

The development of the Ossianic or Fenian Saga

THE following notes are mine, save such as bear Mr. MacInnes's signature. I have striven to make them useful to the student of Celtic antiquity as well as to the folklorist, and have therefore paid special attention to two points : (1) What relation, if any, obtains between the folk-tales current in Gaelic Scotland and the older Gaelic literature ? (2) What traces of early Celtic belief and customs do these tales reveal ?

I have restricted comparison to variant tales found on Celtic soil. The practice, so common among folk-lore editors, of accumulating *titles* of variants, benefits the ordinary reader, who has not a large collection at his disposal, but little ; and as a complete list of variants is never given, the results of comparison, even if the reader does work them out, are necessarily defective. To confine the critical apparatus to one group of tales which *ex hypothesi* are connected, but to examine these fully, seems to me the better plan. Moreover, professed storyologists are having admirably full lists of variants provided for them by Miss Cox in her tabulation of *Grimm's Tales*, now being printed by the Folk-Lore Society in its journal. It seems to me useless to do good work twice over.

I have to thank the many friends who have helped me in these notes. Mr. Egerton Phillimore, Mr. Joseph Jacobs, and Mr. A. MacBain have read the proofs of my Study on the Ossianic Saga, and given me valuable suggestions; Dr. Douglas Hyde has had all the proofs through his hands, and placed his rich store of Irish folk-lore at my disposal with the most ungrudging generosity. Professor Kuno Meyer has supplied me with numerous most important references to the older Irish literature, and has given me translations of hitherto inedited texts. I am greatly indebted to the Council of the Royal Irish Academy for permission to have a transcript made of O'Longan's version of the *Agallamh na Senorach*. I am grateful to both Lord Archibald Campbell and the Rev. D. MacInnes for the opportunity of becoming their fellow-worker in the preservation and elucidation of these " Waifs and Strays" of Gaelic folk-fancy.

I had wished to make my commentary much more detailed and exhaustive than it is ; but my time is not my own, and I fear, did I delay publication longer, it might be altogether deferred. I would, however, ask the reader to bear in mind the conditions under which my work has been done, and to be lenient towards shortcomings of style and arrangement. Errors of fact I have done my best to avoid. I append a list of abbreviated titles of works to which frequent reference is made in these notes. Works not in this list are quoted under titles sufficiently full, it is trusted, to identify them. References are, as a rule, given in the body of the text, generally in brackets at end of passage cited or referred to.

Ag. na S.—*Agallamh na Senorach* : The Dialogue of the Elders. I have used a transcript which the Royal Irish Academy allowed me to make from the MS. translation of the Book of Lismore text, by J. O'Longan, preserved in their library.

A. R.—*Archaeological Review*, vols. i-iv. London, 1888-9. I have quoted chiefly from the following articles in this periodical : Prof. Kuno Meyer's translation of the *Tochmarc Emer*, vol. i, Nos. 1-4 ; my own " Celtic Myth and Saga," vol. ii, No. 2 ; and Mr. MacRitchie's articles, vol. iv, Nos. 3, 4, and 6.

C. M.—*Celtic Magazine*, vols. xii-xiii. Inverness, 1887-88. During these two years the *Celtic Magazine* was edited by Mr. A. MacBain. These volumes are indispensable to every student of Celtic folk-lore.

F.-L. R.—*Folk-Lore Record*, vols. i-v. London, 1878-82. I have chiefly quoted my two articles : " The Aryan Expulsion and Return Formula in the Folk-and Hero-Tales of the Celts," vol. iv, and " Mabinogion Studies," No. 1: " The Mabinogi of Branwen, the Daughter of Llyr" (vol. v).

Oss. Soc.—*Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, vols. i-vi (all published). Dublin, 1854-61.

R. C.—*Revue Celtique*, vols. i-ix. Paris, 1870-89.

S. C. R.—*Scottish Celtic Review*, vol. i (all published). Glasgow, 1881-85. I have chiefly quoted from the tales and ballads collected by the Rev. J. G. Campbell of Tiree, and from my own article in the second number.

A. C. C.—*The Amra Choluim Chilli of Dalian Forgaili*. The original Irish and literal translation. O'Beirne Crowe. Dublin, 1871.

A. F. M.—*Annals of the Four Masters*. Quoted from O'Donovan's 7 vol. edition.

Arth. Loc.—*Arthurian Localities*. By J. S. Stuart Glennie. (Merlin, part iii.) London, 1869.

Miss Brooke.—*Reliques of Irish Poetry*. ... By Miss Brooke. Dublin, 1789.

Campbell.—All references to Campbell alone are to the Popular Tales of the West Highlands, 4. vols. Edinburgh, 1860-62 (now being reprinted by Mr. Gardner of Paisley).

L. na F.—*Leabhar na Feinne*, vol. i, Gaelic text (all published). Arranged by J. F. Campbell. London, 1872.
Grail.—*My Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail, with especial reference to the Hypothesis of its Celtic Origin*. London, 1888.
Hibb. Led.—*Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*. By John Rhys. London, 1888.
Hyde.—*Irish Folk-Tales*. Translated and edited by Dr. Douglas Hyde. (In the press.)
Joyce.—*Old Celtic Romances*. Translated from the Gaelic by P. W. Joyce. London, 1879.
Keating.—*The History of Ireland from the Earliest Period to the English Invasion*. Translated by John O'Mahony. New York, 1866.
Kennedy.—*Legendary Fiction of the Irish Celts*. London, 1866.
L.L. and *L.U.*, respectively *Book of Leinster* and *Leabhar na h'Uidhre* (Book of the Dun Cow), are quoted from the Royal Irish Academy facsimile edition.
Led.—*Lectures on the Materials of Ancient Irish History*. By Eugene O'Curry. Dublin, 1861.
Lismore.—*The Dean of Lismore's Book*. Edited by the Rev. Th. McLauchlan. Edinburgh, 1862.
Luzel.—*Veillées Bretonnes*. Par F. M. Luzel. Morlaix, 1879. I have also looked through the Breton Märchen, published by M. Luzel in Mélusine.
The Mabinogion are quoted from the 1 vol. edition. London, 1877.
M. C.—*On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*. A series of Lectures by E. O'Curry ; three vols. London, 1873-
Mesca Ulad.—*M. U., or the Intoxication of the Ultonians*. With translation and introductory notes by W. M. Hennessy, R.I. A., Todd Lecture Series, vol. i, part 1. Dublin, 1889.
Séb. 1 (Paul Sebillot). — *Contes populaires de la Haute-Bretagne*. Paris, 1880.
Séb.- — *Contes des Paysans et des Pêcheurs*. Paris, 1881.
Séb?— *Contes des Marins*. Paris, 1882.
Troude et Milin. — *As Marvailler Brezounek (Le Conteur Breton), on contes Breton, recueillis par MM. A. Troude et G. Milin, avec le Français en regard*. Brest, 1870.
Zimmer 1 . — *Keltische Studien 5: Ueber dem compilerischen Charakter der irischen Sagentexte int sogenannten Lebor nahUidre*. Zeitschrift fiir vergleichende Sprachforschung. Band xxviii, heft 5, 6. Giitersloh, 1887.
Zimmer 1 . — *Keltische Beitrage I : Germanen, germanische Lehnwörter und germanische Sagen-elemente in der ältesten Ueberlieferung der irischen Heldensage*. Zeitschrift fiir deutsches Alterthum, vol. xxxii, heft 2. Berlin, 1888.
*Zimmer**. — *Keltische Beitrage II: Brendan's Meerfahrt*. Zeitschrift fiir deutsches Alterthum, vol. xxxiii, heft 2, 3, 4. Berlin, 1889. 1
Zimmer G. G. A. — *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*. (March 1, 1887.) Containing review of Darbois de Jubainville's *Essai dun Catalogue de la Litterature celtique de l'Irlande*.

[1] This valuable paper came into my hands just as I was finally revising my proofs. It enabled me to add some important references and afforded welcome confirmation, on many points, of opinions I had arrived at respecting the age of the Irish saga texts.

Alfred Nutt.

Development of the Fenian or Ossianic Saga.

As the heroic tales in this volume belong exclusively to the Fenian or Ossianic saga, I have thought it advisable to preface the Notes by discussing the development of this saga, in opposition to the views of Mr. Skene, which are summed up as follows by Mr. MacInnes : —

“ Who were the Fayn ? To this question Irish scholars have a ready answer. They maintain that the Fayn were an Irish Militia, raised for the purpose of repelling invaders. They were divided into four bands, one for each of the four provinces into which Ireland was divided. Feunn Mac Cúail, with his sons Ossian and Fergus, his grandson Oscar, and his nephew Caoilte Mac Ronain, were of the Leinster band or the Clanna Boisgne. Feunn, the commander of this band, flourished in the time of Cormac Mac Art, who began his reign in A.D. 226. Such, briefly, is the Irish account of the Fayn. W. F. Skene, the highest living authority on the early history of the Highlands, has investigated the grounds on which this account is founded, and has shown clearly that they are purely fabulous. Besides, he has given an account of his own, of which the following is an outline. He shows from *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, and a poem on the battle of Gavra in the *Transactions* of the Irish Ossianic Society, that there were Fayn of Lochlann, of Alba, and of Breatann, as well as Fayn of Eirin. Alba is Scotland to the north of the Friths of Forth and Clyde. Breatann

is the south of Scotland, including Dumbarton. Lochlann was primarily the country lying along the southern shore of the Baltic, but included latterly Denmark and Norway. Dr. Skene shows that the only people that were connected with these four countries are the Tuath De Danan and the Cruithne. The Tuath De Danan came from Lochlann to Alba, and founded settlements there. From Alba they went to Eirin, where they were eventually subdued by the Scots. The Cruithne went from Lochlann to Eirin, and from Eirin they came to Alba. The old historic tales bring the Fayn into close connection with the Tuath De Danan. They were also connected with the Cruithne, as is shown in an ancient poem published in Miss Brooke's collection. There is another ancient poem, in which the poet of the Cruithne bears a name very like Ossian. The inference that Dr. Skene draws from these particulars is that the Fayn, whether a military band or not, were of the population that preceded the Scots in Eirin and Alba, and that they belonged to the period when there was free intercourse between the two countries as if they were one, and when race, and not territory, formed the bond of union. We need not, therefore, be surprised at finding their names and exploits localised in both countries."

This theory of Dr. Skene's, summarised by the Rev. D. MacInnes in the foregoing words, has been extended by Mr. D. MacRitchie in three remarkable articles in the *Archæological Review* (Aug.-Oct. 1889), and made the basis of some far-reaching deductions. Mr. MacRitchie sees in the "Fayn" (to use Mr. MacInnes's transliteration) a non-Celtic race, allied to, if not actually corresponding with, the Picts of history. He furthermore holds that this race is the original of the *sidhe* or fairies of Gaelic tradition. He points out (*A. R.*, Oct., 203 ; that J. F. Campbell was "persuaded of the former existence of a race of men in these islands who were smaller in stature than the Celts, who used stone arrows, lived in conical mounds like the Lapps, knew some mechanical arts, pilfered goods and stole children" (iv, 344), and he has little difficulty in showing the close relations that obtained between the "Fayn" and the Tuatha de Danann, in whom modern research has recognised the dispossessed members of a Celtic Olympus, owning much the same powers and implicated in much the same adventures as the fairies told of by the peasantry of to-day. I propose to examine, firstly, Mr. Skene's theory, then Mr. MacRitchie's corollary, and, lastly, to state briefly my own views with regard to Finn Mac Cumhail and his band of warriors.

At the outset we must note in what shape or shapes the Fenian tradition exists, and trace its growth as far as is possible. None but a practised Irish scholar with wide knowledge of the MS. literature could do this thoroughly. I can, therefore, claim no finality for the conclusions I arrive at, and shall be content if I induce competent Celtic scholars to take up the subject and thoroughly work it out.

Existing Fenian tradition falls formally into two well-defined classes, according as it is in prose or verse. The slightest examination of the mass of Fenian verse still current or only lately extinct in the Highlands, shows us that we are dealing with a product of partly literary origin, and that we have here the fragmentary remains of a literature preserved in Ireland in more perfect form. It is otherwise with the prose tales. There is community of *märchen* between the Gael of Ireland and the Gael of Scotland, as we should naturally expect, and as will be made apparent throughout the course of these notes ; but the impression left upon the mind is not, as is the case with the ballads, that the one set of tales is derived from the other, still less that it is derived from a form that had already assumed a fixed literary shape.

On turning for an explanation of these facts to the history of the tradition, we find that the oldest mentions of Finn to which we can assign, with certainty, an approximate date are those of 10th-11th century Irish "antiquaries", men who made a profession of studying and recording the historical and mythical traditions of the race. Gilla Caemhain, who died in 1072, thus records Finn's death in a chronological poem dealing with the events of history from the beginning of the world to the year 1071 :—" Fifty-seven years, without pain, from the battle of Muccrima of the nobles till Find fell by them, though it was treachery, by the spear-points of Ugrriu's three sons." (Stokes, *Tripartite Life*, ii, 537.)

The battle of Magh-Mucruimhe, fought by Lughaidh Maccon (Houndson) against Art, son of Conn the Hundred-fighter, in which the latter was slain, is placed by the *A. F. M.* in A.D. 195 (p. 109). Tighernach, who died in 1088, enters Finn's death, *s. a. A.D.* 283, as follows : " Finn, grandson of Baisgne, fell by Aichleach, son of Duibhdreann, and the sons of Uirgreann of the Luaighni Teamhrach at Ath-Brea upon the Boyne." Both of these mentions are perhaps partly based upon a verse in the poem on the Fianna by Cinaeth hua Artacain, who died in 985, which is preserved in the *Book of Leinster*, fol. 31 b :

" Mongan—a diadem of all generations—
Fell by the Fiann of Kintyre,
By the Fiann of Luagne was the death of Find [1]

It is certain that Tighernach and his contemporary annalists looked upon Finn as a genuine historical personage of the third century.

The earliest MS. mention of Finn and the Fenians is to be found in the oldest Irish MSS., the *Lebor na h' Uidhre* (*L.U.*), written at the end of the ninth century ; the *Book of Leinster* (*L.L.*), written in the middle of the 12th century, and the *Liber Hymnorum*, of the 11th century. As regards the date of the redactions found in these MSS., I accept Professor Zimmer's conclusions (*ZvS.*, 660-680) that *L.U.* was copied from MSS. compiled, possibly by Fiann Manistrech, in the early part of the 11th century. It is more difficult to date the redaction of *L.L.* as a whole. Professor Zimmer's contention, that many of the saga-texts preserved therein represent an older redaction than that of *L.U.*, seems justified ; but *L.L.* is a MS. of the most miscellaneous character, and some of its contents may be little, if any, older than the date at which the MS. was written. It should be noted that these two MSS. contain the genealogical and historical poems of the great Irish antiquaries of the 10th and 11th centuries, which are the basis of the entire Irish annalistic scheme.

The references in *L.U.* are as follows (I quote from the *R. I. A.* facsimile) : —

L.U., 11*b*. A poem on the approach of winter, put into Finn's mouth. This is quoted in a commentary on the *Amra Choluim Chilli* of Dalian Forgaill (which is likewise found in the *Liber Hymnorum*) ; in it Finn is described as “ hu Baiscne ” (*A. C. C.*, edited by O'Beirne Crowe, 45). Zimmer, *G. G. A.* 186, calls this passage the oldest testimony to Finn and to the Fenian saga. But as we do not know the date of the commentary—though it is certainly as old as the middle of the 11th century—it is impossible to say whether or no this is earlier than Cinaeth hua Artacain's mention. The *A. C. C.* (23) contains another most important reference to Finn. The commentator is explaining the words *diu* = long and *derc* = eye, and quotes as follows: “As Granne, daughter of Cormac, said to Finn —

“ ‘ There lives a man,
On whom I would love to gaze long,
For whom I would give the whole world,
All, all, though it is a fraud.’ ”

I owe this version to Prof. Kuno Meyer. It differs somewhat from the text in *L.U.*, translated by O'Beirne Crowe. As Prof. Meyer points out, this verse containing two words which required explanation in the 11th century presupposes the Grainne and Diarmaid story ; one might otherwise suppose this to have been influenced by the tragic 12th-century tale of adultery of which Diarmaid of Leinster was the hero, and which had such far-reaching consequences for Ireland. [4]

P. xvi, fol. 41-2. *Fotha Catha Cnucha* (“ the cause of the battle of Cnucha ”). This tract has been translated by the late W. M. Hennessy, *Rev. Celt.*, ii, 86-91, summarised and discussed by myself, *F. L. R.*, iv, 14-16. Though short, it implies a great part of Fenian tradition as contained in later literature. It wears a sober historical aspect, and is in substantial agreement with the history found in the annals. I do not think it has been noted before that it makes Urgannd a prominent adversary of Finn's father, Cumhall, in the battle of Cnucha, in which the latter was slain. This, in conjunction with the verse quoted from Gilla Caemhain, points to a feud between the family of Urgannd and that of Cumhall, in which the former were twice successful ; of this feud the later saga has kept no trace, although even more stress is laid upon it in some of the later annalistic tracts. The other references are of a different character. They celebrate adventures of Finn under the name of Mongan, whom the annalists made an Ulster king of the seventh century, and are brought together, pp. xxv-xxvi, fol. 133-34. The most famous of these has been summarised *M. C.* iii, 174-76, and *Arbois de Jubainville*, ii, 336-43. It relates a dispute between Mongan-Finn and Dallan Forgaill, which was settled to the advantage of the former by the appearance from the land of shades of Cailte Mac Ronain, who reveals the identity of Mongan with Finn, owing to the former's father not being, as commonly supposed, the mortal Fiachna, but Manannan Mac Lir, one of the Tuatha de Danann. [5] Another short tale relates how Mongan laid Dallan Forgaill under obligation to fetch a precious stone from the fairy mansion of Cnoc Bane, and how the latter fulfilled the behest. Mongan's parentage and dwelling-place (in Antrim) are likewise described.

The *L.L.* references are more numerous. I first note those of which an English translation or summary exists : —

P. 37, fol. 154a. Poem on the battle of Gabhra, put in Oisín's mouth, translated by O'Curry, *Oss. Soc. I.*, 50.

P. 54, fol. 207b. Poem put in Oisín's mouth, analysed *Lect.*, 305, translated by Mr. Whitley Stokes, *Rev. Celt.*, vii, 289 *et seq.*, under title *Find and the Phantoms* ; cf. Mr. John Fleming's corrections of the translation, *Academy*, Aug. 24, Sept. 24, 1889.

P. 55, fol. 208a. Poem put in Oisín's mouth, translated by Mr. Skene from a 17th century copy, *Lismore*, lxxxv. Mr. Skene opines this describes the capture of a whale, and was written in Scotland. Professor Atkinson describes it as a dream of the chase of a pig.

Other references are —

P. 32, fol. 143a. A poem of Gilla in Chomded, who is possibly one of two like-named personages who died in 1103 and 1124 respectively, mentions several incidents of the "Boyish Exploits of Finn", a tract only known to us, as such, in a 15th-century form

P. 25, fol. 48b. *The Exploits of the Men of Leinster against North Ireland* has the following passage :

"Aed Mac Fidaig fell by the hand of Find,
From the spear of Fiacaíl Mac Conchenn,
For the love he gave to the maiden of Bri Eile.
By the same spear Find killed
Culdub Mac Fidga Forfind ;
By that spear was killed of yore
Deicell Find, an *aithech* of Erand." [6]

An allusion to this poem is found in the 15th century "Boyish Exploits of Finn" (*Rev. Celt.*, v, 203).

Pp. 50-54, fol. 195-204. Passages in the *Dindsenchas*, a topographical tract, which preserves, in abridged form, a number of legends. Cf. *Lect.*, 302. The most interesting of these passages is a long topographical poem put in Finn's mouth, in which he recounts the exploits of Goll mac Morna, and describes in especial how he put the host to sleep by the playing of his harp. Another passage (fol. 195a) tells how the lady Moer sent love-nuts to Finn, but he refused to eat them. One of these passages, it may be noted, the *Dindsenchas* of Almu, is partially quoted in the *L.U.* "Fotha Catha Cnucha". Prof. Meyer tells me he thinks that by the Find to whom a poem, fol. 206a, is ascribed, Finn Mac Cumhail is meant.

P. 23, fol. 43a. Battle of Cnámross, in which Finn helps the Leinster men against Cairpre Liphechair.

P. 40, fol. 160b. The Fianna of Melgi kill Aige transformed into a deer.

P. 49, fol. 193a. Poem on slaying of Unchi Eochair-bel by Cailte and Oisín, put in Finn's mouth.

P. 54, fol. 207b. Poem put in Cailte's mouth, how three strange hunters slay Duban's dog. They first offer their own hound as compensation, but then slay it, and are pursued over sea by the Fianna.

P. 55, fol. 208a. Poem put in Cailte's mouth, describing happy days of yore, before the advent of St. Patrick.

P. 55, fol. 208a. Poem put in mouth of a follower of Finn's, who sends him out at night to search for water. This is the beginning of a poem found complete, *Rawl. B.* 502, printed and analysed by Prof. Zimmer, *G. G. A.* 184 *et seq.*

P. 68, fol. 296b-298b. Finn is brought into contact with St. Moiling, whom he asks for advice whether he should help the Leinster men against the Borama tribute. Moiling says yes, and the battle of Cnámross ensues, in which the Leinster men are successful.

P. 70, fol. 311. The genealogy of Finn. [7]

P. 80, fol. 396a. Genealogy of Diarmaid hua Duibne.

There are two other references of great importance on account of their probable age ; they may indeed possibly be the earliest of all. They occur in the so-called *Cormac's Glossary*. Cormac died at the beginning of the 10th century, and there is no reason to doubt that the greater part of the work which goes under his name is his, or is as old as his age. But the *Glossary* as we have it has been interpolated, and as our refer-ences do not occur in the *L.L.* fragment, the only really old text, it is impossible to be quite sure of their early date. The references are two : one at p. 38 of Stokes' *Three Irish Glossaries* ; one at p. 34, where an extremely curious story is told of Lomna, Finn's fool, detecting an amour of Finn's wife with Coirpre, a champion of Luigne, and being slain by the latter in revenge. If this story is as old as Cormac, it shows that the unfaithfulness of Finn's wife belongs to the oldest stratum of the saga. [8]

The foregoing passages comprise the oldest forms of the Fenian saga as well as the oldest pseudo-historical accounts of Finn, and the 9th to early 11th centuries may be put down, provisionally, as the period in which they were redacted. Few as they are, important deductions may, nevertheless, be made from them. Firstly, they can only be a sample of the extensive mass of poems and tales which must have

existed, describing the exploits of the Fenian warriors in quasi-dramatic fashion. No one at the present day contends that the poems ascribed to Finn, to Oisín, to Cailte, and to Fergus are the compositions of these personages, or are anything else than scraps of a saga, related by means of narratives put into the hero's mouth descriptive of adventures in which he had taken part. Had these poems and tales not been widely spread the compilers of *L.U.* and *L.L.* would hardly have admitted any of them into their collections. This *a priori* contention is strengthened by an examination of the passages themselves, the majority of which are obviously fragmentary and presuppose considerable masses of tradition. Why the Fenian saga and the pseudo-historic account of Finn are so slightly represented in the oldest MSS. in comparison with the Ultonian saga is a question of the highest importance, to which I shall recur later. Secondly, the saga in this, its earliest, just as in its younger forms, is mythic and romantic, rather than historical and heroic. The latter class of mentions can again be classified under two heads. The annalistic Finn who is placed in the 3rd century—though, as we see, there is discrepancy between the chronology of Gilla Caemhain and that of Tighernach—must be distinguished from the Finn of what may be called the Leinster heroic saga, who figures as a representative of the Leinster tribes in their conflict with the remainder of Ireland, in especial with Ulster, and who comes in contact with St. Moling, who died in 696. [9] Thirdly, all these early mentions of Finn connect him with the south of Ireland: the majority are in the *Book of Leinster*; Cormac was Bishop of Cashel in Munster; Finn's dwelling-place is at Almu in Kildare. There is one exception, but an important one. The Mongan story found in *L.U.* (an Ulster MS.) locates Finn in Antrim. This story also connects him prominently with Dallan Forgaill, the disciple of Columba, and therefore probably an Ulsterman. The significance of this fact will be brought out later. Fourthly, the activity of Finn and his companions is wholly restricted to Ireland, with the single exception of the *L.L.* Cailte story about the over-sea hunters. In this, and in the poem put in Cailte's mouth descriptive of the happy pre-Patrician days, we have the first germs of the two most fruitful *motifs* in the later development of the saga; we also find in Cormac's Lomna story and in the *Amra Choluim Chille* verse put in Grainne's mouth a clear indication of another most important incident, the faithless wife; and in the topographical poem assigned to Finn by the *Dindsenchas* we have the model upon which a large portion of the later texts of the cycle are, formally, constructed.

To sum up: an examination of the oldest passages in which Finn is mentioned discloses three main modes of considering him—a pseudo-historic or annalistic mode, a heroic-saga mode, and a mythic-saga or romantic mode, the latter of which are, chronologically, in disaccord with the former. The 10th century saga in its mythic form is of the same essential nature, and possesses in germ the most characteristic features of the later legend.

Before proceeding further I must state my opinion concerning the earliest Irish annals. These seem to me to be the outcome of the same movement which in England produced first Nennius and then Geoffrey, and which disseminated the legend of their Trojan origin throughout all the nations of Western and Northern Europe. Gilla Caemhain, one of the main builders up of this artificial scheme, translated Nennius into Irish, a fact the significance of which has hardly been rightly estimated. Every Celtic tribe possessed traditions, both mythical and historical, the former of substantially the same character, the latter necessarily varying. Myth and history acted and re-acted upon each other, and produced heroic saga, which may be defined as myth tinged and distorted by history. The largest element is, as a rule, supplied by myth, so that the varying heroic sagas of the various portions of a race have always a great deal in common. These heroic sagas, together with the official or semi-official mythologies of the pre-Christian Irish, are the subject-matter of the annals; they were thrown into a purely artificial chronological shape by men familiar with Biblical and Classic history. A framework was thus created into which almost the entire mass of native legend was gradually fitted, whilst the genealogies of the race were modelled, or it may be remodelled, in accord with it. In studying the Irish sagas we may banish entirely from our mind all questions as to the "truth" of the early portions of the annals. The subject-matter of the latter is mainly mythical, the mode in which it has been treated is literary. What residuum of historic "truth" may still survive can be but infinitesimal.

The next stage in the development of the Fenian saga, one of full maturity, is best represented by the longest of all the texts of the cycle, the *Agallamh na Senorach*, or Discourse of the Old Men. The oldest MS., according to Prof. Zimmer (*G. G. A.* 192), is *Laud* 610, of the beginning of the 15th century, and the two next oldest are *Rawl. B.* 487, and the *Book of Lismore*, both of the same century. Formally, the *Ag. n. S.* belongs to the same class as the *Dindsenchas*. It is largely a topographical enumeration, the mention of each place-name giving rise to the narrative of some particular exploit of the Fenian heroes. It differs in important respects from the Highland ballads, the oldest collection of which, the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, belongs to the early 16th century. This has been reprinted by J. F. Campbell, together with all the

more important variants collected orally in the Highlands from that date to 1871, in the *Leabhar na Feinne*. This ballad literature consists of a vast number of disconnected adventures, which frequently duplicate each other, strung on a loose thread, much as follows : The slaying of Cumhall by the tribes of Morna, in which Scandinavians were concerned, so that these obtained footing in Ireland. The forest upbringing of Finn, his recovery of his father's possessions, his peace with the tribe of Morna, his sway over the Feinne, his conflicts with invading Norsemen, and with all sorts of mythical opponents ; his conquests of Britain and most of Europe ; his quarrel with Cormac, High-King of Ireland ; the renewal of the blood-feud with Goll, the leader of the tribe of Morna ; the death of Goll ; the flight of Diarmaid with Graine, Finn's wife ; the pursuit and death of Diarmaid ; the quarrel of Oscar, Finn's grandson, with Cairbre, son of Cormac ; the final catastrophe of Gabhra, in which both sides exterminate each other ; the passing of all the heroes save Oisín and Cailte, who survive to Christian times, and relate the story of their fights and loves to St. Patrick.[10]

It is difficult to fix a date for the redaction of the oldest forms of this, the second stage of the Fenian saga. The diplomatic evidence only reaches back, as we see, to the fourteenth century, and that for *Ag. na S.* only. But I venture to think that the texts are older. One of the most characteristic features of this stage of the saga is the prominence of the *Lochlannach*, whom the saga writers undoubtedly identified with the Norse invaders of Ireland during the eighth-tenth centuries. Two personages who frequently appear are "Manus", an older mythic figure, who has borrowed features from the historical Magnus Barelegs (+1103), and Murachaidh Mac Brian, son of Brian Boróimhe, the victor of Clontarf. This gives the eleventh century as a terminus *a quo*. I would place the great outburst of Fenian saga in the following century. I cannot help connecting it in some way with that spread of the Brythonic saga which yielded to the poets and story-tellers of Western Europe the material of the Arthurian romance. Some suggestive parallels may indeed be drawn between the Welsh heroic ballads, placing as they do the recital of the chief saga-events in the mouth of an aged survivor, *e. g.* Myrddin or Llywarch Hên, and the Ossianic ballads. I also believe that the curious revival of pagan, or at least of anti-clerical spirit, so marked a feature of the ballads, fits the twelfth better than the succeeding centuries. But my chief reason for holding fast to this date is the conviction that both *Ag. na S.* and ballads must have been composed at a time when the recollection of the Norse invasion was still fresh in the popular mind. If this contention be admitted, the fourteenth and fifteenth century texts would stand to the original redaction of the second stage of the saga much as the *L. U.* and *L. L.* texts stand to the original redaction of the first stage. [11]

One characteristic of this second stage has been noticed—the prominence given to foreign invasion, especially to invasion from Lochlann. Whereas the tenth-century Fenian saga is almost exclusively Irish in *locale*, that of the twelfth century embraces not only North-Western Britain but all North-Western Europe. The saga, by thus adapting itself to tenth century history, is in reality more anachronistic than the earlier stage, in which Finn seeks counsel of the seventh-century St. Moling. But, curiously enough, if this fundamental anachronism be overlooked, the annals agree more closely in details with the second than with the first stage. The reason is not far to seek. By the twelfth century the Irish annals and the vast complex of genealogy based upon them had been fully developed ; well-nigh every fragment of tribal tradition, as distinguished from simple folk-lore, had been fitted into the framework of Eochaidh hua Flainn and his successors. The men to whom this was due were the historians and genealogists attached to every petty chief, and the professional antiquary families who collected and transcribed MSS., and instructed pupils in the historic lore of the race. Now, these men were in close contact with the professional bards and story-tellers, to whom must be ascribed the metrical fixing of the Fenian saga ; the latter, thoroughly familiar with the annals, accepted them with enthusiastic respect, and doctored tradition in accordance with them to the extent of their power. Thus the remodelled saga derived part of its material from the genuine recent history of the race, whilst part came from the ever more and more elaborated pseudo-older history. By far the larger portion, however, was supplied by semi-mythic tradition. Two-thirds at least of the adventures in which Finn and his peers take part involve the supernatural, and bring on to the scene personages and incidents belonging to the official or popular Celtic mythology. This second stage may then, like the first, be classified under three heads : (1) the annalistic account, which is coherent and consistent as far as it goes, though it loses both qualities by being inextricably mixed up with (2) the heroic saga and (3) the mythic saga accounts. Of these (3) is substantially the same as in the first stage. But (2) the heroic saga has been completely modified. Finn is no longer the tribal Leinster hero warring especially against Ulster—he is the leader of all Gaeldom warring against the over-sea invaders. The significance of this fact will be brought out later.

Such, then, being the constituents of the saga, the next point is the character of the men by whom it was remodelled in a shape that has partly survived to the present day. These, as already stated, were the

ollamhs, the professional poets and story-tellers, of whom every chieftain had one or more at his court. Familiar with the science of the day, *i.e.* the annalistic and genealogical lore, the vague historical and geographical notions concerning all that was not Ireland, the fragments of classical and Biblical legend extant in Irish, they remodelled the saga in accordance with their science. But they were men of the folk, they had drunk in the folk-tradition with their mother's milk, they told the tales to men familiar as themselves with their contents, and who would have brooked no serious alteration therein. Hence, in spite of its semi-literary aspect, in spite of its transformation to suit new historical conditions, the Fenian saga is on the whole a genuine product of Celtic tradition. Brythonic romance fell into the hands of strangers, Gaelic romance grew up among and with the Gael ; if Arthurian legend, passing through the minds of men of a different civilisation, acquired more varied and subtler beauties, the lays in which Ossian or Cailte depict the glories of the *Feinne* are a more authentic monument of Celtic folk-belief and folk-fancy.

From the twelfth century onwards the Ossianic saga has developed upon the lines laid down for it by the bards of that day. No great incident of the race-history enters into the saga after the Norse invasion. Finn never fights against Normans, nor does he take part in the innumerable struggles which, undeterred by the presence of a foreign enemy, every Irish tribe continued to wage with all others. This, to my mind, is another proof that the saga was substantially fixed before the Norman Conquest had wrought itself into the popular consciousness. It also indicates that the antagonism of Fenian and Lochlannach is something more than the historic shock of two rival races. The historic event has usurped here, as is so often the case, the place of a mythic event ; what that latter was we shall see later. In the meantime it suffices to note that the semi-literary growth of the saga during the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries differs in quantity but not in quality from that found in the fourteenth and fifteenth century texts.

Side by side with the semi-literary development there took place, I maintain, a genuinely popular development of the saga ; the former was mainly in verse, whilst the latter was probably wholly in prose. The *ollamh* heard the fireside tales about Finn, and retold them, as befitted an educated man who had his annals and his sacred and profane history at his fingers'-ends ; but the tales themselves continued to be told, innocent of all such adornments and sophistications, therein Finn and his comrades retained their pristine, wizard, mythic shape. That tales such as these abound to the present day, both in the Highlands and in Ireland, is, of course, no proof of the development I contend for. These popular versions are, it is asserted, the semi-literary forms in their last stage of decay. I can only bring forward one piece of evidence in favour of my view, but then it is, I venture to think, conclusive. The *L.U.* tract, "Fotha Catha Cnucha", has already been alluded to ; it gives the tenth century annalistic version of certain episodes in Finn's career. Other versions exist besides : a fifteenth century one ("The Boyish Exploits of Finn Mac Cumhail"), made up of two distinct portions, an annalistic opening, embodying a different account from that of the *L.U.* tract, followed by a piece of genuine folk-lore ; a seventeenth century semi-literary version ("The Fight of Castle Knoc"), the annalistic portion of which differs both from the fifteenth and the eleventh century tracts, whilst the romantic portion agrees substantially with the "Boyish Exploits", though differences exist which point to another tradition having been followed ; and a modern folk-lore version ("How the 'Een was set up"), which contains next to no annalistic traces. I have summarised and commented upon all these versions in my paper on the "Aryan Expulsion-and-Return-Formula among the Celts" (*Folk-Lore Record*, vol. iv). The formula in question is obtained from the comparison of numerous mythical and heroic legends found amongst the Greeks (the stories of Perseus and of Theseus), the Sanskrit-speaking peoples of India, the ancient Persians (Cyrus), the Romans (Romulus and Remus), and all branches of the Teutons (Siegfried, Wolf-dietrich). Of the four Celtic versions mentioned above, the one which conforms most completely to the formula is the living folk-tale, whilst the oldest version conforms so slightly, that it is necessary to put it side by side with the other versions, and eke out its incidents by their help, to show that it really belongs to this group at all. Of the fifteenth century version, the first, or annalistic, portion does not conform *at all*, whilst the second portion has the most complete set of formula incidents for the section of the story it relates. There can be but one inference from these facts. The oldest version is a folk-tale arranged so as to fit it into an artificial heroic saga ; the folk-tale itself continued current, but was not noted till several centuries later, and was then tacked on to a bit of pseudo-history ; it is only in the present century that the tale has been published in a genuine popular form, and has thus proved itself a variant of a heretic legend noted among all branches of the Aryan race, and at all periods, from 1000 B.C. to 1100 A.D.

Hitherto I have referred more especially to forms of the Fenian saga found in Irish MSS. or collected on Irish soil, but in this connection Celtic Scotland may be regarded as part of Ireland, or, rather, the two combined form Gaeldom. Nevertheless, the fact emphasised at the outset of this note must be kept steadily in view : of the two forms in which the saga has reached us, the one, which is at once semi-literary and semi-popular, owes its semi-literary features probably wholly to Gaels of Ireland. The *ollamhs* of the latter

country were *the* literary class of their race, and their compositions were eagerly welcomed in Scotland. It is, indeed, possible that a portion, even a large portion, of the great mass of Ossianic ballads collected in Scotland may be the actual composition of singers born in the country, but these were thoroughly impregnated with the spirit of Irish court-poetry, as it may be called ; they worked upon the same lines, and were, in fact, members of the same school as the Irish bards. Scotch Ossianic saga of this class is chiefly interesting as enabling us to study the partly oral diffusion of a semi-literary product. It is otherwise with the other, the popular forms. It is inevitable that these, if never fixed metrically or otherwise, must be somewhat differentiated in the course of time, even among the most closely allied branches of the same race. The question then arises whether the Scotch and Irish popular forms stand to each other in the same relation as the Scotch and Irish semi-literary forms, or whether they are not variants, equally authoritative, of themes common to all members of the Gaelic race. To my mind no satisfactory answer has as yet been made to this question ; it is doubtful if we have sufficient evidence upon which to base a perfectly satisfactory answer. In the following notes I shall attempt to collect the evidence—in so far as provided by the Tales printed in this collection—as fully, and to examine it as impartially, as I can. I may remark, once for all, that, as the semi-literary form of the saga, the ballads, enjoyed great popularity throughout the Highlands, it is inevitable that it should have influenced the popular forms to some extent, especially in the names of personages, and what may be called framework incidents.

Applying the foregoing consideration to Mr. Skene's theory, it is seen to be based upon texts of that secondary stage of the Fenian saga which I have assigned to the twelfth century, or, in many cases, upon texts of still later date. Two features have been shown to characterise this stage—the agreement in details with the annals, and the non-Irish *locale* of much of the saga. Now, Mr. Skene has argued repeatedly, and with great acuteness, against the authenticity of the pre-fourth century Irish annals ; it is strange, then, to find him professing such respect and building such far-reaching theories upon texts which, as Campbell frequently remarks throughout the *Leabhar na Feinne*, are, historically, incomplete accord with Keating and other Irish historians.

If the evidence of these texts is worth anything it must be taken as a whole, whereas Mr. Skene utterly rejects their precise and definite historical indications—rightly, in my opinion—and accepts, nay, exaggerates their loose and vague ethnological indications—wrongly, in my opinion. As for the non-Irish *locale*, it is the simple outcome of the conditions under which these versions were composed. The strife of Fenian and Lochlannach dominates this stage of the saga, and as these Lochlannach were identified by the bard with the Norse invaders of Ireland, he necessarily threw in all the historical and geographical knowledge about Norway at his command. In this respect the Fenian saga obeyed the same impulses as the French Carolingian- and the Brythonic Arthur-sagas. The historical basis of the former are the deeds of a man who was never farther east than the Adriatic ; what historical basis there may be for the latter are the deeds of a man who was never outside the British Isles. Yet the later Carolingian saga sends the great emperor to Constantinople ; later Arthurian romance brings all Europe under Arthur's sway, and sends the father of Parzival knight-errant at the court of the Soldan of Babylon. It would be as safe to build historical theories upon these fancies of the romance writers as upon those of twelfth century Irish *ollamhs*.

A concrete example will make this plain. The Oss. Soc. " Battle of Gabhra", in the passage of which Mr. Skene makes such effective use, tells, it is true, concerning Fians of Alban, of Lochlin, and of Breatan—the *L.L.* version, it should be noted, knows nothing of such allies of Oscur's—but the same poem (i, 75), states that the Fenians were on their way to Rome, and the earlier *Lismore* version has the following passage :

“ From India far in the east
To Fodla here in the west,
The kings did all own our sway
Till the battle of Gaura was fought.” (36-37.)

Mr. Skene would be the first to ridicule the hypothesis of continental conquests of Finn, or of a world-wide Fenian empire. Yet the evidence in favour of such an hypothesis is of precisely the same nature as that in virtue of which Finn is represented as the leader of armies drawn from England, Scotland, and Norway, as well as from Ireland.

In so far, then, as the theories of Mr. Skene and Mr. MacRitchie are based upon semi-literary poems of the twelfth and following centuries, they seem to me to lack all solid basis. The saga-history and geography are those of the twelfth, and not of the third or fourth century. What is more, the history and geography are

what they are, to a large extent, in virtue of a mistake. It is because the poet identified the *Lochlannach* with the Norseman that he gave the remodelled saga the historic setting he did. But I am firmly convinced that this twelfth century identification is as baseless as the tenth century fables of the Trojan origin of the Britons, that Prof. Rhys's brilliant conjecture is right, and that "Lochlann, like the Welsh Llychlyn, before it came to mean the home of the Norsemen, denoted a mysterious country in the lochs and seas" (*Hib. Lect.*, 355). The opponents of Finn and his peers were, originally, no oversea warriors, but Underworld deities, and the strife between the two is a variant of that between the Tuatha de Danann and the Fomorians, they, also, powers of the sea, who were euhemerised by ninth century Irish science into pirates, just as Mannanan Mac Lir, the Irish Neptune, was euhemerised into a wealthy ship-owner, living in the Isle of Man.

The objections that can be urged against the Skene- MacRitchie views of Finn are equally valid against two other attempts to disengage the historical element in the Fenian saga. San-Marte (Geheimrath Alb. Schulz), in his *Beiträge zur breton. und celtisch-germ. Heldensage* (Quedlinburg, 1847), has claimed Finn as a Germanic importation, whilst Mr. Duncan Campbell, in a suggestive but reckless article, *The Imperial Idea in early British History* (Trans. of the Inverness Soc, 1888), regards him as a Gaelic Gwledig, the leader, like Arthur, of a militia modelled upon the Roman legion, and traces in the Fenian saga the reflex of the continental campaigns and continental empire of Carausius and Maximus. San-Marte insists upon the relation between the Fenians and Norsemen ; upon the fact that many of the episodes of the saga are abduction-tales of the same kind as what he has called the *Nordseesagenkreis*—North-Sea heroic cycle—*i.e.*, the mediæval German epic of Gudrun and its Scandinavian variants ; lastly, upon the appearance of a Finn in the Anglo-Saxon mythic genealogies. He finds the historic basis of the saga in a Scandinavian militia, which tyrannised over and finally came in conflict with the Irish chiefs, whilst such elements as are not historical are derived from German myth and hero-saga. The first reason falls to the ground, if the views I have urged be accepted. As for the second, the *Iliad* is also an abduction-saga, but it does not, therefore, belong to the *Nordseesagenkreis*. The poets of the remodelled Fenian cycle were doubtless well acquainted with oversea raids which had the capture of women as their object. Nor am I at all concerned to deny that the twelfth century Irish poets may have become acquainted, to some extent, with Teutonic sagas, and may have, to some extent, imitated particular episodes. As for the third reason, a mere similarity of name is all too slight a basis upon which to build ethnological theories. Mr. Campbell, indeed, cites this very fact as an example of the importance of the Finn-story among the pre-fifth century population of Britain. Finn must have been popular for the Saxons to have borrowed him. In other respects Mr. Campbell's theory, whilst enabling him to accept the wildest extravagance of late mediæval story-tellers—it being impossible to say in what part of Europe the legionaries of Maximus may not have wandered—as reflexes of historic fact, compels him to entirely throw overboard every fragment of the Irish annalistic account, so that here, as in Mr. Skene's case, the facts of tradition are arbitrarily discriminated, those alone being accepted which fit into a preconceived theory, instead of a theory being elaborated which will account for them all.

Nothing, to my mind, in the Fenian texts, as we possess them, warrants the conclusion that the Fenians were aught else but Gaels, or that the legends concerning them are aught else but Gaelic, just as the legends of Arthur are Brythonic. There are obvious and very close parallels between these two cycles of heroic legend. But all cycles of heroic legend, no matter among what races they be found, offer parallels, and these are closer among the various races of the Aryan group, and, necessarily, closest among the various sections of each special Aryan race. That Gael and Brython should relate the fortunes of a favourite race-hero in much the same way has nothing that need cause wonderment—the contrary would be the surprising fact. What should be noticed is, that the two cycles have actually *borrowed* very little—the Arthur cycle, perhaps, not at all — from each other : a clear sign that both were developed whilst such traditions were still essentially a tribal, in contradistinction to a general literary possession.

But whilst Mr. MacRitchie's contention that the Feinne were Finns, or some other non-Celtic people, must be rejected decisively, his further contention that they are the same as the Picts, and both the prototypes of the *sidhe* or fairies, deserves careful consideration. The mention of the Picts raises interesting questions. It reminds us, in the first place, that Mr. Stuart Glennie claimed the Fenian saga as distinctively Pictish (*Arth. Loc.*, ch. iv). Now, historically, we know but little of the Picts ; substantially only three facts : (i) the Picts had a custom of succession through females, which was dying out when it comes before us in history : this would make for their being non-Aryans—(2) the Fortrenn king-name list is partly non-Aryan, partly Celtic, the Celtic portion being Brythonic rather than Gaelic ; but then we know that Fortrenn was at least as much Brythonic as Pictish—(3) In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the populations of the larger Pictland are found speaking Gaelic, and have to a great extent continued to do so to the present day ; but

then the same fact obtains in the case of populations whom we know to have been Brythonic in race and speech at an earlier period. These facts do not then lead us very far. The probabilities are that the Picts were an early stream of Celtic immigration ; that they had absorbed a number of non-Celtic peoples, and had adopted some of their customs. It is more likely that they were akin racially to the Gael than to the Brythons, but it is certain they had mingled with the latter, and that their speech so far differed from that of either race as to be unintelligible without special study. If we turn to Mr. Stuart Glennie's results, based upon the occurrence of topographical names belonging to the Fenian saga, we are likewise not much advanced ; certainly not to the extent that he claims. He has shown, and convincingly shown, that there are two well-defined districts of traditional topography in Scotland ; the one Arthurian, occupying what we now call the Lowlands and Borderland ; the other Fenian, occupying the central Western Highlands and Isles. But this latter district is the one known to have been occupied from the fifth century onwards by the Irish Gaels (the Scots) who ultimately extended their hegemony over Northern Britain, thanks partly to whose kingdom, partly to the missionary labours of the Irish Church, it was, that Scotland, from being half Brythonic, half Pictish, became, in tongue at least, Gaelic. In the larger Pictland, *i.e.*, roughly speaking, in modern Perth, Aberdeen, and Inverness, we find a few Fenian localities, but we also find a few Arthurian localities ; whereas Arthurian Scotland proper is free of Fenian, Fenian Scotland proper free of Arthurian names. It is true that Mr. Stuart Glennie has an ingenious theory to account for the presence of the Arthur-tradition in Pictland, while he practically assumes that the Fenian localities of Dalriada are older than the Dalriadic immigration. But I would urge that, if the facts be considered without any prepossession, it is the simplest course to assume that the invading Scots brought their legends with them and localised them in their fresh home. I do not, of course, overlook the fact that the Scots were near neighbours of the Irish Picts, but the hypothesis that the Fenian saga is originally Pictish (in the sense of non Gaelic), and that the Scots of Ireland got it from the Picts, whether of Ireland or of Scotland, instead of the Scotch Picts getting it from the invading Irish Scots, seems to me so opposed to all we know of the growth of the saga, that I cannot hold it worthy serious discussion.

Historically, then, I see nothing to connect the Fenians with the Picts, meaning by the latter the inhabitants at a certain well-defined period of certain well-defined districts of Scotland and Ireland. If these latter were Gaels, they probably, nay almost certainly, possessed the Gaelic saga of Finn, but we have no evidence on the point. Nor is there, I believe, any historical evidence that the Picts were the short, dark, uncannily skilful folk postulated by Mr. MacRitchie's theory. But the examples which he has collected from living folk-lore, together with similar items of evidence—for instance, the well-known tradition of the Pictish art of brewing beer from heather—show that this conception of them has implanted itself in the folk-mind, and, moreover, that in several respects it is akin to the popular conception of the fairies. Mr. MacRitchie also shows that the *Wars of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, a text of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, uses the word *fianna* as equivalent with *sithchuire*, and speaks of both Fenians and fairies as possessing secret places, presumably for the concealment of treasure. In the same passage underground treasures are like-wise spoken of, and the whole is referred by Mr. Mac Ritchie to the hill-dwellings assigned throughout Irish tradition to the fairies, historical prototypes of which he seeks for in the conical mound-huts of a non-Celtic race. Mr. MacRitchie has, further, no difficulty in adducing instances from the Fenian texts of the close connection between Finn warriors and the fairy folk.

Of the two points here raised only the latter concerns the present inquiry. Whenever the fairy mythology of the Celts comes to be exhaustively discussed, the question as to its derivation in certain proportions from distorted recollections of alien and inimical races must not be overlooked, and the nature of the mediæval and modern Scotch traditions concerning the Picts will need the closest scrutiny. The evidence of the Fenian texts in nowise, however, favours an historical basis for the conception of fairydom. Throughout the whole of the saga the Fenians are essentially a mythic folk ; the historical element found in the oldest stage known to us is obviously artificial; the historical element in the secondary stage is equally artificial, and anachronistic as well. But the first element may possibly contain some admixture of the *fact*, the presence of which differentiates heroic saga from pure myth. In other words, the lives and deeds of certain second- fourth century Irish warriors may have had some influence upon the mythic sagas of one branch of the Irish race, and helped them to assume the shape they did. The historical element of the secondary stage has, again, a certain relative truth : it is the outcome in the minds of twelfth century singers of events which we know to have occurred. Ireland was exposed to Viking raids, and Irishmen raided in their turn ; the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland were in perpetual contact with each other, and with the other Celtic races of Britain. But neither of these historical elements can be brought into line with the fairy belief. The latter is much older than the eighth-tenth centuries, when the events reflected in the secondary stage of the Fenian saga were taking place, being, as it virtually is, the same belief as that entertained concerning the Tuatha Dé Danann. Now the Tuatha Dé belong to the very oldest stratum of Irish saga-telling, which had assumed

substantially the shape it now wears by the seventh century at the latest. Historical elements in the Fenian cycle, due to events of the ninth to the eleventh centuries, cannot then possibly be the origin of beliefs which had assumed a fixed and quasi-literary shape many generations before.

As for the earlier historical notices of Finn and his comrades their nature is self-evident ; they are tribal, mythic traditions euhemerised, possibly with the help of a few genuine names and incidents of the period to which they are ascribed. In so far as they are *historical* (*i.e.*, a record of actual fact) they contain nothing which could originate the fairy belief. So far as they are mythic they contain nothing to show that the fairy belief they exemplify ever had historic fact for its originating cause.

My own views of this cycle of heroic tradition are practically implied in the criticism of other theories, but it may be well to restate them briefly. The tales of Finn and his fellow-warriors are Gaelic variants of tales common to all Celtic, to all Aryan, indeed, to the great majority of all human races. They are essentially Gaelic, being found wherever there is a Gaelic population, and practically only where there is a Gaelic population. Scotch evidence seems partly to contradict this statement, as the Fenian saga flourishes now, and has probably flourished for very many centuries, among Pictish populations. But, in the first place, the racial affinities of the Picts have not been determined with precision ; and, in the second place, the populations in question have been Gaelicised for probably a thousand years, with such effect that their speech in no wise differs from that of other Gaels. There would therefore be nothing to surprise in their having assimilated the racial traditions as well as the tongue of their Gaelic conquerors. These tales are essentially mythic, *i.e.* they involve the super-natural, and are made up of incidents common to the mythopoeic stage of story-telling through which all Aryan, and many non-Aryan, races have passed. They first come before us in redactions to which the date 800-900 A.D. may be provisionally assigned ; they are then partially euhemerised, and possibly—though this can never be determined with precision—contaminated by the admixture of historic fact, such admixture being supplied by the lives of men living in Ireland. Whether the tribal sagas were disregarded by the poets and story-tellers until such contamination took place—and this really happened later than in the case of the Ulster saga-cycle—or whether, as is more probable, the Finn tales belonged to a different tribe from that which celebrated the fortunes of Cuchullain and his compeers, certain it is that the one cycle was introduced into the corpus of Irish legend at a later date than the other. Either of the two reasons above suggested is sufficient to account for this fact, but we can, as it happens, suggest a very plausible explanation for this perplexing element in the Ossianic problem. As a rule, the spread of a national heroic tradition is mainly determined by political considerations. Thus the spread of the Arthur romances throughout Europe coincides with the establishment of an Angevin empire, of which the centre of gravity was in England. [12] We saw above that the historical elements in the older stage of the saga belong to Southern Ireland. The second stage, on the contrary, is dominated by the strife of Fenian against Norsemen ; and among the personages frequently met with are Brian Boru, and his son Murachaidh. Now, Brian was a Munster chieftain who wrested for a while the head-kingship of Ireland from the Ulster race of the Hy Neill ; and he, with his son Murachaidh, were valiant adversaries of the Norsemen. Is it too bold a hypothesis that Brian's success gave that pre-eminence to the Southern saga which had previously been enjoyed by the Northern heroic traditions, that he thereby became identified with its after development, and that the incidents of his career helped it to assume the shape it did ? It may be objected that the Finn saga was especially a Leinster product, and that Brian had no greater adversaries than the Leinstermen ; but this objection is in reality an argument. In becoming the official pan-Irish saga, the story of Finn would probably in any case have put off its local Leinster character, but the transformation was hastened and intensified by the fact that the Southern Irishmen who gave it pre-eminence were not of that Southern Irish clan which had given the saga its earlier heroic form. The tales which the Munster *ollamhs* had to tell were less contaminated by historic admixture than would have been the case with Leinster reciters ; for that very reason they offered free scope to the imaginative powers of the 12th-century poets. The same reason commended the Arthur romances to the singers of North France ; they found the foreign tales more plastic than those of Charlemagne and his peers. Another objection may be raised : throughout the foregoing pages it has been tacitly assumed that we find in Scotland two stages of Fenian saga, one due to the 12th-century Irish forms, one due to those earlier traditions which the 5th-6th century Scots brought with them from Ireland. Now the Scots came from the North of Ireland. If, then, the Fenian saga is essentially South Irish, and only pan-Irish from the ninth century on, how came the 6th-century Scots to know anything of it ? In the first place, that which is essentially Southern Irish is the historic development of the saga—the mythic ground-work was probably common to all sections of Gael-dom. We are, therefore, quite justified in assuming that the Northern Scots took with them mythic tales of Finn, tales to which comparatively little attention was paid by the Northern antiquaries and bards, to whom the oldest collections of Gaelic tradition are due, because in the North they had not been worked up into historic, heroic form, as was the case among the Southerners. Nay more ; the facts, few as they are, which

relate to the earliest stages of Fenian tradition, allow us to convert the assumption into reasonable certitude, and indicate one of the ways by which the tradition became known throughout Scotland. An *L.U.* story, as locates Finn-Mongan in Antrim, whilst the 10th-century annalist, Cinaeth hua Artacain, makes Mongan a distinct personage from Finn, and ascribes his death to Fiann of Kintyre, *i.e.*, a district of South-Western Scotland. I take it that Cinaeth had before him conflicting accounts of Finn, one of which connected him, under the name of Mongan, with Scotland. He solved the difficulty, after the manner of himself and of his fellow euhemerising annalists, by making two pseudo-historical personages out of the varying saga-traditions concerning Finn which were known to him. Stories connecting Finn with Scotland would seem to have been current before the middle of the 10th century at the latest.

The *L.U.* story further connects Finn with Dallan Forgaill, the 6th-century disciple of Columba, the founder, of Iona and the apostle to the Picts of Scotland. Again, two of the oldest references to Finn are found in a commentary upon the *Amra Choi. Ch.* of Dallan Forgaill. Dallan Forgaill and Columba are likewise connected with another widely spread Irish legend, that of the Importunate Company of the Bards. These indications, slight and vague as they are, seem to justify the assumption that Columba and his disciples took some prominent part in the diffusion of the Fenian tales ; and if so, it is hardly possible to doubt in what quarter that diffusion took place. All we know of Columba favours such an assumption. His zeal for letters was unbounded. In the whole record, savage as it is, of Irish Saintdom, there is no more amazing story than that which tells how Columba stirred up warfare between Ulster and Connaught in revenge for the judgment which had denied his right to the copy he had surreptitiously made of St. Finian's Psalter. We may wonder at his ideal of Christian charity and brotherhood. We may have our opinion as to the moral principle—so dear to modern America—that a man has a right to convey his neighbour's property without leave asked ; but we cannot deny that the story exhibits Columba as a keen book-lover. Again, there can be little doubt that his advocacy in the assembly of 576 saved the bardic order from threatened suppression. From his interest in the *ollamhs* we may reasonably assume interest in their works.

Be their intermediate history what it may, when we again meet with these tales, in redactions reaching back substantially to the twelfth century, they are profoundly modified in two ways : firstly, the euhemerising process begun in the nineteenth centuries has fully developed, and the saga has been fitted into a framework of tribal and personal conditions, which necessarily determine its growth along certain lines ; secondly, mythic features and incidents have been translated, as it were, into historic terms borrowed from the, comparatively, recent history of the race, and the saga has, in consequence, been enriched by a new series of personages and by a wider geographic horizon. At this stage it is taken up by the literary class of the day, the professional story-tellers, and metrically fixed. It is literary, in so far as the form is artificial, *i.e.*, due to a given man, who did not hesitate to embellish and amplify out of his acquired stock of knowledge ; popular, in so far as it kept in close touch with tradition. This semi-literary form continued to develop until the eighteenth century in both divisions of Gael-land, but the guiding impulse ever came from Ireland. During the last hundred years and more large fragments of it have been preserved in Scotland orally, and offer the most instructive object-lesson with which I am acquainted to the student of traditional diffusion and transmission. Side by side with the semi-literary development, the purely popular forms continued to exist and grow. With regard to Scotland, the chief Ossianic problem is how far these may be looked upon as independent of the semi-literary twelfth century forms, *i.e.*, as derived substantially from the earlier traditions brought by the Gael to Scotland in the early centuries of the Christian era. There is much to be said for and against this view, there is practically nothing to be said in favour of the Fenian saga being older on Scotch ground than the Dalriadic colonisation. Both Scotland and Ireland have an equal claim to the saga in this sense—that both countries were inhabited by Gaels, who told and localised it wherever they went ; but Ireland's claim is in so far superior that these tales were told in Ireland earlier than in Scotland ; that whatever admixture of fact there is in them is Irish fact, and that the chief shapers of the cycle have been Irish, and not Scotch Gaels. On the other hand, the latter seem both to have preserved the popular form in a more genuine state, and the semi-literary form orally with greater tenacity.

Apart from its interest to the student of tradition *per se*, the Fenian saga is the most authentic product we have of Gaelic folk-fancy working over an immense period of time. But it has probably nothing to tell us respecting the oldest history, whether of deed or thought, of the Gaelic race, and although it preserves to us an immense number of mythic ideas and situations, it is, as a rule, in a form influenced by comparatively modern modes of conception and expression. [13]

[2] The second half-verse likewise occurs in a four-stanza poem in the historical tract entitled "Aided Finn", printed in Prof. Kuno Meyer's edition of *Cath Finntraga*, pp. 72 *et seq.*, from *Laud* 610, and *Egerton* 1782, both MSS. of the 15th century. Prof. Meyer has kindly communicated to me a MS.

translation of this curious tract, which is partly in verse, partly in prose ; the verse being, for the most part, of a “ mythic ” character, containing references to adventures of Finn to which Prof. Meyer knows no allusion elsewhere ; whilst the prose is partly “ mythical ”, partly an amplification of the annalistic notices.

- [3] I owe this translation to Prof. K. Meyer.
- [4] Prof. Kuno Meyer will shortly issue in the *Revue Celt.* an inedited Story of Finn and Grainne’s Courtship from the *Book of Lecan*. Grainne imposes tasks upon Finn ; he accomplishes them with Cailte’s help, and wins her, but not her goodwill. This strikes me as an evident *märchen* incident, fitted into a *fixed* saga framework.
- [5] O’Curry’s summary minimises the supernatural nature of the tale to the utmost. The appearance of Cailte is significant. He plays the same part here as in the *Agallamh na Senorach* ; he is the witness *par excellence* to the history of the Fenians.
- [6] I owe this translation to Prof. K. Meyer.
- [7] The questions concerning Finn’s genealogy are fully discussed by Prof. Kuno Meyer, *Academy*, Feb. 21, 1885. Prof. Meyer distinguishes three accounts, the L.U. one, in which the descent is only given up to Finn’s grandfather, Trenmor ; the *Book of Lecan* one (otherwise unknown) which he surmises to be the Munster tradition ; and the *L.L.* one, which derives Finn from Nuadu Necht, the fabled ancestor of all the Leinster clans.
- [8] Mr. Whitley Stokes informs me that he has little, if any, doubt that these stories belong to the oldest portion of the Glossary.
- [9] I follow Prof. Atkinson’s summary of *L.L.* in identifying the Molling of the *L.L.* Borama tribute tract with the 7th century saint. O’Curry, *M. C.* ii, 384, distinguishes two Mollings, an earlier Molling the Swift, and the Saint ; but, from the details given by Prof. Atkinson, it seems certain that the writers of the tract thought of Finn’s interlocutor as the well-known 7th century saint.
- [10] The chief points of difference between *Ag. na S.* and the ballads are these. *Ag. na S.* is largely in prose ; in it Cailte is the chief narrator, in the ballads, Oisín ; in *Ag. na S.* Cailte is on perfectly good terms with Patrick, whilst in the ballads Oisín is perpetually reviling the Christians and lamenting the glory of the pre-monkish days ; in *Ag. na S.* the locale is still mainly Irish. A very common motif in *Ag. na S.* is the opening of the grave of a Fenian hero and the rifling of its treasures, which leads to a narrative of the hero’s exploits. I have noted eight such instances of tomb-despoiling in the *Book of Lismore* version. I cannot but connect this feature of the saga with the well-known grave-rifling practices of the Norse invaders. *Ag. na S.* mentions a number of Patrick’s miracles. It should be possible to fix the date at which these came into the saga by comparison with the Latin lives, the order of which has been settled with fair accuracy.
- [11] Mr. MacBain tells me that he is inclined to date this second stage from the 13th rather than the 12th century. He grounds his opinion upon the sequence of events in the Western Isles. In the second half of the 13th century the Gael regained supremacy in the Isles, and he traces to this the renaissance of the Gaelic saga throughout Gaelic Scotland.
- [12] Cf. Jos. Jacobs, *Æsop*, i, 185.
- [13] A word respecting Macpherson’s Ossian may be thought necessary. Macpherson undoubtedly had some knowledge of the Highland ballad literature, and worked up its themes in the English Ossian, which is, however, almost as much his own composition as *Paradise Lost* is the composition of Milton. He suffered himself afterwards to maintain the existence of a Gaelic original and to connive at a translation of his English poems being put forth as that Gaelic original. From the point of view of the student of Celtic myth and saga Macpherson’s poems are absolutely worthless. But his flashes of genuine inspiration, and the importance of his work in preparing the romantic movement of the 19th century, will always secure to Macpherson a high place on the roll of Scotch writers.

Waifs and strays of Celtic tradition (1889)

Volume : 2

Subject : Folklore — Scotland

Publisher : London : David Nutt

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : National Library of Scotland

Book contributor : National Library of Scotland

Collection : nationallibraryofscotland

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/waifsstraysofcel02lond>

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org

April 18 2011