

The Ulster Cycle: "Deirdre of the Sorrows"

Deirdre of the Sorrows

ONE DAY CONOR MAC NESSA, king of Ulster, came to the house of Felimid, his bard, whose wife had prepared a great feast for the king's company. They ate and drank their fill and the hall was full of the sounds of entertainment.

Felimid's wife oversaw the feast, moving among the guests the whole night long until at last they began to fall asleep. Then she made her way, heavy-footed, to her own quarters because her baby was ready to be born. As she passed through the middle of the house the child in her womb gave a shriek so loud that everyone started up in alarm and the warriors seized their weapons and rushed to the main hall to see what had made the unearthly cry. Nobody knew or could tell what it was till Felimid came from his wife's chamber and told them that it was his unborn child who had screamed.

'Bring your wife here and let her tell us how she interprets this strange happening,' the company said.

Felimid's wife came before the warriors, distraught and frightened.

'What caused our child that is still unborn to scream out?' Felimid asked her. 'It made my blood run cold to hear the sound, it was so piercing and so full of foreboding.'

His wife did not know how to answer him. She too was filled with dread at the loud shriek that had come from inside her body. 'No woman knows what sleeps in her womb,' she told him.

Then she turned fearfully to Cathbad the druid and asked him to tell her the cause of this strange happening. 'Cathbad, you are a wise, generous man and you can foretell the future, please tell me what lies inside my womb.'

The druid answered, 'The infant who has just screamed from your womb is a girl. She will grow up to be a beautiful woman with

The Ulster Cycle: "Deirdre of the Sorrows"

FAME OUTLIVES LIFE

shining eyes and long, heavy fair hair. Her cheeks will be pink flushed under her white skin. Her lips will be as red as strawberries and she will have teeth like pearls. She will be straight and tall, fed on the fat of the land. Queens will envy her and kings desire her.'

Then the druid laid his hand on the woman's belly and the baby in the womb kicked beneath his hand. 'Yes, it is a daughter lying here. She will be known as Deirdre and because of her there will be great sorrow in Ulster.'

Shortly after this Felimid's wife gave birth to a baby girl. Cathbad took the baby in his arms and prophesied over her.

'Fair daughter of Felimid, O Deirdre of the Sorrows, you will be the envy of women and in your life time you will bring wars to Ulster. O exquisite maiden, woman as vivid as a flame, the beauty of your face will bring jealousy to the hearts of men and exile to the three sons of Usnach. Because of your beauty, violent deeds will bring about the destruction of a king's son. The powerful king of Ulster himself will witness a fierce and terrible deed. Your grave will be a lonely mound, and your story told for ever!'

'Kill the child,' the warriors shouted, 'so that Ulster may be spared!'

But Conor Mac Nessa held up his hand, 'No,' he said, 'I will take this child and I will give her in fosterage to someone I trust and when she grows up she will be my wife.'

The king's decision did not please his followers but they were afraid to argue with him.

So Deirdre was raised as Conor wished and she grew more beautiful each day until she surpassed every woman in Ireland. Conor built a fort in a place apart for her so that none of the Ulster chiefs would see her and want her for themselves. Her foster father was the only man, besides the king, who saw Deirdre's beauty. A poet called Levercham, a powerful woman whose anger the king feared, stayed with her and was Deirdre's nurse and teacher.

One winter's day Deirdre's foster father was skinning a calf to provide veal for the table and the blood flowed out across the snow. As Deirdre watched from her window a raven swooped down to sip the blood.

The Ulster Cycle

Deirdre turned to her nurse and said, 'Look, Levercham, I could love a man like that, with hair as black as the raven, and skin like the snow and cheeks as red as blood!'

Levercham answered, 'Well, good luck is yours, Deirdre, for not far from here, in Emain Macha, just beyond this enclosure, is a man like that. He is called Naoise, one of the sons of Usnach. These three brothers are warriors of such courage and skill that if they stood back to back they could hold off all the warriors in Ulster. They are so swift that they can overtake wild animals, and take down deer like hunting dogs. And when they sing together, their song is so melodious that women and men lulled by the music fall silent and peaceful, and cows' milk increases by two-thirds. Ardan, Ainnle and Naoise, these are their names, but Naoise is the strongest and most beautiful of the three.'

'If that is so,' said Deirdre, 'I will not have a day's good health till I see him.'

Not long after this, when the snow had cleared and spring had come to Emain Macha, Deirdre heard beautiful singing coming from the ramparts of the fort. She stole out for she knew that it must be Naoise. She walked past him without glancing in his direction, but Naoise saw her and was so struck by her beauty that he stopped in the middle of his song. He looked at her but she passed him by as if he wasn't there, and then he shouted out so that she could hear him, 'This is a fine young heifer passing me by!'

'Heifers are bound to be fine when there are no bulls about!' Deirdre retorted.

'You have the pick of the herd,' said Naoise, realizing that the beautiful girl must be Deirdre. 'You have Conor for yourself!'

Deirdre turned round then, and looked at Naoise. 'If I had my choice between a fine young bull like you and an old one like Conor I would settle for *you*!'

'But you can't settle for me,' said Naoise. 'You are promised to the king. And don't forget what Cathbad prophesied about you.'

'Are you turning me down?' Deirdre shouted at him.

'I am indeed!' replied Naoise.

In a fit of passion, Deirdre ran up to Naoise and grabbed his head

The Ulster Cycle: "Deirdre of the Sorrows"

FAME OUTLIVES LIFE

between her hands, holding him by the ears. 'May mockery and disgrace fall on this head,' she cried, 'unless you take me with you!'

Because he was terrified of Conor Mac Nessa's anger, Naoise struggled to free himself from her headstrong hold. 'Go away from me, Deirdre!' he shouted at her. 'Leave me alone!'

'Too late for that. I'm putting your honour at stake. You must take me with you,' said Deirdre, holding him fast.

Naoise began his loud chant that signalled danger and when the Ulster warriors inside Emain heard the sound they seized their weapons and got ready to fight each other. Ardan and Ainnle ran out to their brother to stop him singing.

'What are you doing?' they yelled at him. 'Do you want to bring about the destruction of the place?'

So Naoise told them about Deirdre and what she had said to him and how she had put a *geis*, a most solemn bond on him, to take her with him or lose his honour.

'It will bring destruction on us all,' they said. 'But as long as we're alive we cannot allow you to be disgraced. We'll all leave together and take Deirdre away to another country where Conor can't find us.'

The brothers gathered together a band of warriors, one hundred and fifty strong, the same number of women as well as servants and dogs, and when darkness fell the sons of Usnach fled with Deirdre from the province of Ulster and the anger of the king. Other kings made them welcome and for a while they wandered around Ireland going from one king's protection to another's, but they were harried by Conor's men. They escaped ambushes and treacherous traps until they could stand it no longer and left Ireland for Scotland.

They set up camp among the wild mountains and glens and lived on the game they caught. When winter came and the game was scarce, they stole cattle for food. These cattle raids angered the people of the place and a huge crowd of the men gathered together and marched on Naoise's encampment to kill him and his followers.

The sons of Usnach, seeing the men advance, fled to the king of Scotland to seek protection and offered to fight for him in exchange

The Ulster Cycle

for food and sanctuary. The king was glad of the services of such great soldiers and gladly took them into his service.

In their encampment, they built their houses in a circle and because they remembered Cathbad's warning they built a secret house for Deirdre in the centre so that no one would see her. They were afraid that there would be killing on account of her great beauty.

But the king's steward rose early one morning and stole into the brothers' encampment. He found Deirdre's hiding place and saw Naoise and Deirdre asleep there. Like everyone else who saw her he was struck by the girl's beauty and he ran in great excitement to tell the king.

'Until this day we have never found anyone worthy to be your queen,' he said to the king who had just awoken, 'but now I know where there is a woman worthy to be queen of the whole world! She is in a secret room with Naoise. Kill him while he's still asleep and make the woman your wife!'

'I won't do that,' the king said. 'We'll try a different way. Every day when Naoise is out, go secretly to the girl's room and tell her that the king of Scotland loves her. Ask her to leave Naoise and come here to me and be my wife.'

The steward did as he was told. Every day, in secret, he wooed Deirdre for the king, and every night, when Naoise returned, Deirdre told him the whole story.

So now that this ploy had failed the king tried another one. He arranged dangerous missions for the three brothers. He sent them into the front line of battle, and set traps for them so that they would be killed, but through their skill and bravery the three brothers emerged safe from every perilous situation. At last Deirdre was given an ultimatum by the king; she must come to him willingly or she would be taken by force and the three brothers would be killed.

That night Deirdre warned Naoise of the danger and urged him to escape. 'If you stay till tomorrow,' she told him, 'by nightfall you'll be dead. I hate to leave Scotland. I love its lochs and mountains and its purple valleys. It has become a home from home for me but we must go!'

As they got into the boats that were to take them away, Deirdre

The Ulster Cycle: "Deirdre of the Sorrows"

FAME OUTLIVES LIFE

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The Ulster Cycle

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The Ulster Cycle: "Deirdre of the Sorrows"

FAME OUTLIVES LIFE

looked back at the place she had grown to love and began to sing a song in praise of the mountains and lakes of Scotland. As the boat drew away from the shore, she named the hills and the wooded glens, the lochs and inlets, lamenting her departure and remembering her happiness with Naoise in that place.

Once more Deirdre and the sons of Usnach were fugitives. They stole away with their followers and hid on a remote island from where they could see both Ireland and Scotland.

When the news reached Emain Macha that Deirdre and Naoise had left Scotland and were on the island, the Red Branch warriors went to Conor to put the brother's cause before him. 'This is Deirdre's doing, not theirs,' they told him. 'It would be tragic if their enemies killed them in a foreign land because of a headstrong woman. You should forgive them and allow them to return here unharmed.'

'Let them come back then,' said the king, 'and tell them I will send someone to guarantee their safety.'

When the fugitives got this message they were delighted at the prospect of returning home to their country and their companions. They sent back a message to Conor thanking him for his pardon. They asked for three of Ulster's most famous champions, Fergus, Dubtach and Cormac, the king's son, to guarantee their safety, and Conor agreed.

But the king still wanted Deirdre for himself and laid a trap for the sons of Usnach.

He ordered Fergus to make sure that Deirdre and the three brothers and all their household came directly to Emain as soon as they arrived in Ireland. He gave instructions that on no account were they to eat or drink *anywhere* until they ate and drank with him. Then he ordered Borrach, a chief whose fort lay on the route to Emain Macha, to prepare a lavish feast in Fergus's honour. 'He will not refuse your invitation. Remind him of his *geis*.' Conor advised the chief for he knew that there was a bond on Fergus that he must never, under pain of death, refuse to attend a feast that had been prepared in his honour. Borrach did as he had been instructed and when Fergus arrived at the stronghold invited him to the feast

The Ulster Cycle

and reminded him of his *geis*. Fergus turned pale with anger at Borrach's words. 'You had little call to make me choose between my fate and my honour!' he shouted. 'It's a cruel choice! I have given my word to accompany Deirdre and Naoise and their followers to Emain without delay but I cannot refuse your hospitality, unwelcome as it is!'

Naoise and Deirdre were alarmed when they heard that Fergus had to attend Borrach's feast and that they had to go on to Conor's fort without him.

'Are you forsaking us for a meal?' they said bitterly.

'I'm not forsaking you,' Fergus said. 'I'll send my son Fiacha with you to ensure your safe-conduct.'

So Deirdre and the sons of Usnach, accompanied by Fiacha, set off for Emain Macha, while Fergus, Cormac and Dubtach went to Borrach's feast.

When the travellers arrived at the king's fort, another band of visitors was already with Conor. This was Eogan, son of the king of Fernmag who had been a longstanding enemy of Conor's. Eogan had come on his father's behalf to make peace with the king of Ulster, and Conor, seeing his chance, had accepted his offer on the condition that he would kill the sons of Usnach.

As Deirdre and the brothers stood on the green at the centre of Emain Macha, the women of the king's household came out and sat on top of the ramparts to watch. Conor's bodyguard of hired soldiers made a circle round him. Eogan of Fernmag began to move towards the sons of Usnach, and Fergus's son Fiacha, sensing treachery, went up to stand beside Naoise.

As Eogan came close, Naoise went to greet him, In reply Eogan drew his sword and drove it through Naoise's body breaking his spine. As Naoise fell, Fiacha caught him in his arms and pulled him down to shield him with his body but Eogan killed them both. He killed Naoise through the body of Fiacha. Then Conor's mercenaries closed on Ainnle and Ardan and their followers and hunted them like hares from one end of the green to the other and killed them all.

Deirdre was seized, her hands were tied behind her back and she was handed over to Conor.

The Ulster Cycle: "Deirdre of the Sorrows"

FAME OUTLIVES LIFE

Fergus was already on his way to Emain Macha when he heard of the murder of his own son and of the sons of Usnach. He was mad with anger at Conor's treachery. He and the two other warriors, Dubtach and Cormac, who had promised safe-conduct to Naoise swiftly gathered their army and made a surprise attack on Conor's fort. Hundreds of Conor's soldiers died in the raid and Fergus set fire to Emain Macha.

Then Fergus fled to Connacht to Aillil and Medb, the king and queen of that province, for he knew they would give him sanctuary. Fergus brought a large band of his soldiers into exile with him and they made raids on Emain Macha. Every night for sixteen years there was bloodshed and suffering in Conor Mac Nessa's territory in revenge for the death of the sons of Usnach.

After the death of Naoise, Deirdre was kept in Conor's house for a year. In all that time she was never once seen to smile or laugh. She hardly slept at all and the little food she ate barely kept her alive. She crouched in her room, never raising her head from her knees. When Conor brought musicians to play for her, she wouldn't listen to their songs. Instead she recited a poem lamenting Naoise's death. When the king tried to comfort her she accused him bitterly of Naoise's murder and threw his love back in his face.

Conor became more and more angry at the rejection and at Deirdre's defiance. 'Of all that you see, Deirdre, what do you hate most?' he asked her one day.

'I hate *you*, Conor, and I hate Eogan who killed Naoise,' Deirdre answered.

'If that's the case,' said Conor, 'you can spend a year with him!' and he handed her over to Eogan.

Next day the three of them drove out to the fair at Emain Macha. Deirdre was behind Eogan in his chariot. Alongside was Conor. Deirdre could not bear to be between her two tormentors and she made a vow that she would not look at them together, so she kept her eyes cast down, fixed on the earth.

'Well, Deirdre,' Conor taunted her, 'here you are where you can eye us both, like a ewe between two rams!'

The Ulster Cycle

There were galloping past a huge boulder as the king spoke these mocking words and, hearing them, Deirdre leaned out of the chariot, dashed her head against the rock and died.