

Voyages, visions & tragedies

Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history (1861)

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The Historic Tales (continued). 6. Of the *Oitté*, "Tragedies", or Deaths. The Story of the "Death of Conor Mac Nessa". The "Death of *Maelfathartaigh*, the son of Ronan". 7. Of the *Taná*, or Cow Spoils. The "táin bó Chuailgne." 8. Of the *Tochmarca*, or Courtships. The "Courtship of *Eimer*", by the Champion *Cuchullain*. 9. Of the *Uatha*, or Caves. 10. Of the *Echtraí*, or Adventures. 11. Of the *Sluaigheadha*, or military expeditions. The "Expedition of King *Dathi* to the foot of *Sliabh n-Ealpa* (the Alps)". 12. Of the *Imramha*, or Expeditions by Sea. The "Voyage of the Sons of *Ua Corra*". Of the remaining classes of the Historic Tales.

I ALMOST begin to fear you will set me down as a story-teller myself, and not a lecturer upon the grave subject of the Materials of our Ancient History, before I shall have completed my intended notices of the pieces called Historic Tales. You must, however, always bear in mind that, so far as I have thought it right to enter into the details of these stories, I have done so only for the purpose of making the Gaedhlic student as accurately acquainted with their plan and style as the nature of this general course may admit. I have, however, in no instance detailed to you even any considerable part of any of these compositions ; though they will, in fact, upon examination, be found to contain far more of valuable historical matter than I could make you familiar with, if I were even to devote the whole of these lectures to this subject alone. All that I have attempted to do is, to give you a sort of general idea by way of synopsis of the contents of a few of these tales ; and I have selected, as specimens of them, those which appear to me most proper to serve as examples of the classes to which they respectively belong.

The next class of the Historic Tales to which I have to ask your attention, is that of the OITTE or AIDEADHA,—“Tragedies”, or Deaths. These stories are the narratives of violent Deaths, or of any melancholy or tragical occurrences in which the Death of some remarkable individual forms a principal feature in the tale. From one of these *Oitté*, or *Aideadha*, the "*Aideadh Conrui*", Keating has introduced into his history the story of the death of *Curoi Mac Dairé*, who was killed by the celebrated champion *Cuchulainn* about the first year of the Christian era. But the example I prefer to select is a more important one, because the person-age whose death is recorded in the tale was one of the most remarkable men in all our history,—that Conor Mac Nessa, whom I have already more than once spoken. This tale is also particularly interesting to Christians, as you will find, in respect of the immediate cause of the death of the pagan king ; for, though there are several ancient versions of the story, the connexion of the disaster with the crucifixion of our Lord is uniformly recorded. This tale is mentioned in the list, in the Book of Leinster, as the *Aideadh Chonchobhair*, and to some version of this story also Keating had recourse in the compilation of his history. The copy of the tale, the principal contents of which I am about shortly to narrate to you, is preserved in the Book of Leinster.

Conor Mac Nessa was king of Ulster at the period of the Incarnation of our Lord. He was the son of *Fachtna*, king of the same province, but who was slain while Conor was yet an infant.

Conor's accession to the provincial throne was more a matter of chance than of hereditary claim, because Fergus Mac Rossa was actually king at the time. Conor's mother, Nessa, (from whom he derived the distinctive appellation of Mac Nessa,) was still a woman of youth and beauty, at the time that her son came to be fifteen years of age, and Fergus, then the king of the province, proposed marriage to her. Nessa refused to accept his offer, excepting on one condition—namely, that he should hand over the sovereignty of Ulster, for one year, to her son Conor, in order that his children after him might be called the children of a king. To this singular condition Fergus was but too glad to accede, and Conor accordingly took upon him the sovereignty of Ulster, which, young as he was, he administered with such wisdom, justice, and munificence, that, when the year was expired, and the time for resigning the kingly office to its original holder had arrived, the Ulstermen raised a formidable opposition to the act ; and, after much contention and diplomacy, the difficulty was disposed of by each

one retaining what he had,—Fergus his wife, and Conor the kingdom ; and so, as we are in-formed by history, Conor continued long to rule the people of Ulster with wisdom and justice, to defend their rights with vigilance, and to avenge their wrongs with bravery, wherever and whenever the encroachments of the neighbouring provincial powers required it.

It was under the fosterage and example of this prince that the renowned order of knight-hood, so well known in song and story as the Knights of the Royal Branch, sprang up in Ulster ; and among the most distinguished of the order I may name to you the celebrated *Conall Cearnach*, *Cuchulainn*, the sons of *Uisneach* (*Naoisi*, *Ainlé*, and *Ardan*), *Eoghan Mac Durthacht*, *Dubhthach Dael Uladh*, and *Laeghairé Buadhach*, as well as *Cormac Con-loingeas* (Conor's own son).

One of those barbarous military customs which, in one form or another, prevailed in former times perhaps all over the world, and which have been preserved in some countries nearly down to our own days, existed in Erin at this period. Whenever one champion slew another in single combat, it is stated that he cut off his head, if possible ; clove it open ; took out the brain ; and, mixing this with lime, rolled it up into a ball, which he then dried, and placed in the armoury of his territory or province, among the trophies of his nation.

As an instance of this strange custom, we have already seen, in the sketch of *Aithirné* the poet (in speaking of the Siege of *Beann Edair*, or Howth), that, on that occasion, when the great Ulster champion, *Conall Cearnach*, pursued *Mesgedhra*, the king of Leinster, from Howth to *Claena* (in the present county of Kildare), where he overtook and fought him in single combat, he cut off the king's head after he had killed him, and extracted the brain. And, according to that story, it appears that after having put it through the usual process for hardening and preservation, he placed the ball formed of the royal brain among the precious trophies of Ulster, in the great house of the Royal Branch at Emania, where it continued to be esteemed as an object of great provincial interest and pride.

Now, Conor Mac Nessa, in accordance with the custom of the times, had two favourite fools at his court ; and these silly, though often cunning, persons, having observed the great respect in which *Mesgedhra's* brain was held by their betters, and wishing to enjoy its temporary possession, stole it out of the armoury and took it out to the lawn of the court, where they began to play with it as a common ball.

While thus one day thoughtlessly engaged, *Cet Mac Magach*, a famous Connacht champion, whose nation was at war with Conor Mac Nessa, happened to come up to them in disguise ; and perceiving, and soon recognizing, the precious ball which they were carelessly throwing from hand to hand, he had little difficulty in obtaining it from them. Having thus unexpectedly secured a prize of honour so valuable, *Cet* returned immediately into Connacht ; and as there was a prophecy that *Mesgedhra* would avenge himself upon the Ulstermen, he never went forth upon any border excursion or adventure without carrying the king's brain with him in his girdle, hoping by it to fulfil the prophecy by the destruction of some important chief or champion among the Ulster warriors.

Shortly after this time, *Cet*, at the head of a strong party of the men of Connacht, carried off a large prey and plunder from Southern Ulster ; but they were pursued and overtaken (at *Bailé-ath-an-Urchair*, now Ardnurchar, in the present county of Westmeath) by the Ulster-men, under the command of the king himself. Both sides halted on the banks of a stream, which they selected as an appropriate battle-field, and prepared for combat. *Cet* soon discovered that the pursuit was led by king Conor ; at once bethought him of the prophecy ; and immediately laid his plan for its fulfilment. Accordingly, perceiving that a large number of the ladies of Connacht, who had come out to greet the return of their husbands, had placed themselves on a hill near the scene of the intended battle, he concealed himself among them.

Now, at this time, when two warriors or two armies were about to engage in battle, it was the custom for the women, if any were present, of either party to call upon any distinguished chief or champion from the opposite side to approach them and exhibit himself to their view, that they might see if his beauty, dignity, and martial bearing were equal to what fame had re-ported them to be.

To carry out his plan, then, *Cet* instructed the Connacht women to invite Conor himself to come forward, that they might view him. To this request Conor willingly assented in the spirit of the chivalry of the time ; but when he had come within a short distance of the presence of the ladies, on the corresponding eminence at his own side of the stream, *Cet* raised himself in their midst, and fixed *Mesgedhra's* brain in his *Cranntabhaill*, or sling. Conor perceived the movement, and recognizing at once a mortal enemy, retreated as fast as he could to his own people ; however, just as he was entering the little grove of *Doiré da Bhaeth*, *Cet*, who followed him closely, cast from the sling the ball made from the fatal brain, and succeeded in striking Conor with it on the head, lodging the ball in his skull.

Conor's chief physicians were immediately in attendance, and after a long examination and consultation, they reported that it was not expedient to remove the ball ; and the royal patient was carried home, where he was so well attended by them, that after some time he recovered his usual health and activity. He was, however, charged to be careful to avoid, among other things, all violent exercise, riding on horseback, and all excitement or anger.

He continued thus for years to enjoy good health, until the very day of the Crucifixion, when, observing the eclipse of the sun, and the atmospheric terrors of that terrible day, he asked go of the *Bacrach*, his druid, what the cause of it was.

The druid consulted his oracles, and answered by informing the king that Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, was at that moment suffering at the hands of the Jews. "What crime has he committed?" said Conor. "None", said the druid. "Then are they slaying him innocently?" said Conor. "They are", said the druid. Then Conor burst into sudden fury at the words, drew his sword, and rushed out to the wood of *Lamhraidhé*, which was opposite his palace door, where he began to hew down the young trees there, exclaiming in a rage : "Oh ! if I were present, it is thus I would cut down the enemies of the innocent man !" His rage continued to increase, until at last the fatal ball, which was lodged in his skull, started from its place, followed by the king's brain, and Conor Mac Nessa fell dead on the spot. This occurrence happened in the fortieth year of his reign ; and he has been counted ever since as the first man who died for the sake of Christ in Ireland.

This curious tale seems to have always been believed by the Irish historians, and from a very early date. In one version of it, however (that in the Book of Leinster), it is stated that probably it was not from his druid that Conor received the information concerning the crucifixion of our Lord, but from *Altus*, a Roman consul.

Of these Oitté, Aídeadha, or Tragedies, I may just mention one other very curious one (also recorded in the Book of Leinster). I mean the *Aídeadh Maeilfathartaigh Mic Rónain*, or death of the Prince Maelfotharty, the son of Ronan, king of Leinster, about the year A.D. 610.

This king had, as it is stated, married in his old age a very young northern lady, whom he brought home to his Leinster palace, there to see, for the first time, his son, with whom she unhappily fell in love. The prince refused and shunned her : and the lady in revenge, after several endeavours to procure his death, spoke to the king in such a manner as to excite his jealousy against his son, and enraged him so much that *Maelfathartaigh* was soon afterwards killed with spears, himself and his greyhounds, in his father's house and by his father's orders.

The characters in this tale are all historical, and the tragedy is narrated, as well as the whole story of the causes that led to it, at full length.

The next division of historical tales that I would have had to notice, would have been the TANA, or Cow Spoils ; but as you have already had a specimen in one of which I gave you a copious description in a former lecture (I mean the *Táin bó Chuailgné* which is indeed the chief of them), I shall pass them over for the present, and proceed to take up an example of another class of these tracts ; that, namely, which consists of the stories of the more celeb-rated TOCHMARCA, or Courtships and Espousals, in ancient Irish history. Of this class of tales, one of most remarkable, and the best preserved, is the *Tochmarc Eimhiré*—the tale of the Courtship of the great Ulster champion Cuchulainn and the lady *Eimer*, the beautiful daughter of *Forgall Monach*, a nobleman who in his day held a court

of general hospitality (similar to that of Da Derga before mentioned) at the place now called Lusk, in the county of Dublin.

Of the champion *Cuchulainn*, the hero of this tale, we have spoken at some length in a former lecture, when treating of the *Táin bó Chuailgné*, I need only add here that, according to all the accounts, the beauty and symmetry of his person are described to have been in full accordance with his noble carriage and bearing, and worthy of his precocious valour and renown.

The men of Ulster, it appears, paid *Cuchulainn* a very peculiar compliment ; for, presided over by their famous king Conor Mac Nessa, they held a special assembly to devise the best means of providing for their young champion a partner for life, worthy of his rank in life, his manly perfections, and his personal and military accomplishments. The decision to which they came was, to send envoys all over Erin to visit the courts of the princes and nobles, in order to discover the most beautiful and accomplished lady among their daughters, so that *Cuchulainn*, in accordance with the custom of those times, should go and court her.

In accordance with this decision, persons properly qualified for so delicate a mission were sent forth from Emania (the palace of Ulster) ; but after an extensive and close search among the higher classes of the day, they returned home without being fortunate enough to succeed in the object of their embassy,—in fact, *Feramorz* himself was not one of them.

Cuchulainn, however, nothing dispirited by the failure of the solicitude of his friends in his behalf, resolved to go and try his own success in a matter that concerned him so much, and which, after all, should depend for its final accomplishment on his own personal examination and approval ; and having heard, it would appear, of the beauty and accomplishments of the lady *Eimer*, he ordered his chariot, and, accompanied only by his faithful charioteer, *Laegh*, he set out from Emania, and, passing by the many princely and noble mansions that lay in his journey, stopped not until he drew up on the lawn of the court of her father, *Forgall*, at Lusk.

Here he had the good fortune to meet the beautiful object of his visit, in the pleasure-ground of the mansion, enjoying her customary sports, surrounded by the fair daughters of the neighbouring chiefs and men of Meath, whom she was accustomed to instruct in the lady accomplishments of the times (for the lady *Eimer* is stated to have been preëminently endowed with “ six natural and acquired gifts, namely, the gift of beauty of person, the gift of voice, the gift of music, the gift of embroidery and all needlework, the gift of wisdom, and the gift of virtuous chastity”). *Cuchulainn* immediately (but in an obscure style of speech) revealed his name and the reason of his unceremonious visit to *Eimer* ; but the young lady declined to accept his addresses, alleging as her only reason that she was a younger daughter; and then, launching forth in a strain of charming eloquence on the beauty, accomplishments, and virtues of her elder sister, she recommended her suitor to seek her father’s consent for liberty to pay his court to that lady. *Cuchulainn*, however, declined this recommendation, and not wishing to be seen by *Eimer*’s father or brothers in private conversation with her, he soon after took a hurried leave, and departed for his home.

Forgall soon came to hear of the visit of this remarkable and unknown stranger to his daughter, and discovered at once from his description who he was. Not desiring, however, to form an alliance with a professional champion, and knowing well that his designs on *Eimer* would be renewed, he immediately determined on obstructing them.

For this purpose, he clad himself and two chosen attendants in the attire of Scandinavian messengers, and supplying himself with various articles of value, they went northwards to Emania, and presented themselves at the court of King Conor, as messengers sent to him with presents and gifts from the king of Scandinavia. The strangers were well received and highly feasted and honoured for three days, after which they were introduced to the chief heroes of the Royal Branch, such as *Conall Cearnach*, *Cuchulainn* himself, and others, who showed them various specimens of their military education. *Forgall* bestowed great praise on the accomplishments of these celebrated warriors, but remarked that there were some feats of arms in which they appeared to be deficient, and recommended the king to send them into Scotland to finish their education at the great military academy of *Damhnall*, the champion, and the Amazonian lady *Scathach*.

So warmly, and apparently so disinterestedly, did he press this recommendation, that *Cuchulainn* made a vow (in a form of promise, from which, according to the laws of chivalry of the time, he could not recede), that he would forthwith set out for Scotland, and not return as long as he could find any feat of arms to learn, in which he happened to be then deficient. *Forgall* then took his leave of king *Conor* and his court, and returned home highly pleased with the success of his plan, as he had calculated that, should *Cuchulainn* fulfil his vow, he should never return, because he could never escape all the dangers that were sure to beset him in his travels. However, *Cuchulainn* paid a hasty but secret visit to his lady love, who, by this time, had become deeply enamoured of him, and, having told her of the vow he had made, and of his determination to fulfil it, they plighted mutual troth and constancy, and he went forth on his travels.

As *Forgall* anticipated, *Cuchulainn's* journey was beset with dangers and difficulties of all kinds ; but those described in the tale are chiefly of the romantic and supernatural character. Although, nevertheless, the story at this point is especially enriched with poetic embellishment, still the natural incidents with which it abounds, and the curious sketches of, or perhaps I should say, allusions to, the manners and customs of the date of society at a period so very remote (but with which the writer appears to have been familiar), both in *Erinn* and in *Scotland*, will make ample amends in information of the most solid character, for the exuberant display of the author's fancy, whosoever he may have been.

But to continue : *Cuchulainn*, having finished his military education at the school of the lady *Scathach*, in *Scotland*, and having gained great renown by his superiority over his fellow-students, returned home by way of *Ceann Tiré*, or the Land's Head [now *Cantire*, in *Scotland*], paying a visit to the island of *Rechrainn* [now *Rathlin*], on the north-east coast of *Erinn*. Here he met with an incident, which, though not quite new in character to classical scholars, has, from the circumstances that produced it, a peculiar interest for the Irish historian.

On putting into a small bay in the island of *Rechrainn*, he, and the few Irish fellow-students who accompanied him, left their vessels, and, reaching the beach, were surprised to find a beautiful girl sitting there alone. *Cuchulainn* immediately questioned her as to the cause and reason of her strange position, and the young lady told him that she was the daughter of the king of *Rechrainn* ; that her father was every year compelled to pay a large and rich tribute to the *Fomorians*, or pirates, who infested the *Scottish* islands ; that, failing this year to procure the stipulated amount, he was ordered to place her, his only daughter, in the position in which he now saw her, and that, before the night, she should be carried off by the *Fomorians* ; and whilst this conversation was actually going on, three fierce warriors of the *Fomorians* in fact landed in the bay from their boat, and made straight for the spot in which they knew the maiden awaited them. Before, however, they had time to lay rude hands upon her, *Cuchulainn* sprang forward to encounter them, and succeeded in slaying them all, receiving but a slight scar on the arm in the combat, which the maiden tied up with a part of her costly robe. The maiden, so unexpectedly released from her terrible condition, now ran joyously to her father, and related to him all that had happened ; but she could give no particular account of her deliverer. The father immediately communicated the happy tidings to his people, who, with the strangers and visitors at his court, thronged around him with their congratulations, and *Cuchulainn* among the rest. The king led the way to the customary ablutions before their feast, in which he was followed by his household and visitors, several of whom were boasting of having been the actual rescuers of the princess ; but when it came to *Cuchulainn's* turn to bare his arms, she immediately identified him as her deliverer, from his having the strip of her dress wrapped round his arm. An explanation followed, and the king, with the young lady's full consent, made an offer of her and her fortune to her deliverer. This *Cuchulainn*, however, declined to accept at the time ; and, bidding farewell soon afterwards to his friends on the Island of *Rechrainn*, he returned to *Emania*, where he was joyfully received by king *Conor* and the knights of the *Royal Branch*.

Cuchulainn took but little rest after his arrival in *Ulster*, before he set out for the residence of his faithful lady love at *Lusk* ; but *Eimer's* father and brothers having heard of his return, and expecting a visit from him, fortified themselves and *Eimer* so strongly and closely, that for a whole year *Cuchulainn* failed to obtain even a sight of her, much less an entrance to her dwelling. Being driven to desperation at last, he scaled the three circumvallations of the court, entered it, slew *Elmer's* three brothers, killed or disabled their adherents, and took away the lady herself by force, together with her

waitingmaid, and as much gold, silver, and other treasures as he could carry. *Cuchulainn* forthwith transferred his treasures to his chariot, and turned his face northwards once more ; but an alarm being raised in the country all round, he was followed by numbers of armed men, so that he was compelled repeatedly to wheel round and give them combat. These combats took place generally at the fords of the rivers ; and it is remarkable that every ford from the *Glenn-Ath* (or the ford of Great Deeds), on the river *Ailbhiné* (now the Delvin), to *Ath-an-Imoit* (or the Ford of the Sods), on the River Boyne, took its name from that of some person slain in the course of these combats, or from some characteristic incident connected with them. But besides these names (many, or all of which may be easily identified) there is scarcely a hill, valley, river, rock, mound, or cave, in the line of country from Emania (in the present county of Armagh) to Lusk (in the county of Dublin), of which the ancient and often varying names and history are not to be found in this singularly curious tract. So that, if we look upon it even but as a highly coloured historic romance, it will be found one of the most valuable of our large collection of ancient compositions, on account of the light which it throws not merely on ancient social manners and on the military feats and terms of those days, but on the meaning of so vast a number of topographical names. And it records too, I may add, very many curious customs and superstitions, many of which, to this day, characterise the native Irish people.

The only old copies of this tract with which I am acquainted are three. One of them, an imperfect one, is in the ancient *Leabhar na h-Uidhré*, in the library of the Royal Irish Academy ; another written partly on parchment and partly on paper, in the same library, belongs to the time of about the middle of the sixteenth century ; the third, a fine and perfect one on vellum, in the British Museum, is in the handwriting of *Gillariabhach* O'Clery, the son of *Tuathal* O'Clery, who died in the year 1512. Of this copy I have made a careful transcript for my own use, free from the contractions with which the original abounds, and more accessible for all useful purposes than either of the old, or I may perhaps say, than any other copies now extant.

Amongst the other remarkable *Tochmarca*, or Courtships, still preserved among our MSS., I may mention the very ancient *Tochmarc Moméra*, printed last year [1855] by the Celtic Society, with the battle of *Magh Lena*. It contains a singularly interesting account of the voyage of the celebrated Eoghan Mór to Spain in the second century, and his marriage there with the daughter of the king of that country. The name of this story does not occur in the list of specimens of *Scéla* in the Book of Leinster.

The *Tochmarc Mheidhbhé* which does appear in that list, is the story of the marriage of the celebrated *Meadhbh*, [or *Méav*], queen of Connacht, with *Ailill*, prince of Leinster, at Naas ; told in the *Tain bó Chuailgné*.

The *Tochmarc Ailbhé* also in that list, is the courtship of *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, of the princess *Ailbhé*, the daughter of *Cormac Mac Airt*. This lady *Ailbhé* is said to have been the wisest woman of her time ; and Finn's courtship is described in the relation of conversations, in which there is a sort of contest of ability and knowledge between them.

Of the many *Tochmarca* still preserved to us, I shall only mention one more—the *Tochmarc Begfolad*, or “ Courtship of the Woman of little dowry”, who was sought in marriage by *Diarmaid Mac Cearbhaill*, monarch of Erin, in the sixth century. This piece is very ancient, though this also does not occur in the incomplete list in the Book of Leinster ; and it is of remarkable value for the minute descriptions which it contains of the lady's dress, and of the various gold ornaments worn at the period.

Another class of tales is known by the name of UATHA, or Caves. These are tales respecting various occurrences in caves : sometimes the taking of a cave, when the place has been used as a place of refuge or habitation,—and such a taking would be, intact, a sort of *Toghail* ; sometimes the narrative of some adventure in a cave ; sometimes of a plunder of a cave ; and so on. Thus the *Uath Beinné Edair* (mentioned in the Book of Leinster), is the tale of the hiding of *Diarmaid and Gráinne*,—the latter the intended wife of *Finn Mac Cumhaill*, with whom *Diarmaid* eloped,—in a cave on *Beinn Etair* or *Edair* (*i.e.*, the hill of Howth). Again the *Uath Chruachan*, or “ Cave of *Cruachain*”, is a very curious story of the plunder of the cave of *Cruachain*, part of the Story of the *Táin Be or Bo, Aingen*, (Cow-Spoil of *Aingen*), in Connacht, in the time of Queen *Meadhbh* and King *Ailill*, about the

time of the Incarnation. So the *Uath Belaigh Conglais* is the story of *Cuglas*, a prince of Leinster in the first century. This prince was a distinguished huntsman, but one day in hunting, he disappeared in the cave called since after him, *Belach Conglais* (now Baltinglass), and was never heard of afterwards.

Another class consists of the ECHTRAI, or Adventures. An *Echtra* was generally a foreign expedition : it was always a personal adventure of some kind. That called in the Book of Leinster the *Echtra Macha inghiné Aedha Ruaidh* (or the Adventure of Macha, the daughter of *Aedh* [Hugh] the red), is the story of Queen Macha's expedition into Connacht, and her bringing back as prisoners the three sons of *Dithorba*, the events of which I have already related to you in reference to the founding of the palace of Emania by this Macha (near the present city of Armagh). The tales of these two classes are, however, so like in their subjects to others, of which I give you examples, that it is unnecessary to detain you here by any detailed specimen of them. I shall pass on then to another and more important division

The example of the SLUAIGHEADHA, or Military Expeditions, which I wish to introduce to you, is that in which the last of the pagan kings of Erin lost his life, about the year of our Lord 428. This expedition was also (like many of the Irish wars of the period), a continental one, and the king's army appears to have passed quite across the south of France. The story is called, in the Book of Leinster, the *Sluaghid Dathi co Sliabh n-Ealpa*, or the Expedition of Dathi to the Alpine Moimtain.

Niall of the Nine Hostages was succeeded in the monarchy by *Dathi*, the son of his brother *Fiachra*, king of Connacht; and was, like his uncle, a valiant and ambitious man. It happened that, in the seventeenth year of his reign, king *Dathi* was induced to go from Tara to *Eas Ruaidh*, the great cataract of the River Erne (at the present Ballyshannon), to adjust some territorial dispute which had sprung up among his relatives. The time at which this journey was undertaken was the close of the summer, so that the king arrived at his destination close upon November Eve, a season of great solemnity of old among the pagan Gaedhils.

Dathi, having concluded an amicable adjustment among his friends, and finding himself on the eve of the great festival of *Samhain*, was desirous that his Druids should ascertain for him, by their art, the incidents that were to happen him from that time till the festival of *Samhain* of the next year. With this view he commanded the presence of his Druids ; and *Doghra*, the chief of them, immediately stood before him. " I wish", said the king, " to know my destiny, and that of my country, from this night till this night twelvemonths". " Then", said *Doghra*, " if you will send nine of your noblest chiefs with me from this to *Rath Archail*, on the bank of the river *Muaidh* [the Moy], I will reveal something to them". "It shall be so", said the king, " and I shall be one of the number myself".

They departed secretly from the camp, and arrived in due time at the plain of *Rath Archail*, where the Druid's altars and idols were. *Dathi's* queen, *Ruadh*, had a palace at *Mul-loch Ruaidhé*, in this neighbourhood, [a place still known under that name, in the parish of Screene, in the barony of Tireragh, and county of Sligo]. Here the king took up his quarters for the night, whilst the Druid repaired to *Dumha na n-Druadh* (or the Druid's Mound), near *Rath Archail*, on the south, to consult his art according to the request of the king.

At the rising of the sun in the morning, the Druid repaired to the king's bed-room, and said : " Art thou asleep, O king of Erin and of Albain ?" " I am not asleep", answered the monarch, " but why have you made an addition to my titles ? for, although I have taken the sovereignty of Erin, I have not yet obtained that of Albain [Scotland]". " Thou shalt not be long so", said the Druid, " for I have consulted the clouds of the men of Erin, and found that thou wilt soon return to Tara, where thou wilt invite all the provincial kings, and the chiefs of Erin, to the great feast of Tara, and there thou shalt decide with them upon making an expedition into Albain, Britain, and France, following the conquering footsteps of thy great uncle, Niall, and thy granduncle, *Crimhthann Mór*. The king, delighted with this favourable prediction, returned to his camp, where he related what had happened, and disclosed his desire for foreign conquests to such of the great men of the nation as happened to be of his train at the time. His designs were approved of, and the nobles were dismissed to their respective homes, after having cordially promised to attend on the king at Tara, with all their forces, whenever

he should summon them, to discuss farther the great project which now wholly seized on his attention.

Daihi returned home, stopping for a short period at the ancient palace of *Cruachain*, in Roscommon. From this place he proceeded across the Shannon, and then delayed for some time at the ancient palace of *Freamhainn*, [a name still preserved in that of the hill of Frewin, in the present parish of Port-Loman, in the county of Westmeath].

The tale goes on to tell, at this place, an anecdote, having reference to the raith or building where the party then were, which is so interesting in itself, and as an example of the kind of information with which these tracts abound, that I may so far digress as to state it to you.

In the course of the evening, when the fatigues of the journey were forgotten in the enjoyment of the cup and the cheerfulness of conversation, the king asked his Druid, *Finnchaemh*, who it was that built the noble and royal court in which they were then enjoying themselves. The Druid answered, that it had been built by *Eochaidh Aireamh* [Monarch of Erin, about a century before the Christian era]. He then narrated to *Daihi* how that monarch called on the men of Erin to build him a suitable residence, which should descend to his own family independently of the palace of Tara, which always descended by law to the reigning monarch. The men of Erin cheerfully consented, and, dividing themselves into seven divisions, they soon built the great rath and the palace within it. The ground upon which the palace was built was the property of *Fera Cul* of *Teabhtha* (or *Teffia*); and although they formed one of the seven parties who contributed to its erection, the monarch had not asked their consent for the site. This intrusion was so keenly felt by the *Fera Cul*, and their king, *Mormael*, that, at the following feast of *Samhain*, or November Eve, when invited by the monarch to the solemnity of the great festival, *Maelmor* attended with forty men in chariots, who, in the confusion of the night, murdered king *Eochaidh*, unperceived by his people, and escaped themselves. The king's death was not discovered till the following morning, and the *Fera Cul* were the first to charge the murder on the secret agency of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, by the hand of *Siogmall*, of *Sidh Neannta* (in the present county of Roscommon).

So far the Druid's history of the building of *Freamhainn*, and the death of the Monarch *Eochaidh Airimh*. The *Fera Cul*, however, did not escape detection; their crime was quickly discovered, and, in fact, in order to escape the punishment which awaited them, they fled over the Shannon into Connacht, and settled on the borders of Galway and Roscommon. Here the tribe remained for nearly three hundred years, until the return of Cormac Mac Art from his exile in Connacht, in the year of our Lord 225, to assume the monarchy, when he invited the *Fera Cul* to accompany him as his body-guard. This service they accordingly performed, and on Cormac's ascending his father's throne he gave them a territory north of Tara, nearly coextensive with the present barony of Kells. And I may observe that since this settlement of the claim by Cormac, they have been always known in Irish history as the *Fera Cul Breagh*, or the *Fera Cul* of 'Bregia', a territory comprised in the modern county of East Meath. (This designation seems to have been intended to distinguish their territory from the original one, called that of the *Fera Cul* of *Teabhtha* or *Teffia*, which is in West Meath—a distinction not hitherto accounted for by modern writers.—H. 2. 16. Col. 888. T.C.D.)

Let us, however, return to the story of king *Dathi* himself. On leaving *Freamhainn*, *Dathi* came to *Ros-na-Righ*, the residence of his mother, which was situated north-east of Tara, on the bank of the Boyne. Here he remained for some time, and at last returned to Tara, at which place he had, meanwhile, invited the states of the nation to meet him at the approaching feast of *Beltainé* (one of the great pagan festivals of ancient Erin) on May Day.

The feast of Tara this year was solemnized on a scale of splendour never before equalled. The fires of *Taillten* [now called *Telltown*, to the north of Tara] were lighted, and the sports, games, and ceremonies, for which that ancient place is celebrated, were conducted with unusual magnificence and solemnity.

These games and ceremonies are said to have been instituted more than a thousand years previously, by *Lug*, the king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, in honour of *Taillté*, the daughter of the king of Spain, and wife of *Eochaidh Mac Eirc* the last king of the *Firbolg* colony, who was slain in the first

great battle of *Magh Tuireadh*. It was at her court that *Lug* had been fostered, and on her death he had her buried at this place, where he raised an immense mound over her grave, and instituted those annual games in her honour. These games were solemnized about the first day in August, and they continued to be observed so long as down to the ninth century.

After the religious solemnities were concluded, *Dathi*, having now discharged his duties to his gods and to his subjects, turned his thoughts to his contemplated expedition ; and at a conference with all the great chiefs and leaders of the nation, found them all ready to support him. Accordingly, without further delay, he concluded his preparations, and leaving Tara in the charge of one of his cousins, he marched to *Dundealgan* (the present Dundalk), where his fleet was ready for sea, at the head of the most powerful army that had ever, up to that time, been known to leave Erin. He did not, however, embark at Dundalk, but ordering his fleet to meet him at *Cuan Snamha Aighnech* (now Carlingford), he marched to *Iubhar Chinntrachta* (now Newry), and from that to *Oirear Caoin*. On his way to the latter place it appears he passed by *Magh Bilé* (now Moville), and only at a short distance, (so that *Oirear-Caoin* may probably have been the ancient name of the place now called Donaghadee.) Here his fleet awaited him, and having embarked all his troops, he set sail for Scotland, which he reached safely at Port Patrick.

Immediately upon his landing, *Dathi* sent his Druid to *Feredach Finn*, king of Scotland, who was then at his palace of *Tuirrin brighé na Rígh*, calling on him for submission and tribute, or an immediate reason to the contrary on the field of battle. The Scottish king re-fused either submission or tribute, and accepted the challenge of battle, but required a few days to prepare for so unexpected an event.

The time for battle at last arrived ; both armies marched to *Magh an Chairthi* (the plain of the Pillar Stone), in *Glenn Feadha* (the woody glen) ; *Dathi* at the head of his Gaedhils, and *Feredach* leading a large force composed of native Scots, Picts, Britons, French, Scandinavians, and Hebridian Islanders.

A fierce and destructive fight ensued between the two parties, in which the Scottish forces were at length overthrown and routed with great slaughter. When the Scottish king saw the discomfiture of his army, he threw self headlong on the ranks of his enemies, dealing death and destruction all round him : but in the height of his fury he was laid hold of by *Conall Gulban* [the great ancestor of Saint Colum Cille and of the O'Donnells of Donnegall], who, taking him up in his arms, hurled him against the pillar stone and dashed out his brains. The scene of this battle has continued ever since to be called *Gort an Chairthé*, the Pillarstone Field ; and the glenn, *Glenn an Chatha*, or Battle Glen.

Dathi having now realized the object of his ambition, set up a surviving son of the late king on the throne of Scotland, and receiving hostages and formal public submission from him, he passed onwards into Britain and France, in both of which countries he still received hostages and submission, wherever he proceeded on his march. He continued his progress, but with what object does not appear, even to the foot of the Alps, where he was at last killed, in the midst of his glory, by a flash of lightning.

The body of this great king was afterwards carried home by his people, and he was buried with his fathers in the ancient pagan cemetery at *Raith Cruachain*, in Connacht, as related in a very old poem by *Tarna Eigeas*. At this place his grave was still distinguished by the *Coirthe Dearg*, the Red Pillar Stone, down to the year 1650, when *Dubhaltach Mac Firbisigh* wrote his first great Book of Genealogies.

There are two copies of the present tract in Dublin, one in the Royal Irish Academy, and the other in my own collection, both on paper, and neither of them older than the year 1760 ; and although the tract has so far suffered at the hands of ignorant transcribers, as to be much corrupted in style and language, still I have found in it many genuine illustrations of ancient manners, customs, and ceremonies, to which other very ancient and better preserved pieces contain but allusions more or less obscure.

The next and last class of the Historic Tales, of which I shall give you an example at any length, is that of the IMRAMHA, or Expeditions by Sea, which, as I have already explained to you, are to be distinguished from the *Longeas*, in so far as the *Imramh* was a navigation undertaken voluntarily, and generally in search of something, while the *Longeas* was a voyage entered upon involuntarily, as in the case of banishment or escape from pursuit. You have had a specimen of the *Longeas* in the story of *Labhraidh Loingseach*. The example of an *Imramh* which I have selected is a story of a much later period, in the Christian times—namely, about the sixth century; so that it is the last in the chronological order of my examples. It is the *Imramh Ua Corra*, or the Navigation (or Expedition) of the sons of *Ua Corra* into the Atlantic Ocean.

Of this class of our ancient tales, the number that have come down to us is but small, but they are very ancient; and though indefinite in their results, and burdened with much matter of a poetic or other romantic character, still there can be no rational doubt that they are founded on facts, the recital of which, in the original form, would have been probably found singularly valuable, though, in the lapse of ages, and after passing through the hands of story-tellers, whose minds were full of imagination, these tales lost, in a great measure, their original simplicity and truthful character, and became more and more fanciful and extravagant.

That such tales as these were numerous in the ancient history of Erin may be very clearly seen from the Litany of Aengus *Céilé Dé* where several of them are mentioned. At present, I know of but four such pieces remaining in our ancient manuscripts, of all of which, however, we have copies of considerable antiquity and detail. These are the Navigation of Saint Brendan; the Navigation of the sons of *Ua Corra*; the Navigation of *Snedgus* and *Mac Riaghla*; and the Navigation of *Maelduin*. (One of these pieces, the Navigation of Saint Brendan, has been introduced to the world in full detail, and in beautiful verse, by my distinguished friend, our Professor of Poetry, Denis Florence MacCarthy, in the Dublin University Magazine for January, 1848).

Saint Brendan's voyages, for he made two, were performed about the year 500; the voyage of the sons of *Ua Corra*, about the year 540; the voyage of *Snedgus* and *Mac Riaghla* (two priests of the island of Iona), about the middle of the seventh; and that of *Maelduin*, in the eighth century. As the early history of the sons of *Ua Corra*, and the cause of their wanderings at sea, are more circumstantial and curious (though their story, too, is tinged with a little of the fabulous) than any of the rest, excepting Saint Brendan's, I have selected this tale as an example of which to give you a short sketch.

Conall Dearg Ua Corra was an opulent landholder and farmer of the province of Connacht. He had to wife the daughter of the *Airchinnech*, or lay impropiator of the church *Clothar*; with whom he lived happily for some years, keeping a house of hospitable enter-tainment for all visitors and strangers. Not being blessed with children, however, though praying ardently to the Lord for them, they became, particularly the husband, impatient and discontented; and, so far did his despair carry him, that at last he renounced God, and persuaded his wife to join him in prayer and a three days' fast to the Devil, to favour them with an heir to their large inheritance.

It would seem that the evil spirit heard their petition, for, in due time after, the wife brought forth three sons at one birth. These sons grew up to be brave and able men, and, having heard that they had been consecrated to the Devil at their birth, they resolved to dedicate their lives to his service. As if for that special end, they appear to have collected a few desperate villains about them, and to have commenced an indiscriminate war of plunder and destruction against the Christian churches of Connacht and their priests, beginning with the church of *Tuaim dá Ghualann* and not ceasing till they had pillaged or destroyed more an half the churches of the province.

At last they determined to visit also the church of *Clothar*, to destroy it, and to kill their grandfather, the *Airchinnech* of the place. When they came to the church, they found the old man on the green in front of it, distributing with a bountiful hand meat and drink to his tenants and to the benefactors of the church. Seeing this, his persecutors altered their plans, and put off the execution of their murderous purpose till the more favourable time of night.

The grandfather, though suspecting their evil design, received them with kindness, and assigned them a comfortable resting-place; and, after having fared heartily, they retired to bed, in order to lull

suspicion, at the usual time. *Lochan*, the eldest of the three brothers, had, however, during his sleep, a strange vision, which ended by seriously affecting their design. He was shown in a dream, in vivid colours, the glories and joys of Heaven, and the torments and horrors of Hell ; and he awoke deeply affected by what was thus disclosed to him.

When the three brothers, then, arose at the hour of the night appointed to execute their purpose, *Lochan* addressed himself to the other two, related to them his vision, told them of his newly-born fears, and, in fine, persuaded them that they had been hitherto serving an evil power, and making war on a good master. The brothers were powerfully struck with what they heard ; and so complete was the transformation of mind suddenly wrought in them by it, that at last they all agreed to repair in the morning, in a spirit of sorrow and penitence, to their grandfather, to seek his prayers and pardon, and to ask his advice as to what they should do to amend their lives, and make reparation for the past.

When the morning came, accordingly, they presented themselves before the *Airchinnech*, acknowledged their wicked intentions, and took counsel with him as to their future conduct. The course he advised them to take, and on which they determined, was, that they should repair at once to Saint Finnen of Clonard, who was then the great teacher, and, as it were, the head of all the schools of divinity in Erin, and submit themselves to his spiritual direction.

For this purpose they took leave of their friends, put off their habiliments of warfare and offence, turned their spears into pilgrims' staffs, and repaired to Clonard.

When the people of Clonard perceived them coming, being well acquainted with their wickedness, they fled for their lives in all directions, with the exception of Saint Finnen himself, who went out calmly to meet them. Seeing this, they hastened to meet the holy priest, and throwing themselves on their knees before him, they besought his pardon and spiritual friendship.

“ What do you want ?” said the priest. “ We want”, said they, “ to take upon us the habit of religion and penitence, and henceforth to serve God.” “ Your determination is a good one”, said the priest ; “ let us come into the town where my people are”.

They entered the town with him, and the saint having taken counsel of the people respecting the penitents, what they decided on was, to place them for a year under the sole care and instruction of a certain divinity student, with whom exclusively they were to hold any conversation during that period.

Having finished their year in this manner, in the solitary practice of religious exercises, and the study of the Christian doctrines, to the satisfaction and edification of their instructor and the entire congregation, the three brothers again presented themselves before Saint Finnen, and besought his benediction and his penitential sentence for their former crimes.

The saint gave them his benediction, and then said : “ You cannot restore to life those innocent ecclesiastics whom you have slain, but you can go and repair and restore, as far as it is in your power, the many churches and other buildings which you have desecrated and ruined.”

The sons of *Ua Corra* at once rose up and took an affectionate leave of Saint Finnen and his pious and learned flock ; and as the church of *Tuaim da Ghualann* [Tuam] was the first that suffered from their wicked depredations, they determined that it should be the first to receive the benefit of their altered dispositions. Thither accordingly they went, and they repaired the ruined church, and restored it to its original perfection. And thus they proceeded on, from place to place, until at last they had repaired and restored all the ruined churches but one, after which they returned to Saint Finnen.

The saint asked them if they had finished their work. They answered that they had repaired all the churches but one. “ Which is that ?” said Finnen. “ The church of *Ceann Mara*”, [Kinvara, at the head of the bay of Galway], said they. “ Alas !” said the saint, “ that was the first church which you ought to have repaired,—the church of the holy old man, Coman of Kinvara ; and return now”, said he, “ and repair every damage that you have done in that place”.

The brothers obeyed, they went back and repaired the church, and after this, taking counsel with Saint Coman, they built themselves a great *curach* or canoe, covered with hides, three deep, and capable of carrying nine persons, in which they determined to go out upon a pilgrimage upon the great Atlantic Ocean.

When their vessel was ready to be launched, several persons besought permission to accompany them ; and among others, a bishop, a priest, and a deacon, as well as the man who built the canoe, and also (the story tells us) a certain musician. These five they received of the party.

With this company then the three sons of *Ua Corra* went out upon the waters in the Bay of Galway ; and after having cleared the islands and headlands of the bay, deeming it useless to attempt to steer their course in any particular direction, they drew their oars on board, and committed themselves passively to the mercy of the waves and the direction of God.

The adventurers were driven by the wind from the land into the solitudes of the great Atlantic Ocean ; and the story goes on to describe how, after forty days and forty nights, they came to an island which was full of people, all of whom were moaning and lamenting. One of the wanderers went on shore for the purpose of learning the name of the island and the character of its inhabitants, but no sooner had he joined these strange people, than he too began to moan and lament like the rest ; and this induced his companions to depart without him.

After this the tale becomes altogether wild and fabulous, always, however, tending to a certain moral conclusion. The wanderers pass occasionally into the region of spirits, and are brought into contact with the living and the dead ; and the incidents of their voyage are made to tell, negatively, on some of the immoralities and irregularities of Christian life. On one island, for instance, they found a solitary ecclesiastic, who told them that he had been expelled from the community to which he belonged for neglecting his matins ; that he set out on the sea in a boat, and so was cast ashore on this island alone. On another island they found a man digging with a spade, the handle of which was on fire ; and on asking him the cause of so strange a circumstance, he told them that when on earth he was accustomed to dig on Sundays ; and this was the punishment awarded to him. On another island they found a burly miller feeding his mill with all the perishable things of which people are so choice and niggardly in this world. On another they found a man riding a horse of fire, who told them that he had taken his brother's horse, and ridden it on a Sunday. Another island they found peopled with smiths, and artificers in the precious metals, and men of every trade, all shrieking and moaning under the incessant attacks of huge black birds, which tore the flesh from their bones with their bills and talons ; and they learned that these people were thus made to suffer for all the falsehoods and frauds which they had been guilty of in this world.

At length the voyagers approached a land which they learned from some fishermen on its coast was Spain. Here they landed, and the bishop built a church, which, however, he soon afterwards resigned to the priest, and went on himself to Rome, accompanied by a certain youth, who was one of the wandering party. This bishop subsequently returned to Erin from Rome, accompanied by the same youth, who is said to have related the whole adventure, under the bishop's correction, to Bishop *Saerbhreathach* [a name Latinized Justinus, and now called Justin] ; Bishop Justin related it to Saint Colman, of Arann Island ; and upon this relation Saint *Mocholmóg* wrote the poem which begins ; —

The Ua Corras of Connacht,
Undismayed by mountain waves,
Over the profound howling ocean,
Sought the lands of the marvellous.

From the conclusion of this tale we may fairly infer that its composition belonged originally to the great island of Arann, on the coast of the county of Clare, and in the bay of Galway ; and, although the narrative, in the latter part of it, is wild and fabulous, there is little doubt that this and many similar voyages were actually undertaken by several parties of Christian pilgrims in the early ages of the Church in Ireland. And this fact, as I have already stated, is fully borne out by the Litany of Aengus *Ceilé Dé* written about the year 780 (of which more on a future occasion), in which he in-

vokes the intercession of the sons of *Ua Corra* and of their company, as well as of several other companies of pilgrim navigators.

At the time of the delivery of this lecture I was acquainted with two copies of this curious tract, both on paper, one in the Royal Irish Academy, and the other in my own possession. Since then, however, a copy of it, somewhat damaged indeed, but full and valuable, has come under my observation; one, namely, which is preserved in the old vellum "Book of Fermoy", before referred to as having been purchased by the Rev. Dr. Todd, at the sale of the books of the late William Monk Mason, in London, in 1858. The copy in my possession appears to have been transcribed from the same original.

The Other divisions of the Tales mentioned by the early writers, I need not stay to enlarge on.

Of the *Fessa* (Feasts or Banquets), we have a great number, some of which I shall have presently to allude to in connexion with the Fenian and purely imaginative tales.

The *Aithidhé* were Elopements. Of these an excellent example is within the reach of all of you, in the celebrated story of *Deirdré* and the Sons of *Uisneach*, an edition of which (with a translation) was published here in 1808, by the Gallic Society of Dublin, of which copies may still be easily procured. This was the tract named in the Book of Leinster as the *Aithid Dheirdri re Macaibh Uisnigh* (the Elopement of *Deirdré* with the sons of *Uisneach*).

The *Serca*, or Loves, were love-stories, such as that eventful story of Queen *Gormlaith*, the principal part of which I had occasion to describe to you in a former lecture.

The *Tomhadhma* were the stories of the bursting out of Lakes, and the irruptions of the Sea, and the consequences of the inundations caused by them. Thus the *Tomhaidhm Locha n-Echach*, or Bursting out of Loch Neagh, is the account of the irruption which first formed that great loch, about the second century; in which irruption *Eochaidh Mac Mairéda*, the son of the king of Fermoy, in Munster, was drowned with his people. It is from him that Loch Neagh takes its name: *Loch n-Echach*, the Lake of *Eochaidh*.

The *Tochomladh* was an Immigration or arrival of a Colony; and under this name the coming of the several colonies of *Partholon*, of *Nemedh*, of the *Firbolg*, the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the Milesians, etc., into Erin, are all described in separate tales. It is probably from the original records of these ancient stories that the early part of the various Books of Invasions has been compiled.

Lastly, the *Fis*, or Visions, were stories of prophecies declared in the form of visions seen by various personages. Of the more remarkable prophecies, as they are called, I shall soon have occasion to speak to you at greater length.

I believe I have now laid before you a somewhat intelligible though very short sketch of what the student of history may expect to find in the various classes of the HISTORIC TALES of the *Ollamhs* and Poets of Erin. Their value and bearing upon our history I have already attempted to indicate, and I hope even the slight descriptions my space allowed me to give of these compositions, have been sufficient to prove to you their importance.

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