Who Were The Feinn?

Did Fingal Live or Ossian Sing?

A Paper Read By
Mr. Alex. Macbain, M.A.,
Raining's School,
Inverness.

[January 26TH, 1892.]

At the meeting held on this date, Alexander Mac-Bain, M.A, Raining's School, Inverness, read a paper entitled, " *Who were the Feinn* ? " which was as follows : —

FIONN is the popular hero of Gaelic romance, and his band of warriors are known as the Feinn, an oblique form of the older name Fiann. The favourite English form of the hero's name is Fingal, a name applied to him by MacPherson, of Ossianic fame ; and Fionn's men are consequently called in English, Fingalians. But Irish writers and Celtic scholars refuse to recognize the Fingal and Fingalian of MacPherson's work, and they therefore fall back on the native terms as they are — Finn and Fiann. The whole romantic cycle of the Feinn is variously styled by literary scientists as the Ossianic Saga, the Finn-Ossian Saga, or the Finn Saga. The term Fenian Saga, which would otherwise be so neat and accurate, is objectionable from its modern political associations. The present paper deals with the origin, contents, and meaning of the Ossianic Saga : in other words, we shall try to answer the question, " Who were the Feinn ?"

The whole material of Gaelic myth and romance divides itself easily into three cycles — the mythological, the Cuchulinn, and the Ossianic cycles. The mythological cycle has to do with the various mythic invasions of Ireland from antediluvian times till before the dawn of history. It concerns itself much with the doings of the Tuatha de Dananns, or the tribes of the gods of Dana, who are believed to be the gods of the Gaelic Olympus reduced to kings and heroes, of a very supernatural kind, however. We find only an echo of this cycle among our Scottish Gaelic Literature ; the great collections of the last and present centuries, with the exception of one poem, ignore the mythological cycle. That it was once known is amply proved by Bishop Carsewell's complaint about the people's delight in the " framing of vain, hurtful, lying, earthly stories about the Tuath de Danond, and about the sons of Milesius, and about the heroes and Fionn MacCumhail with his Fians." The second cycle of Gaelic myth and romance concerns Cuchulinn and his generation, which the Irish historians place in the first century of our epoch. Its central figure is Cuchulinn, and its scenes are laid mostly in Ulster ; Cuchulinn himself belongs to that stage of myth which we see in the Grecian tales of Perseus and Hercules, but his surroundings are on the whole like those we meet with in the Iliad. The Ossianic Saga, on the other hand, is later and more general in its scope. The fairy adventures of the Odyssey, so to speak, are grafted on the Iliad, and there is often an attempt to relate what seems to be sober historic fact. In reality, however, this Ossianic cycle is, as we shall see, the latest presentment of the mythic and heroic materials of the race ; it picks up the detritus — the waifs and strays — of the other cycles, and attaches them to certain popular figures of its own. It gathers round Fionn and his merry-men most of the mythic and heroic literature of the Gael. Whence, however, came Fionn and his heroes ? That is our question.

The Feinn present themselves to us in three aspects at least, according as we consult history, popular fancy, or pure literature. The historians and annalists of the Gaelic race in Scotland and Ireland fix Fionn's epoch as the third century of our era. This is practically three centuries later than the Cuchulinn epoch. Though the task was no easy one, these historians have succeeded in reducing Fionn and his Feinn to the sober dimensions and the fixity of dates necessary to history and chronology. But there is the second Fionn and Feinn ; they are the heroes of the popular sagas and folktales ; they become in this case men of gigantic stature, fighting with giants and monsters, and all supernatural powers, degenerating finally into the heroes of mere fairy-tales. This, as we shall see, is the real Feinn. The third aspect in which Fionn and his men may appear is the epic — after Homer considerably ; the blind old bard of Chios's lonely isle becomes a " Mac," and the golden gods of Olympus become pale ghosts, who meteor-like ride the winds, or down in the deep earth worm their

way along, the cause of earthquakes to us poor mortals ! And so MacPherson plays his part — editor, author, and translator (into Gaelic) of " Ossian," It is, however, to this 18th-century Ossian that we owe the preservation of the rich popular material which forms our Ossianic collections ; but for MacPherson's genius, the ear of Europe would not have been caught, and controversy would not have collected and preserved the fast disappearing heroic poetry of the Highlands. We owe the deepest gratitude to James MacPherson, be his motives or actions what they may, and, as Mathew Arnold says : " When we are unjust enough to forget it, may the muse forget us ! "

These, then, are the sources of our knowledge of the Feinn — first, history, dating from the annals of Tigernach, in the 11th, to the Irish history of Keating, in the 17th century ; secondly, popular literature, dating from the 12th to the 19th century ; and, thirdly, MacPherson's unique production of the 18th century, which, as being a purely original work, we shall now dismiss from our consideration, The Irish historians represent Fionn and the Feinn as a sort of third century militia ; one of the most eminent of present century Irish scholars declared his belief that " Finn MacCumhail was a real historical personage, and not a myth like Siegfried or Hercules," while another no less eminent writer looked on Fionn's existence " as an historical personage as assured as that of Julius Cæsar." Even some of the severe scientists of Germany share this view, though in a more modified form. Professor Windisch, of Leipzig, who stands among the two or three best of our Celtic scholars, thinks that Fionn existed in the third century, and explains the mythic incidents of the Ossianic saga as borrowed from the earlier Cuchulinn cycle, which in its turn again borrowed some of these very incidents possibly from Christian legend.

The Scottish view has up till lately been to regard MacPherson's work as authentic, holding that there was a king of Scotland in the third century called Fionn, surrounded with a band of warriors renowned for bravery and knight-errantry. There was not, nor is there any historical document to prove the existence of such a king and people ; the Irish historians mention no such king, and, indeed, flatly contradict the Irish part of MacPherson's history, where Cuchulinn and Fionn are made to shake hands over three hundred years of time, and over nearly three thousand years of manners and customs. This and the ballads collected from oral recitation, inclusive of those of the Dean of Lismore's book, were felt to be very awkward to deal with ; but our Scottish scholars turned to pooh-pooh Irish history. and, saddest fact of all, under MacPherson's spell, to depreciate and decry their own excellent heritage of ballad literature, which they looked upon as corrupt and distorted copies and fragments of what MacPherson was lucky enough to find complete and incorrupt. Dr. Skene, thirty years ago, maintained the authenticity of MacPherson's work, and proceeded to identify the Feinn with one of the early races who inhabited Scotland and Ireland. After throwing discredit on the Irish annals, he, nevertheless, proceeded somewhat inconsistently to accept their authority to prove the existence of such an ancient population.

He adduced a stanza from a late Irish ballad which details the Battle of Gabhra, when the power of the Feinn was crushed ; here we are told that —

" The bands of the Fians of Alban,
And the supreme King of Breatan,
Belonging to the order of the Feinne of Alban,
Joined us in that battle.
The Fians of Lochlin were powerful ;
From the chief to the leaders of nine men,
They mustered along with us
To share in the struggle. "

Thus there must have been Feinn not only in Scotland and Ireland, but also in England and Lochlin, a name vaguely used for the country of the Norsemen, that is, Norway and even Denmark. Dr. Skene at once concluded that the Feinn must be a race of people who inhabited these various countries of Lochlin, Britain, and Ireland. And, of course, he proceeded to identify them with the Picts — that enigmatic people who are at once the puzzle and the delight of the antiquarian, and who are represented in the annals as migrating from Lochlin to Erin, and thence repressively to Alban. So the Feinn were the Picts, who anteceded the Milesiaas or Scots in Ireland, and the Scots in Aiba. A writer some three years ago — Mr. David MacRitchie — " caps" the whole theory by identifying these Picts, or, as he calls them, Pechts, and the " Fane" with Finns and Lapps, as the *small* people who preceded the Celts in our islands, and who gave the Celts their idea of fairies, for these people lived in

hillocks and underground caves — in the barrows and " Picts" houses, whose remains still exist here and there in the country. Now the view which Dr. Skene maintained has no historic evidence in its favour ; besides, it errs grievously in misunderstanding the force of the word *feinn* and *fian*. A Fian meant originally simply a champion, warrior, or hunter ; a fian booth, for example, was a hunting-booth. The Feinn were the warriors or champion band. Consequently Feinn, or champions, might exist in any land — England, Scotland, or Lochlin. The oldest records speak of the Fianns of Scotland, and mean undoubtedty champions by the reference. Similarly, the term is used in Irish history and legend for champions, protagonists, and for brigands and pirates also. Dr. Skene himself seems to have abandoned his theory, for in his " Celtic Scotland," his latest and ripest work on the history of ancient Alba, he makes no mention of Fionn and his men at all. They have no place in Scottish history — so we inter from Dr. Skene's silence. And such is the fact, if MacPhersonic Fingallans are meant. As for Mr. MacRitchie's vagaries, it is sufficient to say that his theory of the origin of fairies does not account for the belief in these beings existing all the world over — outside districts where Finns or Lapps ever trod. Besides, the Feinn were not small men ; they were giants, and they are represented as often fighting fairy powers.

We have thus far two, if not three, theories of the origin of the Feinn. The Irish view maintains the historic reality of Fionn, but acknowledges that wild and incredible stories have accreted around him and his warriors ; the Scottish view accepts MacPherson, but, as modified by Dr. Slcene, it identifies the Feinn with the Picts ; and if Picts, why not Pechts, and then Finns and Lapps, and then fairies, according to Mr. MacRitchie. The theory which has been held by many Celtic scholars — especially in our day — is that the Feinn are a mythic people analogous to King Arthur and his knights, and to the similar heroic saga of other countries ; and this is the view which the present paper is intended to demonstrate.

Before, however, passing on, we must notice the extraordinary theory which has been within the last two years launched on the European world by that erratic, but undoubted genius, Professor Zimmer, of Greifswald. The turning-point of his theory — indeed the most of it — depends on his derivation of the name Fiann. He maintains that this was borrowed from the Norse *fjándi* (foe). The Irish of the ninth century borrowed the word and used it in a complimentary sense, meaning " the brave enemy," then " mercenary," and then " a warrior band." The Professor easily shows that the Irish term was used by the early writers merely to denote any " warrior band," but that after the twelfth century it came to be specialized, and to mean the bands of Fionn and Goll. He tries to show that the word has special reference to the Vikings and to the Dublin Danes ; but he fails in this, despite a great array of texts which are twisted in his favour. He finds that *Caitil Find* in 856 is slain at the head of the Gall-gaedhel, or mixed Irish and Norse, fighting against the Danes : he then concludes that here we have the original of Fionn who heads a warrior band of Fiann, or Gall-gaedhel, against Amlaf and his Danes. Now Fionn is represented as living in King Cormac's reign, in the third century ; yes, but there was a like famous Cormac at the end of the ninth century, whose wisdom and literary qualities are often ascribed to the earlier monarch. Hence it was an easy matter for popular fancy to put Fionn back six centuries ; indeed he is represented as also appearing in the Irish history itself three centuries later than the date usually assigned him, one time as contemporary with St. Molling, and at another time as incarnated in King Mongan. There are also, as the Professor shows, plenty traces of Norse influence in the Ossianic Saga ; not to mention the fact that the late ballads make Fionn and his men the protagonists against the Norsemen, there are some Norse superstitions in the older sagas, such as Fionn's wisdom-tooth, which must be compared to Fafni's heart, which gives Sigurd his supernatural knowledge. Further, names are also analyzed by the Professor : Lochlann is properly Loth-linn, and is identical with the island of Laland, whence the Danish vikings came. The name *Ossian*, or *Oisin*, is from Saxon sources, and is identified with *Oswine*, which is a good Anglo-Saxon name containing the prefix *ós*, gods, and *wine*, friend. Oscar similarly is referred to the Norse *Asgeirr*, gods' spear, *ás* being here again the same as the Saxon *ós*.

The Professor's theory is a very ingenious one, and no justice can be done to it in so condensed an epitome as the above. Its main weakness is the impossible derivation of Fiann from the Norse *fjándi*. How could a foreign name for enemy become a native term for hero on being borrowed ? The Norse called the Irish *fjándi*, doubtless ; but, were the Irish to borrow the word as a meaningless term applicable to themselves, it could only become synonymous with *Eireannach*, or " Irishman." The reference of *Ossian* and *Oscar* to originals like *Oswine* and *Asgeirr* has more to say for it , but there is one fatal, or almost fatal, objection to the derivation : the *o* and *a* of *Oswine* and *Asgeirr* are long, and would give *óisean* and ó*scar*. The restricting of *Lochlann* in its origin to the insignificant island of Laland is

absurd on the face of it. Its proper mediæval meaning is " Scandinavia," but it may be suspected that originally it meant Belgium and Holland, with Denmark ; for the word means, in Gaelic, " lake-land," which is thoroughly applicable to the Netherlands, or, as the Scotch called them, the " Lowlands Low."

Before proceeding, and in conjunction with Professor Zimmer's derivations, we may pause to ask if the names of the Ossianic Saga can throw any light on the origin of it. First the name *Fiann*, with its genitive *Feinne*, points, according to Gaelic philologic laws, to an original Celtic form like *veinna* or *veinda*, and a root *vei*. This root is well enough known ; it signifies " to hunt," and from it came the Latin *venari* (to hunt), the German *weidmann* (sportsman), and the Gaelic *fiadh* (deer), and *fiadhach* (hunting). The Celtic root seems to have been *veid*, and probably the original of *Fiann* was *veid-na*, signifying a " hunting company, hunters." This derivation suits the use of the word in mediæval Irish for " hunting ; " as, for instance, *fian-bhoth*, for " hunting-booth." Further, the Feinn are always represented as being great hunters ; indeed, they are represented in the legendary history as supporting themselves from *Beltane* to *Samhain* — from May till November — on the products of the chase, while during the winter half-year they were billeted on the inhabitants like a company of soldiers or militia. The passing of the word *Fiann*, meaning " hunting", or " open-air living," to mean " champion-ship" and " champion-band," is easy. The name *Fionn* is more difficult to deal with. Of course, from the fact that *fionn* means " white," people at once jump to the conclusion that the name Fionn merely means " white." Fionn was the " white" or " fairhaired man," according to this theory. Now it is true that animals are called merely by the colour ; Achilles's horse is *Xanthos*, or the " yellow." The legendary bull of Cualgne, around which revolves the Cuchulinn cycle, is called the *Donn Chualgne*, or the " Brown of Cualgne ;" but men are never named on this principle. Colour is a mere epithet ; it cannot be the man's name. Personal names consist of either two roots or of one root and a suffix ; it is true that the name might get reduced to the one root, but in Fionn's case this seems unlikely. So we may take it that *Fionn* does not mean " white." It is possible to refer it to a shorter form of the same root, as we have in *Fiann*, that is, *vei*, with a shorter form *vi* ; or rather *veid*, shorter *vid*. The form *vid-no-s* seems to be the original of the word, but this may well be referred to the root *vid* (to know) ; indeed, there is an old Irish verb, *finnaim*, which signifies " to know." This would give *Fionn*, as a name, the force of the " wise" or " learned one." And this admirably suits Fionn's character, for he is a seer, an utterer of proverbs, and a poet. He knows the future if only he bruises his thumb in his mouth ; that is one of his many accomplishments. There are other warriors in the Feinn stronger than he, but none so wise. The name *Ossian*, the older *Oisin*, exists in Irish as a common noun, meaning a " fawn" or " young deer". This is no doubt the meaning of the name *Ossian* ; the derivation is supported by, or else has given rise to, the common story that Ossian's mother was a deer — a woman bespelled into a deer. The tale will be found at large in *Leabhar na Feinne*. It was a common practice to call men by animal names. Many instances occur in Gaelic legend and history. Dog names are exceedingly common ; for example, the great champion of the Gael is called *Cuchulinn*, the " hound of Culainn," and a common mediæval name was *Math-ghamhainn* (MacMahon), whence *Matheson*, which signifies " bear's son." *Cattan* means the " little cat", just as *Ossian* means the " little deer." This again connects the Feinn with hunting, and it may well be that Ossian's name may be a survival from the time of animal worship. The name of *Oscar* appears also as a common noun in the sense of an " ignorant person," a " traveller," which does not present any relevancy to Oscar's character. An allied word is *coscar* (victory), and this would seem to be the proper root idea. We might analyze the name as *od* (out) and *scar* (cut), giving the idea of cutting and fighting — a slayer or warrior. The name *Conan* signifies the " little dog ;" he was the Thersites, or clown, of the Feinn, and the name admirably suits his character. The name *Diarmid* has been explained as meaning *Dia-airmit*, " god-reverencing" or " pious," like the name *Divitiacus* of Cæsar. Goll's name is explained by the obsolete adjective *goll* (blind) ; he is Fionn's opponent, the " dark one" of Fenian history, and hence his name. It is also interesting to note that he is named after his mother — a fact which points to matriarchy and Goll's representing a lower scale of civilization to the Feinn. Caoilte is the great racer of the Feinn, and his name evidently arises from *caol* (thin), and hence " active." It is not necessary or important to pursue the analysis of the names further. We find that the names suit the character given to the Feinn in the legends as a great band of hunters and warriors.

Let us now consider what is told us about the Feinn by the Irish historians, and by Gaelic literature generally. According to Keating, an Irish historian of the seventeenth century, who worked with much older material, the Feinn formed the militia, pretorian guard, or standing army of Irish kings in the second and third centuries. There were three battalions of them on a peace footing, and seven if there was war. They had many privileges, we are told, of which some may be mentioned. During the winter

half-year, as was said, they were billeted on the people ; during the summer half, they had to maintain themselves by the chase. No man could settle his daughter in marriage without first asking if any of the Feinn wanted her as wife. But one of the Feinn must not refuse a woman because she had no dowry, nor must he offer any violence to a woman. He must not refuse to fight nine men of any other nation that might set on him. His fighting and running qualities were put to severe tests, all of which are recounted minutely.

The oldest MS. of consecutive Irish Literature is *Lebor na h-uidre* — the Book of the Dun Cow — written about 1100. In it are some significant references to Fionn, which show that he was an important character then in popular estimation, though Cuchulinn and the Ulster heroes fill the place in it which is held by Fionn in the Scotch ballads. Practically the same views were then held by annalist and peasant respectively about Fionn as have been held up to our own time. The one made him a historic, the other, a legendary character. The story of his birth and upbringing is told in *Lebor na h-uidre* as a sober, historical fact ; and yet we shall see that it is to all intents and purposes the same as the wild legend collected in the islands at the beginning of this century by one MacPherson, and to be found in *Leabhar na Feinne*. It is simply, as we shall see, a Gaelic setting of the old tale of Perseus and his grandfather Akrisios, or of Romulus and Remus and their wicked uncle. The story may be condensed as follows : — Nuada, son of Achi, son of Dathi, son of Brocan, son of Fintan, of the Dathi folk in Brega, a famous Druid, received, from Cathair Mor in the second century, the land of Almu, or Almhainn in Leinster — now Allen. Nuada's son Tadg, or Teague, had a beauty of a daughter called Murni Muncaem, " Fair-necked Murni," and suitors of high degree from far and near sought her. Cumhall, son of Trenmor, king-warrior of Ireland, was then in the service of Conn of the hundred fights, high King of Ireland, and he sought the maiden's hand ; but Nuada refused, knowing prophetically, as a Druid, that he must vacate Almhainn if his daughter marry Cumhall. But Cumhall took the girl off by force. Tadg complained to Conn, who commanded Cumhall to restore the girl, which he refused to do. Conn then sent his forces against Cumhall. The latter lost the battle, being slain by Aed, son of Morna, who afterwards was called Goll from being then blinded of an eye in the fight. Her father cast Murni out, and would have burned her ; but she fled to Conn, who handed her over to Cumhall's sister and her husband Fiacal. Here she was delivered of a son, who was named Demni. The boy was well brought up, and on reaching manhood called his grandfather to account for the murder of his father, and received from him his property of Almhainn as *éirig*, or ransom ; and henceforward Dernni, or Finn that was to be, lived at Almhainn, having compromised with Goll on receiving an *éirig* , and they lived in peace, until a quarrel over a pig at Temhair-Luachra brought them to enmity again. As Mr. Nutt observes : — " Tadg's dispossession at the hands of his grandson Finn, may be compared to Akrisios's death at the hands of his grandson Perseus, Amulius's death at the hands of Romulus and Remus, and Astyages's banishment by Cyrus. In all these cases, a father ill-treats his daughter, and the son avenges his mother's wrongs." The *Lebor na h-uidre* account, however, leaves out a most important part of the story — the youthful exploits and education of the hero. Probably this was too mythical, or, as Keating says of these Feinn stories, " too incredible" to relate. Fortunately a fifteenth century MS. fills this blank, and fills it with material which has all the appearance of antiquity stamped upon it. The story is, that there was strife for the chieftainship of the Feinn between Cumhall and Uirgrenn, and that the Battle of Cnucha was fought, wherein Cumhall fell at the hands of Aed, son of Morna, leaving his wife Murni to shift for herself pursued by these foes. Murni was delivered of a son Demni, whom two Druidesses took to the forest of Sliabh Bladhma, and nursed in secrecy. They reared him till he was fit for hunting, and his first exploit was to kill a duck and her brood. He was thereafter taken by a plunderer named Fiacail, but restored to the two heroines, or Feinnesses, as the Druidesses are called. He went forth one day and saw youths hurling ; he won against a fourth, and then against a third, and finally against all of them. " What is thy name?" said they. " Demni," replied he. They are advised to kill him, and profess inability, but they tell his name. When asked as to his appearance, they describe him as " fair," and hence he got the name of Finn. The next day he came to play, they attacked him ; but he prostrated seven of them. He returned another time, and found them swimming ; being challenged, he drowned nine of them " Who drowned the youths ?" inquired all. " Finn," was answered, and from this the name of Finn clung to him. He went forth on one occasion with the two heroines, and perceived a herd of fleet deer ; he ran and caught two bucks of them. After this he went away from the heroines alone, and halted not till he took hire in military service with the King of Bentraighe. The latter suspected him of being the son of Cumhall from his prowess as a hunter. He left Bentraighe and took service with the King of Kerry, who had married Cumhall's widow. The king knew him by his skill at chess, and he had to leave for fear of being slain trusting to the king's hospitality. He then came to the house of Lochan, a chief smith, and he fell in love with his daughter Cruithne, and obtained her at the smith's hand. The smith made two

spears for him, and he went away ; he was warned not to go on the passage on which the boar called Beo was usually to be seen, but he happened to go on the pass where the boar was and killed it, and brought its head to the smith as a dowry for his daughter. He then went into Connaught to look for his uncle Crimall, and on the way he heard the wail of a solitary woman, and she wept for her son killed by a big, ugly hero. Finn went in pursuit of the hero, and killed him. The person who fell here was Liath Luchra, he who first wounded Cumhall in the Battle of Cnucha. He then went to Connaught and found Crimall in a desert, and wandered about afterwards ; and so as to be able to cope with his father's slayers, he repaired to learn wisdom with Finn Eges, who was for seven years watching the salmon of Linn Feic, for it had been prophesied that " Finn" would eat the salmon of Fee, and that he would be ignorant of nothing afterward. And Finn Eges caught the salmon, and ordered Finn to roast it, and not to eat of the salmon. But Finn burned his thumb in touching the salmon while cooking it, and put it into his mouth, and Finn Eges knew him for the real Finn. And knowledge was given to Finn ; so that when he put his thumb into his mouth, whatever he had been ignorant of used to be revealed to him. He learned there divination and poetry, and a specimen poem of his is handed down detailing the beauties of summer in a way that Duncan Ban could scarcely surpass for colour and descriptive power. Thereafter he went to Cethern MacFintaine to learn further wisdom, and Finn-egis was his name then. He helped his tutor in the courtship of the fairy of Brig Eile, whose abode was open every Hallowe'en and whose lover Finn slew, as the book of Leinster, a MS. of the twelfth century, says : —

" Aed mac Fidaig fell by the hand of Finn,
From the spear of Fiacail mac Conchenn,
For the love he gave to the maiden of Bri Eile."

Then Fiacail rushes to Inver Colpa to the Feinn, followed and overtaken by Finn, who has to undertake the Fenian watch for the night. He heard a cry, and ran to see about it, when he found three fairy maidens weeping at a barrow, and one of them he seized and rushed off with her brooch. She prayed him to give it back — and here, as the well-known Swan maid incident of fairy-lore comes in, our story suddenly breaks off, the MS. being imperfect.

The above eleventh and fifteenth century versions of the story of the birth and youthful exploits of Finn, might pass for history ; but the genuine folk tale, several versions of which were taken down in the Highlands, cannot be mistaken for any other than a genuine, heroic saga — almost a fairy-tale. The best version was, as already said, collected by one MacPherson in Mull, about 1800, and printed in *Leabhar na Feinne*, at page 37. It is thus : — In the time we speak of, Ireland was divided into five provinces, with a king over each, and Finn's father was the ablest of these. He was at feud with another king, and finally lost all his men ; there was a prophecy that this would happen, but that his son would win all back again. Cumhall, Finn's father, was proceeding to his last battle, when he passed a smith's house. The smith was not in, but his pretty daughter was, and she and the king became familiar. The smith, on learning what happened, cursed the king, and hoped he would not return safe from the fight. Smiths and Druids were uncanny in those days, and his wish was gratified : Cumhall fell in the battle. The new king heard of the smith's daughter, and ordered her to be imprisoned. If she gave birth to a daughter, the daughter might be allowed to live ; but a son must be put to death, for he would be the true heir to the throne. She brought a daughter into the world, and all his watch rushed to tell the king ; but, before the night was through, she also brought a boy into the world. The nurse Luas Lurgann rolled the child up in the end of her gown, and rushed off to the woods, where she brought him up in secret. She exercised him in all kinds of feats — chess, *cleasa* (feats) of all kinds, and arms. When she thought him sufficiently trained, and when she tried him in all things, and he failed not, she told him who he was and what he was expected to do. She immediately thereafter took him to the town to show his mettle. He bruised his way through the crowd, and went to play hurley (shinty) with the boys of the king's town. He beat everybody and then began to maul and kill right and left. The king heard of it, and came out : " Co e an gille *Fionn* ud," said he, " tha mortadh nan daoine ?" (Who is that *Fair* lad killing the people ?) The nurse clapped her hands for joy, and said : " Long hast thou wanted to be baptized, but today thou art indeed baptized, and thou art *Fionn*, son of Cumhall, son of Trenmor, and rightful king of Erin." With this she rushed away and the boy with her — some versions saying she carried him on her shoulders. They were hotly pursued. Luas Lurgann's swiftness of old was failing her : Fionn took her on his shoulders and carried her. He rushed through the woods ; and when he halted in safety, he found he had only the two legs of his nurse left over his shoulders : the rest of her body had been torn away in the wood. After some wanderings, he came to Essroy, famous for its mythic salmon — the salmon of all knowledge. Here

he found a fisher fishing, and he asked for a fish to eat. The fisher never yet had caught fish, though he had fished for years ; for — as other forms of the story have it — prophecy said that no fish would be got on it till Fionn came. The fisher cast his line in Fionn's name, and caught a large salmon. It was too large for Fionn, he said, and he put him off each time. Fionn got the rod himself, and landed a bigger salmon still. The fisher, who had recognized who he was, allowed him to have a small fish of his lot ; but he must roast it with fire on one side the stream and the fish on the other, nor must he use any wood in the process. He set fire to some saw-dust, and the wind blew a wave of fire over to the fish, and burned a spot on it. Fionn put his thumb on the black spot ; it burned him, and he put the thumb in his mouth. Then he knew everything — the fisher was Black Forca who slew his father. He seized Forca's sword, and killed him. In this way he got his father's sword and also the dog Bran, both of which the fisher had, as some versions of the story have it. And, further, by bruising his thumb in his mouth, the past and the present were always revealed to him. He then went in secret to his grandfather's house — the smith's house. Thereafter he appeared in the king's court. The king gave wrong judgment, and if one of royal blood did this, Temra the palace (?) fell ; and if one of royal blood gave the right judgment, it rose again. Temra fell ; but on Fionn giving the judgment rightly, Temra was restored again. He was at once recognized and again pursued. The king then hunted every place in Erin for him, and at last found him as steward with the king of Colla. Colla and Fionn rose together against Cairbre, and deposed him ; and so Fionn recovered his patrimony and kingdom.

Fionn's birth and upbringing were both extraordinary. He lived a life of warlike glory, and died mysteriously slain on the banks of the Boyne by the sons of his father's bitterest foes. Here he had retired in his old age, and was slain by fishing shears. But versions differ ; some say a fisherman slew him to gain renown as Finn's slayer ; the Scotch popular tales are also somewhat misty on the subject. They say that Fionn was killed by a treacherous person who invited him to jump on to an island, in the way he did. Fionn did the jump. Then the man jumped the same backwards, and challenged Fionn to do so. Fionn tried it, but fell up to his head in the water. The man, finding him thus immersed, and with his back to him, cut off his head.

Before proceeding further, I intend to draw attention to this life-history of Finn himself, for the main outlines of the story will soon be recognized as common to the hero tales of Europe and Asia. Classical scholars will at once recognise the parallelism of Finn's story with the Perseus myth, further with the story of Theseus, son of King Aegeus, in a flying visit to Troezen ; the myth of Heracles, son of Zeus ; and also to the story of Romulus and Remus. The fact is that the birth, upbringing, and the death of the heroes of these mythic sagas, from India to Ireland, can all be put under a few common heads. They have been analysed and tabulated for the Aryan races by Von Hahn, who examined 14 stories altogether ; 7 from Greek mythology, viz., those of Perseus, Heracles, Oedipus, Amphion and Zethos, Pelias and Neleus, Leucastus and Parrhasius, and Theseus ; one belonging to Roman myth— the Romulus and Remus legend ; two to Teutonic mythology — the Wittich-Siegfried and Wolfdietrich sagas ; two to Persian myth — Cyrus and Key Chosrew ; and two in Hindoo mythology. Mr. Alfred Nutt, who has extended the formula to embrace the Celtic nations, calls it the " Aryan Expulsion and Return Formula," and to Von Hahn's 16 headings, he adds two to suit the exigencies of Celtic saga. Mr. Nutt's table is as follows : —

1. Hero, born out of wedlock, or posthumously or supernaturally.
2. Mother, princess residing in her own country. [Cf. *beena* marriage.]
3. Father, god or hero from afar.
4. Tokens and warnings of hero's future greatness.
5. He is in consequence driven forth from home.
6. Is suckled by wild beasts.
7. Is brought up by a childless (shepherd) couple, or by a widow.
8. Is of passionate and violent disposition.
9. Seeks service in foreign lands.

9a. He attacks and slays monsters.
9b. He acquires supernatural knowledge through eating a magic fish.

10. He returns to his own country, retreats, and again returns.
11. Overcomes his enemies, frees his mother, and seats himself on the throne.
12. He founds cities.
13. The manner of his death is extraordinary.
14. He is accused of incest ; he dies young.
15. He injures an inferior, who takes revenge upon him or his children.

16. He slays his younger brother.

We give the incidents of the Fionn cycle in this tabulated form, placing side by side the Fionn of history and the Fionn of popular fancy : —

History.	*Tradition.*
1. In marriage (?), posthumously.	Out of marriage, posthumously, and one of twins.
2. Muirne, daughter of Chief Druid.	Muirne (?), daughter of a smith. Lives with her father.
3. Cumal, leader of Militia.	King Cumhal : is passing house.
4. Tadg, Druid, knows he will be ejected by hero.	Greatness foretold by a prophet, and known to be rightful heir to throne.
5. Driven to an aunt's house.	Into the wilderness.
	Nourished by fat and marrow in a hole made in a tree.
6. By his mother or aunt (?)	By his nurse, Luas Lurgann.
	Drowns the schoolboys or overcomes them at shinty, or both. Causes his nurse's death.
	Serves as house steward.
	[Scholar to Fionn, the Druid.]
9A.	Slays the Boar Beo ; kills lake monsters (*biasta*).
9B.	Eats of the magic Salmon.
10.	Wanders backwards and forwards over Erin.
11. Forces Tadg to abandon Almu.	Kills father's murderer.
	Overcomes Cairbre and gets throne.
	Gets headship of Feinn.
12.	Builds forts, *dunes*, &c. ; founds a great kingdom.
13. Slain by sons of Uirgrenn, somehow by fishing spears.	Dies, mysteriously slain in jumping lake.
14.	
15.	
16	

Finn is not the only Celtic hero that agrees with this formula. Cuchulinn, in the earlier Gaelic cycle, has similar strange tales told of his birth, while in the Welsh Arthurian cycle the Peredur story is the nearest parallel, but the birth and youth stories of Arthur, Merlin, and Taliessin, partake largely of the same mythic character. In face of such a wide-spread consensus of mythic story, it would be folly to claim, even for the 11th century version of Fionn's birth and rearing, the shadow of a foundation in fact. I need not here concern myself with the origin of the formula — the cause of the incidents and the growth of such a myth. It is a question that belongs to Indo-European mythology, or rather to world-wide mythology, for the Semites are not without traces of a similar formula. The modern method is to account for these incidents as results of primitive religion, ritual, or custom. The first two headings of the table can easily be explained as folklore survivals of old marriage customs, more especially reminding us of the *beena* marriage system, where the young lady gets her tent and cattle, and places a spear outside stuck in the ground. The warrior that takes up the spear and defends her is her husband, but only so long as he can defend and keep her. Similarly the expulsion or exposure of the child by the wicked uncle or relative may be are reminiscence of the struggle between patriarchy and matriarchy — when the rule that a man's brother or sister's son is his heir, as among the Picts, and not his own son, was giving way to the rule that the son should succeed the father. These speculations, however, do not much help, nor at all hinder, our proof of the mythic character of Fionn's life-history.

We have shown that the personal history of Fionn is mythical ; but, it may be asked, what about the Feinn? Fionn's story may be a myth, but was there no such warrior band as the Feinn ? History, however, has little or nothing to say about them. Tigernach, the oldest of Irish annalists, who lived in the 11th century, only mentions Fionn's death and the names of his murderers, under the date 283 ; and the Four Masters in the 17th century repeat Tigernach's entry with two verses of poetry in addition. But the Masters further mention the Feinn as taking part in the Battle of Gabhra, where their side was defeated in 284, and next year Caelte, of the Feinn, slew the High King of Ireland. That is all that these honest annalists tell about the Feinn. Of course, other more or less historic works make copious reference to them, notably Keating, from whom I have already quoted the privileges and duties of the

Feinn ; but little of historical fact can be gleaned from these writers. The fact is that the historic account of the Feinn, like that of Fionn, is poor and shadowy. Only three historic facts, such as they are, stand out of the mass of wild story. These are : — (i) The Feinn were an Irish militia (!) in the third century ; (2) they were overthrown in the Battle of Gabhra, where also King Cairbre, a real personage without a doubt, fell in 284 ; (3) Fionn himself married Cormac's daughter, and Caelte killed Cairbre's successor, Fothaidh Airgtheach, in 285. Evidently some difficulty was found in fitting the heroes of the mythic tales into history, a difficulty which also exists in Arthur's case. He, like Fionn, is not a king in history — there is no place for him — but he is a " dux belli" or " militia" leader. Yet the popular imagination is distinctly in favour of the idea that these heroes were also kings.

To show how the Feinn may have been intruded into the serious history of Ireland in the 3rd century, we have only to look at the Scotch Fenian ballads and the later Irish ones. In the pseudo-history to which we are treated there, Finn's great opponents are the Norsemen. The most famous Fenian ballad, outside that of Gabhra, is the ballad of Manus, King of Lochlin. This ballad is almost epic in its fullest form ; it details the coming of Manus, the description of both armies, the terms offered by Finn, and the battle in which Finn won. But who was Manus ? Why, he was none other than the famous Magnus Barelegs, King of Norway, who fell in an Irish raid in Ulster in 1103! Besides, the Norsemen did not commence their invasions of Britain and Ireland till the end of the 8th century (795), five hundred years after the histories say that Finn was dead. Another favourite Scotch ballad is that of " Teanntachd mhor na Feinne," " The Great Distress of the Feinn," where Earragon, King of Lochlin, invades Ireland on account of the elopement of his wife ; but unlike the fate of Menelaus and his Greeks in the *Iliad*, Earragon is defeated and slain. Expeditions to Lochlin are common, and the oft-repeated story of the feast of peace, to which the one king invited the other with his chiefs, and when the guests had each a host beside him ready, at a given signal, to stab, but anticipated by the guest king and his chiefs, who slay each their man and escape — this also is told of the Feinn as happening in Beirghe or Bergen, the capital of Lochlin. Now there is no possibility of connecting Finn and his men with Norse wars that lasted from the 9th till the 13th century, but we can easily understand how a popular mythic hero might appear in the folk literature of a later era as the protagonist against the invaders. Chiefs and even kings, such kings as there were, are too local in time and place to become the heroes of any general folk literature in regard to the Norsemen, and so the mythic Finn fills the place of many a brave leader that fought against the Lochlinners in divers places and divers times. Just so St. Columba gathers round him the praise due to many other nameless pioneer saints that penetrated the wilds of northern Alba.

But the pseudo-historic is only one aspect of Fionn and his warrior Feinn. What has puzzled and annoyed the Irish historians and critics are the " wild stories," as Eugene O'Curry called them — that is to say, the folk-tale or *märchen* literature that is gathered about the Feinn. " Incredible" and " wild" are the epithets applied to them, and properly so. But these are exactly the stories which are best remembered by the people. Enchantments, for instance, form a prominent part in the Fenian stories. Let us take one example, shortly rendered. It is the chase of Slieve Culinn. Two fairy sisters love Finn ; but one declares she will not marry a grey-haired man. So the other determines to make Finn's hair grey. This is how she did it. She got a small lake made on Slieve Culinn, and endowed its waters with the power of making any that bathed in it grey and old. Now, Finn was one day walking near his home at Almhainn, the rest being away, when a doe sprung from a thicket and made off — it was a beauty ; and Finn's dogs gave chase ; so did Finn. When he came to Slieve Culinn, the doe made a sudden turn and disappeared ; he marvelled much, but as he went to whistle back his hounds, he heard a cry, and there, beside a little lake, was a maiden of ravishing beauty, crying bitterly. Finn asked the cause of her great sorrow, and, midst sobs, she told that her golden ring, of priceless worth, had fallen into the lake, and rolled out of sight. Finn plunged into the lake, swam around it thrice, and got the ring, which he gave the maiden as he was coming out of the water, when, lo ! she disappeared into the lake before his eyes. As soon as he took his feet out of the water, he lost all his strength, and fell on the bank a withered, old grey-headed man. The Feinn, meanwhile, assembled, and missed their chief. A search was made. Ossian fell upon a poor old man, by the side of the little lake, and asked him for Finn, but it was not till Caelte came up that Finn whispered into his ear the horrid truth. Then the Feinn raised three shouts of lamentation and anger that frightened foxes and badgers into their dens all around ; and then they set out to the howe of the fairy, where they began digging down. They found her, and forced her to give Finn a drink from the fairy healing-cup. When he drank, he was restored to his old self again, except that his former golden hair was now evermore grey. Such is the chase of Slieve Culinn.

Then there is the “ Chase of Slieve Fuad,” where all the Feinn are enticed on a hunt into the Giant’s power ; the “ Palace of the Rowan Trees,” where the King of Lochlin’s son held most of the Feinn enchanted ; the “ Pursuit of the Gilla Dacker,” where some of the Feinn are carried into the Celtic Hades and rescued ; and the enchantment by “ Blar Buy,” where Finn and several of his men were mutilated, then rescued by Diarmat and healed by the famous healing-cup of the Feinn, there and then acquired. Then, again, Finn or one of his men becomes the hero of a pure fairy or folk tale, as in the story of the “ Bentgrey Lad,” who works wonders for Finn ; the “ Gruagach Ban, son of Ireland’s King,” where Finn helps the Gruagach to a fairy wife ; and some others, In this group must also be placed Finn’s helping of distressed people— the story where he goes off with supernaturally gifted servants in a supernatural bark, and saves the newly born child of an Island Queen from the monster who used to steal the children at their birth ; further, the story of the maiden who fled to Finn and his Feinn from Daire Borb, who pursues her on his steed over sea, and kills many of the Feinn, and kills also the girl. This is Macpherson’s Faine Soluis, one of his prettiest and honestest episodes in the Fingalian epics. Closely connected with enchantments and fairies, come the Fenian fights with monsters, and with lake dragons. The best known story of this kind is the “ Muileartach,” King Manus’ nurse, a grey old carlin that came over sea to destroy the Feinn, and now recognised as a personification of the Atlantic sea. In Ireland a very popular class of legends is that relating to the killing of dragons and lake monsters. There is scarcely a lake in Ireland but there is some legend there about a dragon, or *biast*, which Fionn, or one of his heroes, or one of the Saints, destroyed. Fionn had some tough fights with these terrible animals. Ard nan Cath, the *peist* of Loch Cuan, had swallowed many of the Feinn, arms and all, and latterly Fionn himself, but he cut his way out, and set free those that were already swallowed by cutting a door on each side. The monster’s head was as large as a hill, and his teeth larger than trees. In fact Lucian’s whale in his very “ True Tale” scarcely surpassed the monster that met the Feinn, Finn’s grandson, Oscar, was likewise often engaged in the same work. On one occasion, as an old Lewisman used to tell, Oscar was fighting with a huge *biast* that came open-mouthed towards him, He jumped down its throat at once, and cut his way out, and thus killed the brute. We have read of Odin being thus swallowed by the wolf, but have never heard of his appearing afterwards.

We must pass over the numerous foreign invaders who came singly — like “ Conn Mac an Deirg” — or with large armies like Manus, and especially Daire Donn — Dun Darius — King of the world, who was routed with all his host at Ventry Harbour. The internal economy and discords of the Feinn must claim our attention for a little. The blood-feud between Clan Morna and Finn, owing to the slaying of Finn’s father by Goll Macmorna, was scarcely ever settled, though apparent peace reigned ; and in the final crash, the sons of Morna aided Cairbre against the Feinn, and crushed them. But there were other interesting escapades of a more or less serious character. The high moral feeling that existed among the Feinn has been done ample justice to by James Macpherson, and there are many documents — poems and actions — which prove the high chivalrous feeling towards women and conquered foes, the generous hospitality, and the other noble virtues. But there is also another side to the shield ; not only have we got the drolleries of Conan the Bald, and the burlesque accounts of Fionn and his father-in-law, Garbh Mac Starn, which fill the part of the clown in the great Fenian drama, but lovely woman plays her part also — a havoc part it is, too, like the rôle of Helen of Troy in ancient Greek mythic history. The fact is this— The Feinn are a popular literary reflex of the people’s aspirations after the noble and good, and, at the same time, they are made, in a lighter vein, a human enough reflex of the foibles and frailties of Celtic civilization, at least in mediæval times. The faithlessness of Fionn’s wife, however, is not an accretion to the Fenian myth during the middle ages ; it is an ingrained part of the old myth, for we have it in the Arthurian legend as well, twice repeated in Lancelot’s and in Tristram’s stories. Grainne, Finn’s wife, eloped with Diarmat — the ballads and tales say it was so supernaturally fated, and Diarmat had a love mark on his face that no woman could resist ; evidently in moral extenuation of the deed. Finn pursued the couple, and to all appearance forgave Diarmat, but he got him wounded by a magic boar on Ben Gulbin, and refused to heal him though he could, so that Diarmat died. This is a tragic story. There are, however, lighter scenes and incidents than this, which may be, and, let us hope, are of mediæval manufacture. A poem like the “ Lady of the Mantle” is a humorous picture of mediæval rather than Fenian morality.

Another popular view of Finn and his heroes is that which connects them with the topography of the country. In this case, and, indeed, very often otherwise, Finn is looked upon as a giant, and his heroes a race of giants, that can stride valleys and straits, and cross to Erin on stepping stones, which they themselves cast into the sea. The Kinloss charter in the Moray chartulary, given in the early part of the

13th century, speaks of Tuber na Fein, which is glossed by " feyne, of the grett or kempis men callit ffenis, is ane well." This, which is only a hundred years later than the oldest Irish MS. account of Fionn, is exactly the present day popular notion of the Feinn. They were giants. About 1500, Hector Boece can thus write of Fyn Mak Coul : — " Virum uti ferunt immani statura, septenum enim cubitorum hominem fuisse narrant, Scotici sanguinis omnibusque insolita corporis mole formidolosum." Thus, much to the disgust of Keating, the Irish historian, he makes him a giant some seven cubits high, makes him also a Scotchman, and fixes his date about 450 A.D. ; and he further tells us that Fyn was renowned in stories, such as were told of King Arthur. Bishop Leslie, in the same century, says that Fynmacoul was a " man of huge size, and sprung, as it were, from a race of giants." Gavin Douglas, about 1500, also speaks of

" Greit Gow Macmorne and Fyn Mac Cowl, and how
They suld be goddis in Ireland as they say."

Dunbar, the contemporary poet, says : —

" My fore grandsyr, hecht Fyn Mac Cowl,
That dang the deil and gart him yowll,
The skyis rained when he wald scoull,
He trublit all the air :

He got my grandsyr Gog Mag-og ;
Ay when he dansit the warld wald schog ;
Five thousand ellis gaed till his frog,
Of Hieland pladdis, and mair."

The world shook when Fionn danced ! Martin, in his " Western Isles," calls him a " giganticman." And in Ireland also, as in Scotland, Fionn and his heroes are among the people considered to be giants, " the great joiant Fann Mac Cuil," as Kennedy calls him, after the style of the peasantry who relate tales of Fionn. Mr. Good, a priest at Limerick in 1566, speaks of the popular " giants Fion Mac Hoyle, and Oshin (read Osgur) Mac Oshin." Standish O'Grady, in his lately published " History of Ireland," places the Fianna back in the dawn of Irish history — gigantic figures in the dusky air. " Ireland is their playground. They set up their goals in the north and south in Titanic hurling matches, they drive their balls through the length and breadth of it, storming through the provinces." Macpherson found the ballads and stories full of this, and, as usual, he stigmatises them as Irish and middle-age. He quotes as Irish this verse : —

" A chos air *Cromleach*, druim-ard,
Chos eile air Crom-meal dubh,
Thogfa *Fion* le lamh mhoir
An d' uisge o *Lubhair* na sruth."

With one foot on lofty Cromlech, and the other on black Crom-meal, Fionn could take up the water in his hand from the river Lubar ! Yet the hills can still be pointed out in Macpherson's native Badenoch where Fionn did this ; but Macpherson, as usual, gives them his own poetic names. Carn Dearg and Scorr Gaoithe, at the top of Glen-Feshie, are the hills, and the *Fionntag*, a tributary of the Feshie, is the poetic " Lubhar." He has therefore to reduce the Fionn of the popular tales and ballads, to proper epic dimensions — to divorce him, as he says himself, from the " giants, enchanted castles, dwarfs, palfreys, witches, and magicians," which he thinks were imposed on the Fionn epic in the fifteenth century, and continued still to be the popular idea of Fionn and his heroes.

The popular imagination accounts for this tallness in a rationalistic manner worthy of any ephemerist historian. In Campbell's " Popular Tales," this is how the Een was set up. An old King of Erin, hard pressed by the Lochlinners, consults his seneschal as to the best course to pursue. The latter advises him to marry 100 of the tallest men in the kingdom to the same number of the tallest women ; then again to intermarry 100 of each sex of the tallest of their descendants, and so on to the third generation. This would give him a gigantic race able to cope with any foe. The thing was done. And in the third generation a gigantic race was the result. Their captain and king was Cumal, and he defeated the Lochlinners and forced them to terms of peace.

Another phase of the popular aspect of Fionn is the attribution to him of many crisp sayings and proverbs, for Fionn is both wise and brave, a warrior, but also, and most especially, a seer and a philosopher. In fact, as I suggested, the name Fionn may mean the " knowing one." Some of these Fenian proverbs and sayings may be quoted : —

Cha do dhirich Fionn bruthach riamh, 's cha d'fhag e bruthach gun direadh. (Fionn never climbed a brae, nor ever left one unclimbed— that is, he went slantwise up the brae).

Cha do bhrist Fionn riamh barr-iall a bhroige (Fionn never broke the point of his brogue thong). Strong as he was, he was never in such a hurry as to use his strength to ill purpose.

Cho fada 'sa' cheann 's bha Fionn 'sna casan (As long-headed as Fionn was long-legged.)

Cha tug Fionn riamh blar gun chumha. (Fionn never fought battle without offering terms).

Gaoth troimh tholl, gaoth bharr tonn, 's gaoth lom an aiteimh, na tri gaoithean b' fhuaire dh' fhairich Fionn riamh. (Wind through hole, wind from wave-tops, and the bare wind of thaw, these are the three coldest winds Fionn ever felt.).

Ceathrar da 'n tug Fionn fuath —
cu truagh agus each mall,
tighearna tire gan bhi glic,
is bean fir nach bearadh clann—

(Four that Fionn hated — a mangy dog, a slow horse,
a witless laird, and a bairnless wife).

Fionn's choice of a dog was thus : —

Miann mhic Cumhaill air a chu —
An t-alt luthaidh bhi fada o'n cheann,
Meadhon leathann, leabhar chliabh,
Uileann fhiar ag-us speir cham.

Earball mu'n speir, speir mar chorran,
Cluas mar dhuilleig, suil mar airneig,
Uchd mar ghearran, gnos mar chuaille,
Sud mar thaghadh Fionn na Feinne cuilean cuain.

Fionn is the acme of Gaelic hospitality, and there are several proverbs bearing on this. Fionn' s house is thus described : — Tigh farsaing fial, a chomhla cha do dhruideadh riamh— The door of his wide hospitable house was never shut. Again : — Tha dorus Fhinn do'n anrach fial — To the wanderer his door is never shut. Fionn never deserted a friend : Cha do threig Fionn riamh caraid a laimhe deise. Yet Fionn's sword (Mac-an-luinn) was so keen that it cut through all it met.

Proverbs and sayings about the Feinn ascribe to them the highest virtues of the race. " Cothrom na Feinne" is the expression for " Fairplay." Their hardihood is remembered by their three bed-stuffs — fresh tree-tops, moss, and fresh rushes (Barr gheal chrann, coinneach is ur luachair).

The most famous of these expressions is that about Ossian, " Mar Oisin an deigh nam Fiann" — Ossian after the Feinn — an expression which first appears in Gaelic literature in the Fernaig MS. of two hundred years ago. The mediæval ballads and literature represent Ossian as surviving to St. Patrick's time, two hundred years later than the rest of his race. The Saint and he have royal battles as to whether the Feinn are in heaven or not ; and Ossian wont believe that any power, divine or other, could hold the Feinn in chains or bonds. All this is related in spirited ballads that are extant. The bringing together of Ossian and Patrick over a gulf of two hundred years was done simply enough, and the fact was easily explained. Ossian was carried away by the fairy queen, and dwelt with her for two hundred years. He returned, a great giant, still youthful, on a white steed, from which he was cautioned not to dismount, if he wished to return again to Tir-nan-og. He found everything changed ; instead of the old temples of the gods, now there were Christian churches. And the Feinn were only a

memory. He saw some puny men raising a heavy block of stone. They could not manage it : so he put his hand to it and lifted it up on its side ; but in so doing he slipped off his horse, and fell to earth a withered and blind old man. The steed at once rushed off. Ossian was then brought to St. Patrick, with whom he lived for the rest of his life.

The Feinn are, however, not dead, but sleeping ; they sleep underneath one of the great green knolls somewhere in the Highlands — they say, under Tom-na-hùrich, at Inverness, or Craig How. They will awake one day and come forth to restore the Gael to all his pristine power and glory. It is said that some paltry fellow once obtained admission to the underground hall where they recline. He had been asked to blow three whistles on an instrument he got. He blew the first whistle, and the sleeping forms of men and dogs moved to life ; he blew the second, and the warriors raised themselves on their elbows and looked at him ; but his heart failed him for a third blast — so great and dreadful did the men seem. So he threw away the whistle and ran, while the words of their cursing rang in his ears — " Mile mollachd, is miosa-dh' fhag na fhuair." " A thousand curses on thee that leftest worse than thou foundest."

We come now to the conclusion of the whole matter. We have found that the Feinn history is nothing but heroic sagas, the leading features of which are reproduced among other Aryan nations, and we have found, moreover, that the most popular portions are purely fairy or nursery tales — pure *märchen*, to employ the German word. Was there really a *historical* personage called Fionn ? In his case, we may emphatically say — what cannot always be said of these heroic figures — that there was no Fionn, at least, little or no Fionn. The histories, we saw, reject him and his band. His connection with King Cormac is factitious and factitious.

This monarch is the most popular that appears in early Irish history, and it is natural that the hero about whom the national legends were gathered should be fixed in his reign and indeed become connected with him by marriage.

If Fionn is not a historical character, then how can we account for his existence as the national hero of the Gael ? To answer this is to have the " key of all the mythologies." How do the heroes and demigods of mythology arise ? Fionn is, like Hecales, Theseus, Perseus, and other such persons of Greek myth, a culture hero — probably originally a local deity raised to a national place. He is an incarnation of the chief deity of the race — the Mercury, whom Cæsar tells us the Gauls worshiped — a god of a literary and mercantile character. His grandson Oscar is a reflection of the war god, and the other characters of the Fenian band no doubt correspond to the other personages of the Gaelic Olympus. Reverting to the question with which we started — " Did Fingal live or Ossian sing" — we have to give the answer, that Fingal lived and Ossian sang only in the heart and imagination of the Gaelic race, to embody their ideal of all that is noble and heroic.

Who were the Feinn? " Did Fingal live or Ossian Sing?" : a paper read by Mr. Alex. MacBain, M.A., Raining's School, Inverness (1892)
Author : Macbain, Alexander, 1855-1907
Subject : Finn MacCumhaill, 3rd cent; Ossian, 3rd cent
Publisher : [Scotland : s.n.
Language : Scottish Gaelic
Digitizing sponsor : National Library of Scotland
Book contributor : National Library of Scotland
Collection : gaelic

Source : Internet Archive
http://www.archive.org/details/whowerefeinndidf00macb

Edited and uploaded to www.aughty.org
May 10 2010