloved,
Goll, gentle, brave ;
Morna's great son, . . .
First in the school,
Of gentle blood,
Of noble race,
Liberal, kind,
Untired in fight,
No prince so wise . . .
Of fairest face,
No king like Goll.”

He is frequently spoken of as the "great-souled son of Morna," and in the tale called "The Little Brawl at Almhain (Allen)" he is placed next to Fionn himself in the list of Fenian

warriors and takes equal rank with him as leader of his own Connacht troops. Sometimes he is represented as the friend and ally of Fionn ; he rids Fionn of a terrible deformed hag of whom all the host declare themselves afraid, in order to prove to the chief that “ when the need is greatest, ‘tis then the friend is proven ;” [1] and his trustworthiness is commented on frequently in the Ossianic poems :

“ We were staunch, relying on Goll ; now that Goll of the feasts lives not, every man is bold against us.” There is a touching story of Goll’s protection of his adversary, Fionn, when the latter had ventured alone one evening across the ford and found Goll sleeping in the midst of his hosts. Fionn awakens and challenges Goll, but the chief of the Connacht warriors points to the array of his hosts who have placed themselves between Fionn and his retreat. Fionn appeals to his protection, and Goll nobly responds by conducting Fionn safely back into the midst of his own army (*Duanaire Finn iii.*). The incident may be compared to Cuchulain’s protection of Meave’s army during its retreat across the Shannon. Fionn even bestows on Goll his own daughter to wife. [2]

But there were causes of jealousy between the two chieftains. In the tale called “ The Little Brawl at Allen” Fionn is represented as jealous of Goll’s wealth, and of the rents which he had exacted independently of the Leinster chief from the King of Lochlann, [3] and there were other causes of quarrel between them. Nor was it possible that Fionn should forget that Goll it was who had killed his father in the Battle of Cnucha. This deed was always coming up between them, and it ended in a violent feud in which Fionn pursued Goll with persistent enmity and finally drove him to death. Goll is found pent up at last on a narrow crag in the wide ocean, his faithful wife by his side still refusing to abandon him, fierce with the pangs of hunger and with only brine to drink, yet still untamed, and slaying one by one the warriors sent against him. One of the most pathetic poems in the *Duanaire Finn* (No. X) describes his appeal to his wife on the evening before he is slain to leave his side and seek safety in the tents of the enemy, and her refusal to do so ; while another short poem of great force launches as the refrain of each stanza his curse upon the house of Baeiscne.

The character of Goll mac Morna is everywhere represented as powerful, noble, and magnanimous.

Fionn.

But though Goll is lauded for magnanimity, Oisín for wisdom and poetical gifts, and Oscar for bravery, it is around the head of Fionn that the praises of the poets cluster. He is the “ golden salmon,” “ the gift-bestowing noble leader of the hosts,” “ the diversely accomplished sage,” the Fian chief whose accomplishments exceeded those of all the fifteen Fian leaders before him. [4] He is equally renowned as poet and warrior ; most of the early Fenian poems are ascribed to Fionn himself or to Caeilte, or to his poetic son, Fergus True-lips ; it is only later that we find Oisín replacing Fionn as the supposed author of the Ossianic ballads and verses. Caeilte is regarded as the author of nearly all the poems in the “ Colloquy,” save a few ascribed to Fionn, and he frequently composes them in response to questions proposed by Oisín ; while in the collection called *Duanaire Finn*, the authors are various. The Leinster chief’s generosity is such that

“ Were but the brown leaf that the wood sheds from it gold
Were but the white billow silver
Fionn would have given it all away ; [5]

while the splendour of his equipment, his fort and servants, his retinue of poets, physicians, wise men and warriors is the theme of innumerable poems and eulogies. Yet the actual character of the hero as we find it set before us in the tales is strangely in contrast to these fair eulogiums. He is often represented as vindictive, tortuous in his dealings, little given to pity or to straightforward action. He would seem to have two aspects ; his official character as a chieftain, and his less pleasing character as a private individual. As we may regard the personality of Fionn to be compounded out of many different ideals, this need not disturb us.

Leinster Tradition.

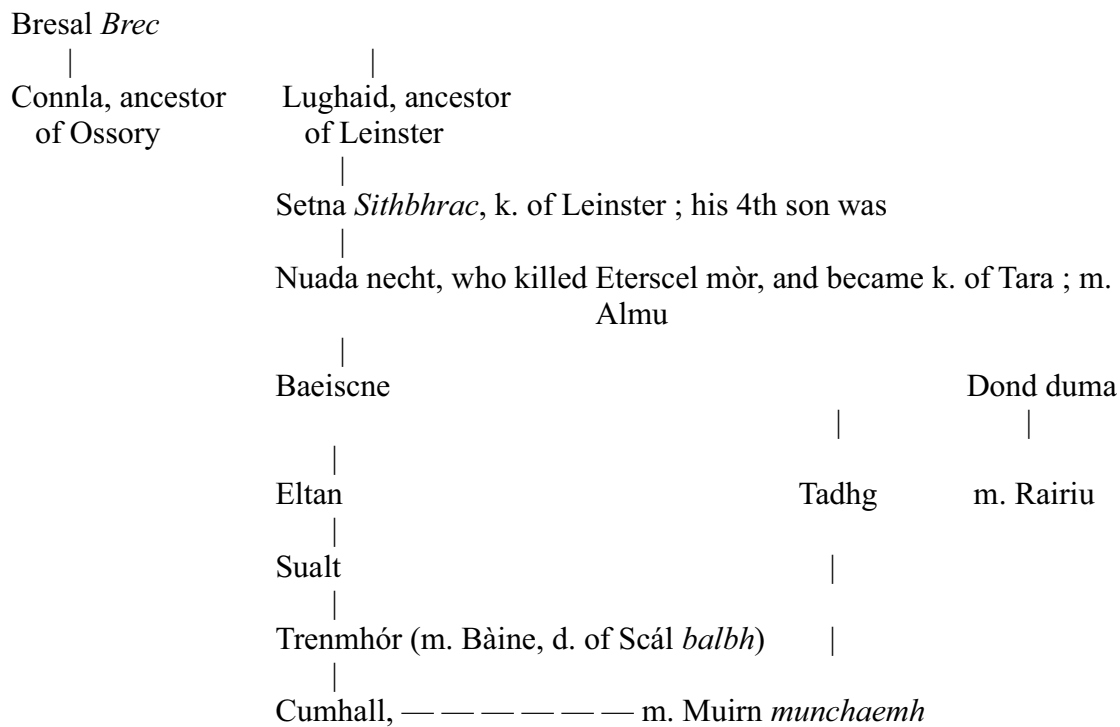
The great number of poems and tales dealing with the adventures of Fionn, or ascribed to the hero himself, amply prove that the Ossianic cycle is in the main a Leinster product. Fionn himself is a Leinster man, his palace is at Almhain (Allen), in the present County of Kildare, and the tales deal for the greater part with the wars and deeds of the Leinster Fianna. It will be necessary to look a little more closely into the matter in order to discover among what section of this Leinster population the tales arose and under what circumstances the cycle was formed. The genealogies of Finn will aid us in determining this. They are not very easy to understand, because he has at least three distinct genealogies, and there are also considerable differences between the various accounts even of these three. The oldest account is probably that which makes him one of the Ui Tairrsigh of Failge (Offaley, a great district comprising the present counties of Kildare and parts of King's and Queen's Counties), sometimes identified with the Luaigne of Tara, or more properly with the Gaileoin, a distinct race of people settled in parts of Leinster. This is his Leinster pedigree, and by much the oldest and most important.

Munster Tradition.

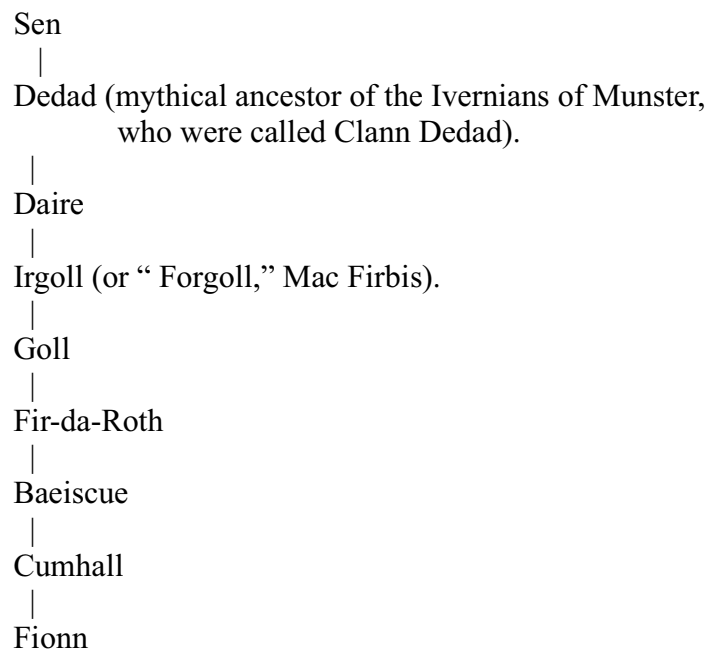
The two others connect him with Munster. The first gives him a descent from the Corca-Oiche Ui Fidhgeinte, [6] from whom the tribe of the Ui Tairrsigh branched. The second makes him a descendant of the Orbhraighe, of Draim Imnocht, probably the people of the barony of Orrery in Co. Cork. These are only three of the most important out of the six different descents assigned to Fionn mac Cumhall in Mac Firbis' great collection of genealogies. Evidently there was much uncertainty about his real origin, and he was claimed as champion by both the Southern Provinces and assigned a place among their tribes. We may discard here the theories of his Munster origin, which seem to have been invented at some late date, probably when the kingdom of Cashel rose into prominence, or when the family of the Dal Cais came to the front with the rapid rise of Brian Boru to power. [7] It may well have seemed a necessity to be able to claim one of the national heroes as the head of the Southern clans ; but the general tradition has always made Fionn a Leinsterman, and there is good manuscript authority for adhering to this tradition. It is not only supported by Mac Firbis, but also more explicitly in the Book of Leinster. [8]

We give here this pedigree from the Book of Leinster, with some additions from other sources to make it more complete.

Leinster Pedigree.



We must remark on this pedigree that the names Eltan and Sualt are usually omitted. In one of Mac Firbis' genealogies they are given as one word, "Sabhalt," but the real explanation of them is found in a tract on Fionn in MS. Egerton, 1782, in which Fionn's pedigree is given thus : "Fionn, s. of Cumhall, s. of Sualtach, s. of Baeiscne, s. of Nuada Necht." It is clear that this is no other than the father of Cuchulain transferred into the genealogy of Fionn. [9] To show the wide differences which exist in Fionn's pedigrees we give one of the Minister genealogies from the Book of Lecan (col. 768).



A note to this adds, "This is not the Leinster pedigree."

Difficulties in the Pedigrees.

The variety in his pedigrees was evidently long ago a matter of difficulty to the scribes, for in MS. Egerton, 1782, after relating that Fionn fell in battle with the three sons of Uirgenn and Aichlech mòr, son of Duibhenn, the third son of Uirgenn, at Ath Brea on the Boyne, the scribe adds : “ His origin the experts declare variously ; some of them say that he was of the Corca-oiche in Ua Fidhgeinte ; others again assert (and this is the truth of the matter) that he was of the úi Tairrsigh of Offaley, which were of the Aithech Tuatha, as Maelmura has said in the chronicle : Six stocks there are that shall have territorial settlement, but are not of Breogan’s people, viz. : the Gabhraidhe of the Suca ; the Ui Tairrsigh, the Gaileoin of Leinster [and others].” (Sil. Gad, ii., p. 99.)

In the piece called “ The Boyish Exploits of Fionn” (*Mac-ghníomhartha Fhinn*) Cumhall is said to be “ of the Corca-oiche, a tribe of Cuil Contuinn, and it was from these that the Ui Tairrsigh, the tribe of Cumhall, branched.” [10] This tale is a very old one, being found in the Psalter of Cashel. The Leinster origin of the tribe we may consider to have been the oldest tradition, and it corresponds to all we otherwise know of the Ui Tairrsigh, *i.e.*, the people of Cumhall, who were a Leinster sept of the Ui Failghe, the traditional descendants of Ros Failghe, eldest son of Cathair mòr. Their country was very extensive before the English invasion, and from them the O’Conor Falys and O’Dempseys claim descent. It comprised the present baronies of East and West Offaley in Kildare and other districts in King’s and Queen’s Counties, [11] There is, however, considerable difference in the account of the exact home of the úi Tairrsigh. In the “ Colloquy” Drum Cree (Druim Criaich) in Westmeath is said to be in their territory. It is evident that Fionn has been localized in various districts of Leinster. Accepting this general tradition of the race of Fionn and Cumhall as the one usually accounted most correct, we must ask, who were these peoples, the Ui Tairrsigh, the Gaileoin, the Gabhraidhe, and the Luaigne of Tara from whom this great hero was popularly believed to be descended ?

It will be remembered that in the quotation made above from the account of Fionn’s death, found in MS. Egerton, 1782, these three stocks are said to be not of Breogan’s people, that is, not of the Milesian race, [11] though they were settled among them, but to be of the Aithech Tuatha or unfree tribes, who were a subject race. This is said to be quoted from Maelmura of Fathan, a writer of genealogical and historical poems, who died in 884. It is possible that in Maelmura’s time these remnants of a subject race may still have remained in Leinster and have been known to him. In any case their tradition was still alive. Keating repeats the same account of them in his chapter on the Firbolg. He says : “ Some antiquaries say that it is from the Firbolg come these three tribes which are in Ireland, but are not of the Gael, namely, the Gabhraidhe of Suca (R. Suck) in Connacht, the Ui Tairrsigh in the country of the O’Failge and the Gaileoin of Leinster.” [12]

The Firbolg.

The people from whom Fionn was believed to be descended were then a subjected race, not of the true Gaels or Milesians, but belonging to those vassal tribes scattered through the country who were known under the general name of Firbolg, and who were popularly believed to have inhabited the whole of Ireland at an earlier period of its history.

They are more commonly divided into the Fir Galian, the Fir Domhnann, and the Fir Bolg, [13] but were gathered under the general name of Fir Bolg. These people were looked down upon by the true Gaels, and were regarded by them with the utmost contempt and hatred. Mac

Firbis, in his introduction to his great Book of Genealogies, says of them : “ Everyone who is black- haired, who is a tattler, guileful, tale-telling, noisy, contemptible ; every wretched, mean, strolling, unsteady, harsh and inhospitable person ; every slave, every mean thief, every churl, everyone who loves not to listen to music and entertainment, the disturbers of every council and assembly and the promoters of discord among men, these are the des-cendants of the Firbolg, of the Gaileoin, of Liogairne and of the Fir Domhnann, in Erin. But, however, the descendants of the Firbolg are the most numerous of all these.”

But though this was the official verdict of the conquerors upon the races they had conquered, but who remained scattered among them up and down the country, the occasional glimpses that we get of these people in the stories give us quite a different idea of them. As a matter of fact, the Gaels seem to have been jealous of their activity, courage and energy. In the opening account of the forces collected by Queen Meave for the war of the *Táin bó Cuailnge*, we find the Gaileoin or Gailiana exceeding all the other troops of Ireland in these qualities. When King Ailell, her husband, questions her as to the spirit and disposition of the various contingents, she is forced angrily to acknowledge that in comparison with the Gailiana or Gaileoin all the others were but a poor set ; when the other troops had but just halted to encamp, the Gailiana had finished pitching their tents and bothies ; when others had set up their shelters the Gailiana had made an end of cooking ; when others were beginning to eat, the Gailiana had finished their meal ; while others were still eating, the Gailiana were already in bed and asleep. Ailell congratulates himself that they have such excellent troops on their side, but Meave protests that she would like to exterminate the whole of them, as she considers them to be a danger in the host. She is only dissuaded from this vengeful and unjust act by the persuasions of Fergus and her husband, and on condition that they are dispersed through the army and are not allowed to remain more than five men together in any one place. It was the policy of the free tribes or Milesians in every way to depress and hold down their powerful predecessors. Like Meave, they feared that a combination of these active warriors might at some time threaten their authority, and they took the same course as Meave pursued with the Gaileoin to weaken them, by dispersing them throughout all Erin and taking their lands from them. [14]

It seems to have been among this brave but unfree race that the legends of the Fianna had their origin. It is impossible to suppose that the Gael would deliberately have made Fionn, who became a national hero for the whole country, a member of the race they despised, unless some early tradition had existed identifying the legends with these people. But if they had learned the stories from these warlike remnants of older races living beside and among themselves and among whom probably their children were fostered, a people who were their servants, nurses and hired troops, the theories of Fionn's origin would become comprehensible. They traced his descent from the septs among whom his legends were first repeated.

Slow Acceptance of the Tales.

If we accept this theory of the rise of the Fenian legends among a subject race it would help us also to explain the otherwise curious fact of their slow acceptance by the learned men and the deliberate preference shown by them for the literature of the Cuchulain cycle, which arose among the free and dominant Gaelic peoples and is marked by a haughty independence. That a number of the stories were known in the time of the gathering of the great collections of romance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and even long before this, is certain ; the tales, poems and allusions found in our earliest remaining books, the Psaltair of Cashel, the Book of the Dun, and the Book of Leinster prove this abundantly. But though they were known, they are only sparsely represented among the great mass of Cuchulain tales or of tales of independent origin. They seem to have been unwillingly admitted as part of the national

literary heritage and to have been dependent almost entirely upon oral transmission through several centuries. Though a single allusion in an old poem makes us aware that the love tale of Diarmuid and Grainne is as old at least as the ninth century, the oldest copy that we have of the whole story is of the fifteenth century. The great bulk of the stories of the Cuchulain cycle which has come down to us dates, in its written form, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but the great bulk of the written Ossianic Literature comes to us from the late fifteenth century onward, the largest portion being comparatively recent and dating only from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet it is quite possible that of the two the Fenian legend is in its origin older than the Cuchulain cycle. There are proofs that the general outline, already half-historic, half-romantic, was formed at least by the eighth or ninth century. The tales of Mongan-Fionn are thought to belong to the eighth century ; there are allusions to Fionn in the Eulogy on St. Columcille (*Amra Choluimb Chille*), and in Cormac's Glossary, which cannot be more than a century later, and Cinaedh hui Artacain (d. 975), and Tighernach the Annalist (d. 1088), both mention the death of Fionn at Ath-Brea on the Boyne.

No doubt, the legends themselves are far older than any written record we have of them. The fact that they were generally known, but not considered to be worthy of insertion in the great collections, is easily understood on the supposition that they were looked upon as the popular folk-beliefs and stories of the people who were regarded by the ruling and dominant class as their vassals, an inferior race whom they at once feared and despised ; it is not easily explained on any other ground. Its rise and location in different parts of Ireland is also natural when we consider how these people were dispersed through the country. Starting with a common tradition the cycle would develop along independent lines in Leinster, in Connacht, and in Munster, and in each province localities would be identified with the deeds of Fionn and his heroes, and special stories would be invented to illustrate them. With the dying out of the more splendid Cuchulain cycle, and with the gradual absorption of the subject races in the general population and the loss of those distinctive marks of vassalage which had divided them off as a separate race from the aristocratic families, the tales of Fionn would work their way upward and begin to receive wider notice. The Ulster cycle was too local to retain a permanent place, and it had never touched the people at all ; it remained as the ideal and pastime of the well-to-do and ruling classes. When Ulster ceased to give its kings to Tara and Munster princes replaced the long succession of Ui Néill, a fresh heroic legend, representing southern Ireland, was needed ; perhaps we may take the adoption of Fionn as head of the house of Dal Cais, whose chief, Brian, rose to be first Southern King of Ireland, as a mark of the change of feeling. At any rate it was about this time that the cycle underwent its greatest expansion.

The Norse invasions brought into it a new and wider element. Fionn and Goll were no longer mere local leaders of mercenary bands, engaged in carrying on interminable blood-feuds between themselves, and occupied during the months in which they could not fight in the more peaceful arts of ventry ; they became national warriors, engaged in defending the coasts against foreign invasion, or extending a world- power outside Ireland. The Lochlannach is no longer a fairy-being, dwelling beneath the waters of the inland lakes ; he is the Norse invader against whom Brian and the whole country must wage never-ceasing war.

Second Period.

To this second period of Ossianic revival belong a large number of tales and ballads which have as their subject fights with over-sea warriors, excursions into distant lands, and the rescue of fair women from foreign tyrants.

These tales and ballads, having the Norse invasions as their subject, continued to be invented at least up to the twelfth century, for several mention the name of Manus or King Magnus of Norway, who fell in battle in Ireland in 1103 A.D. After the middle of the twelfth century, though Norse raids continued, they were rather isolated attacks than national efforts to conquer the country. The coming of the Normans directed attention in another direction, and we may consider that the second epoch of the Ossianic legend closed about this time. There is no mention in any of the poems or prose tales of the Norman invaders ; we may therefore presume that they ceased for a time to be invented.

The third period of Ossianic production extends from before the fifteenth century down almost to our own day. The great body of Scottish and Irish Ossianic ballads belongs to this period, with numerous prose tales, usually of an extravagant and bombastic nature, intended chiefly for entertainment and retaining little trace of the historic tone of the ancient tales.

Historical Probability of the Fenian Legend.

Before examining the separate tales more closely, let us return for a moment to the traditions of Fionn's ancestry and personality. We have said that the Fenian legends appear to have arisen among the Firbolg peoples, but the question still remains : was Fionn an actual chief of Leinster warriors, and did such a body of troops ever actually exist as we hear of in the traditions of the Fianna, over whom Fionn is represented as presiding either as captain of a local militia or as an over-sea conqueror and guardian of Ireland in the Norse period ? To answer the latter part of the question we can appeal to the history of the period. The method of attack by the Norse and the defence offered by the Irish are well known, and we may say at once that there is no notice in the history of a force organised under its own leaders for the defence of the country, independent of the tribal and provincial chiefs or of the Kings of Tara. The tribal system, in which each chief called out and sustained his own tribesmen in the field, himself leading them to battle, was in full sway during the Norse period and was the ordinary method of defence. There was, indeed, just such quartering of soldiers upon the people as was complained of under the Fenian *régime*, but it was Norse or Norse-Irish fighting-men from whose exactions the native inhabitants suffered. There is no sign during the Norse period of the existence of an organised militia for purposes of national defence such as is pictured in the Fenian tales. But for purposes of foreign warfare it is probable that in Ireland, as elsewhere, bodies of mercenary troops under powerful leaders would constantly be raised, who would be independent of the claims of the sept and would be ready for service whenever required. Whether they were also used within the country is uncertain.

Such semi-historical stories as the Battle of Magh Rath, or the Battles of Rosnaree or Clontarf, or the account of the Battle of Chester in 912, show that mixed mercenary forces were always available when any special military expedition was in progress. Going further back, the constant wars of the Irish " Scots," in union with the Picts and Britons, against the Romans during the fourth and early fifth centuries, make the existence at that time of large levies of trained troops in Ireland fit and ready for foreign service and fighting under recognised leaders extremely probable. The ordinary system of military service would probably have been unsuited to troops employed in continuous foreign warfare ; and forced levies entirely at the disposal of their leaders and whose services were repaid in money or its equivalent would become a necessity. Nothing is more likely than that the unfree populace would be largely drawn upon for such military service. They could be ordered abroad or wherever required with a facility which would not have been possible in dealing with free and independent tribesmen. The fact that these septs had been in large part deprived of their lands and that they were a naturally active and military race would dispose them to turn to fighting as a natural outlet to their energies. Their condition of dependence is expressed in such

comments as that in the Dindsenchus of Druim n-Dairbrech, where we read of some of these unfree tribes : “ The Fidgai, the Fochmaind, the Gaileoin, were not their own masters early or late.” [15]

It therefore seems natural to suppose that the Fenian tradition may have arisen out of an actual condition of things, probably existing in Ireland through a considerable period of time, and the idea of which was a familiar one to the people at large.

Actual Existence of the Fenian Leaders.

But when we pass from the general question of the existence of a militia quartered upon the clans but owning obedience only to their own leaders and not to the chiefs of the clans, to consider that of special personages mentioned in the legends, we must approach the subject with greater caution. Let us return to the genealogy of Fionn himself. It will strike us at once, even if we confine ourselves entirely to the best authenticated Leinster pedigree, that it is a pedigree concocted from mixed sources and that it contains a very large element of the supernatural. The introduction of the name of Sualtach or Sualtam, Cuchulain’s father, broken into two and filling two links, is curious, and it becomes more interesting in connection with the whole question of Fionn’s genealogy when we remember that though Sualtach is usually regarded as the mortal father of Cuchulain, he is called more than once in old Irish literature, “ Sualtach sídhe,” or Sualtach sidhech, *i.e.*, “ Sualtach of the fairy mounds,” and is spoken of as possessing, through the power of his mother, who was an elf woman, “ the magical might of an elf.” [16]

Discarding the name of Sualtach, which is clearly an innovation, and does not occur in most of the genealogies, we come to the name of Cumhall’s father, Trenmhór, or “ great strength,” which sounds suspiciously like a concocted name ; and when, further on, mounting to the head of the pedigree, we find that Fionn was removed by but few intermediate steps (in many of the genealogies by three only, viz., Baeiscne, Trenmhór, and Cumhall) from the god Nuada, from whom most of the Leinster tribes traced their descent, we feel that we are on ground that is not far separated from pure mythology. It will be noticed that Nuada Necht is also Fionn’s great grandfather on the female side, through Muirn “ of the smooth-neck,” whom Cumhall married, and who was daughter of Tadhg, son of Nuada and his wife, Almu.

Now all these persons are purely mythological figures and are always regarded in Irish literature as gods and goddesses. In the “ Colloquy” we read, in answer to the query, “ Who was Fionn’s mother ?” “ She was Muirne smooth-neck, daughter of Tadhg, son of Nuada, of the Tuatha dé Danann ;” [17] and elsewhere, in reckoning up the chief princes of the Tuatha dé Danann, Tadhg’s name is mentioned with such well-known deities as Bodhb Derg, Angus Og, Lir of sídh Fionnachaidh, etc., as “ Tadhg, son of Nuada, out of the beautiful sídh of Almhain.” [18]

A similar mythical origin is given for Scál balbh, whose daughter, Baine, was wife to Trenmhór and mother of Cumhall. He is said in one place to have been “ King of the Fomori,” or gods of the sea ; and yet again he is father of the god Lugh *Lámh-fhada*, the god of light. [19]

Nuada Necht himself appears in legend under a double personality ; he is sometimes a god and sometimes the powerful Druid and magician of Cathair mór. [20] Under both forms his wife was Almu or Almha, who dwelt in the sídh in Leinster, to which she gave her name. This hill of Allen, in Kildare, became traditionally the central fort and residence of Fionn. It is

called in the older form, Almu, and in the later Ossianic ballads, Almhain, but though certain spots in the neighbourhood are still traditionally associated with incidents in the Fenian stories, there is no sign of any ancient rath or mound on the hill itself. Like other places associated with the Fenian legends, it vanishes into a fairy haunt when we approach it more closely. When, in the “Colloquy,” Caeilte is questioned as to the origin of the name, he replies : “It was a warrior of the Tuatha dé Danann that lived in the teeming, glittering brugh : Bracon (or Becan) was his name, and he had a daughter that was still a virgin ; her name was Almha.” What comes next is erroneous. “Cumhall, son of Trenmhór took her to wife ; in bearing him a son she died, and this green-surfaced *tulach* was closed in over her. From her, therefore, it is now named, whereas until then it had been called ‘ the Look-out Hill.’ ” [21]

The same atmosphere of fairy-lore comes into the description of every personage and of every act of the Saga. Diarmuid O’Duibhne, called in *Duanaire-Finn* “Diarmuid O’Duibhne from the Brugh,” had been brought up among the gods, “with the powerful Manannán mac Lir in the land of promise ;” “with Angus Og, the Dagda’s son, he had learned knowledge.” Cnú Dheireoil, Fionn’s dwarf harper, is “son of Lugh of comely form ;” Oisín’s mother, Blai, daughter of Derc “of the forcible language,” is a sídh-woman. (Colloquy, *Silva Gad.* II., p. 102). Even Bran, Fionn’s hound, is superhuman. In *Duanaire-Finn* xvii., we read :

“ Bran though a hound was yet no hound ;
 Good was her valour, fair her fame ;
 She was no hound’s offspring, from no hound sprang ;
 No hunting-dog’s offspring was her mother.”

But the most important among the traditions regarding Fionn himself is that which connects him with a mysterious being called Mongan, who was, according to the historical accounts, son of Fiachna Finn, a King of Ulster in the early part of the seventh century, but, according to the old traditions, a son of Manannán mac Lir, and a man gifted, like his supernatural father, with surpassing knowledge and subtle intelligence and the power of shape-shifting. It is hinted in one story that this Mongan was, in reality, Fionn mac Cumhall, reborn four centuries after his death. He is addressed as Fionn by a distinguished warrior, who says he is Caeilte, Fionn’s foster-son. It does not seem clear that this Mongan is always regarded as Fionn, but the suggestion is a curious one, and is one more link connecting his personality with the mythological world. It is the only tradition connecting the Leinster leader with Ulster, and was, perhaps, invented for this special purpose. [22]

Now, the fact that Fionn’s genealogy is traced up to Nuada Necht and Tadhg, his son, who are both gods, need not necessarily mean that he himself is superhuman, any more than the fact that many of the rulers of Europe trace their descent from Woden and other deities makes them gods themselves ; but in the case of Fionn and his compeers the genealogies are so near to the fountain-head and are, like all his history, so closely interwoven with the supernatural, that it becomes difficult to regard him and his followers otherwise than as products of the poetic imagination. In this instance it is the imagination of a subjected race, regarded as out-cast by their conquerors, but whose traditions, as the race distinction slowly died out, be-came the heritage of the entire nation. It was a tradition looked down upon by the official story-tellers as unworthy of their notice ; they did not recite the tales or copy them into their books ; but the legend nevertheless gradually made its way, was added to and expanded, until from the fifteenth century onward it formed the most voluminous portion of the country’s literature.

- [1] Tale of the Cave of Keshcorran, *Silva Gadelica*, Ed. S. H. O'Grady, ii., p. 347.
- [2] *Ibid.*, ii., p. 347.
- [3] *Ibid.*, ii., p. 380.
- [4] *Silva Gad.*, ii., pp. 166-167.
- [5] *Ibid.*, ii., p. 104.
- [6] Intended in the later genealogies to designate the sept of that name in Co. Limerick.
- [7] The only sept that claimed descent from Fionn is the Dal Cais, *i.e.*, the O'Briens of Munster. It is said that Fearcorb, their progenitor, was son of one of Finn's daughters by Grainne, d. of Cormac mac Airt. As the Dal Cais, or Dalcassians, were unknown to fame until shortly before the time of Brian Boromhe (Boru) and his brothers, it is clear that this Munster genealogy was invented after that time to dignify the ancestry of their race.
- [8] cf. *Silva Gadelica*, ii., Extracts X. (iv.), *a. b.*, p. 519 ; and the "Colloquy with the Ancient Men," *ibid.*, ii., p. 245.
- [9] This reading of the name was conjectured by Dr. Kuu Meyer in an article on Fionn's genealogy which appeared in the Academy, February 21st, 1885 ; but he does not seem to have been aware of the references which confirm his supposition.
- [10] O'Donovan locates this tribe "on the borders of Meath and Cavan," which would have been within the ancient borders of Ulster, but his opinion is unauthenticated.
- [11] In the "Colloquy" this pedigree is given thus : "Fionn, s. of Cumhall, s. of Tredhorn, s. of Cairbre *garbshrón* "rough nose," s. of Fiacha *fóbhreac*, "slightly freckled," of the úi Fhailge. *Sil. Gad.*, ii., p. 245.
- [12] Breogan was father of Bili, whose son was Galamh or Milesius, the ancestor of the Milesians.
- [13] History of Ireland, Ed. Comyn, for Ir. T. Society, p. 201.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 195. Cf. The Irish Nennius, Ed. Todd, 1848, pp. 44, 49 ; and for a list of the un-free or rent-paying tribes, cf. O'Curry *Mans. Cust.*, Intro., p. xxvii. *n.*
- [15] See Mac Firbis' Introduction to the Book of Genealogies ; O'Curry, *Mans. Cust.*, Intro., xxvii. *n.*
- [16] Metrical Dind.. Part II., p. 47, Ed. E. Gwynn, R.I.A. Todd Lecture Series.
- [17] LL. 580, 24 ; Cóir Ammann, *Irische Texté*, Sec. 282.
- [18] *Silva Gad.* II., p. 245.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 225.
- [20] Book of Ballymote, fac. 403a, 33 ; we find him said to be "of the Saxons" in B. Lee., p. 385b, 41. *Silva Gad.* II., Extracts XXIV. (ii.) ; *ibid.* VI. (v.)
- [21] The pedigree of Nuada, the Druid of Cathair mór, is : Son of Achi, s. of Dathi, s. of Brocan, s. of Fintan of Tuath-Dathi in Brega. His wife was Almu, who, according to this story, died of grief for the destruction of her castle and death of her husband. *Fotha Catha Cnucha*, or Causes of the Battle of Cnucha, *Rev. Celt.* II., p. 86.
- [22] *Silva Gad.* II., p. 131.
Almu was wife to Nuada, not to Cumhall, and the true story is told in the Dindsenchus of Almu :

" Almu, beautiful the woman !
Wife of Nuada mór, son of Achi ;
She entreated—just the award—
That her name should be on the entire hill."*

* Todd Lecture Series, Vol. IX., p. 73, and cf. Dind : of Rennes, *Rev. Celt.* XV., p. 309.

[22] For this legend, see " Voyage of Bran," by A. Nutt, pp. 45-5 1.

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