

Táin Bó Cuailnge [Cattle Raid of Cooley]

Táin Bó Cuailgne is the central saga of the *Ulster cycle and one of the oldest stories in European vernacular literature. Very old when it was written down, it survives in three main manuscript rescensions; in the **Book of the Dun Cow*, the **Book of Leinster*, and the **Yellow Book of Lecan*. The *Book of Leinster* version, though it produces a consistent narrative, is florid in style, whereas the other two preserve earlier and starker forms of the tale perhaps in the ninth. The *Táin* tells how *Medb, queen of Connacht, makes a raid on the Ulaid (Ulstermen) to carry off the Donn (Brown) Cuailnge, a great bull from Cooley in Co. Louth, so that she can rival her husband, Ailill, who possesses a comparable bull called Finnbennach (White-Horned). At first she tries to acquire the Donn peacefully, sending emissaries to its owner Dáire, but they get boastful in drink, saying that the bull would have been taken anyway. Learning of this, Dáire refuses her and the *Táin* begins. When the Connacht army reaches Ard Cuillenn (near Crossakeel, Co. Meath) they find the first sign of *Cú Chulainn, the hero of the narrative. He has been watching their movements, but having a tryst with Fedelm Nochruthach that night at *Tara, he has left a *geis (taboo), which they cannot pass, made from an oak sapling bent into a hoop and carved with *ogam, on a standing stone. At Ath Gabla on the Boyne near Drogheda, a second geis, a four-pronged fork of a tree stuck with severed heads, diverts them once again. When Ailill asks who has done this Fergus, amongst the Connachtmen because of the high king *Conchobor's treachery [see **Longes mac nUislenn*], recounts Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds. Now seventeen, he defends Ulster alone since the Ulstermen are suffering a debility laid on them by Macha [see *mythology]. Cú Chulainn attacks the Connacht army in a series of devastating night raids, smashing heads with his sling-shot and killing hundreds, but the army still advances. Fergus makes an agreement with Cú Chulainn committing him to a bout of single combat each day. Etarcomal goes with Fergus on the parley but stays behind when it is over, staring insolently at Cú Chulainn. After an exchange of insults he boasts that he will be the first to face the Ulster champion on the following day. Unable to wait so long, however, he turns back in rage, and Cú Chulainn splits him to the navel. Besides his natural opponents, the supernatural Morrígan [see *mythology] comes to the hero in various guises: as a red-eared heifer, a black eel which coils about his legs, and a she-wolf. After he has fought her off, wounding her in the process, she appears as an old woman milking a cow with three teats, one for each of the wounds she has sustained. Exhausted, Cú Chulainn asks her for a drink and when he blesses each of the teats in turn the wounds he has inflicted heal. Cú Chulainn's divine father,

Lug [or Lugh], comforts him and he sleeps for three days and nights while Lug stands guard over the Ulster passes. A troop of boys, training in arms at *Emain Macha and exempted from Macha's sickness because of their youth, now come against Medb and are killed. When Cú Chulainn awakes and finds that the boy-troop has been destroyed, he goes into a 'warp-spasm' (riastrad): his jaws go back, one eye contracts, the other swells out above his cheek, a hero-light as long as a warrior's whetstone leaps out of his forehead, and blood erupts from his skull. In this enraged condition, he makes a great slaughter. According to a late and highly formulaic accretion to the story, Ferdia, who was Cú Chulainn's foster-brother in Scotland when they were learning arms, is next persuaded by magic to enter combat against him. The heroes then fight for three days at Ath Fhirdia (Ardee, Co. Louth), embracing each other as friends at night while they exchange food and healing herbs for their wounds. Finally Cú Chulainn sends a lethal weapon called the gae bolga downstream, propelling it with his foot; it enters Ferdia's rectum, killing him when its barbs open out inside his body. Cú Chulainn laments his dead friend. The Ulstermen begin to come to his aid and Conchobor, recovered from his debility, musters his forces at Slemain Mide, near Uisneach (in Co. Westmeath). Prostrated by the wounds he has incurred fighting Ferdia, Cú Chulainn sends his charioteer to rouse the assembled warriors who go into combat naked (a custom described by classical commentators on the *Celts). When the final battle is engaged the Connacht forces retreat, but Medb has sent the Donn Cuailnge to safety in Cruachan. During the retreat she menstruates, filling three trenches with her blood. Cú Chulainn encounters her and agrees to allow her forces back to Connacht, where they foregather to witness the bull-combat that concludes the *Táin*. After a fierce struggle the Donn carries Finnbennach's carcass on his horns across Ireland, scattering pieces of it throughout the country on his way. He then attacks the people of his own territory before dropping dead.

The saga reflects dynastic conflict and issues relating to *sovereignty in ancient Ireland, as well as the Celtic view of fate, the influence of the supernatural, and the mysteriousness of human motives, but also the familiarity of violence and death to the warrior-caste of an aristocratic tribal society. A dominant presence is the land of Ireland itself, particularly the great central stretch between Roscommon and Dundalk [see *dinnshenchas]. The editorial history of the three rescensions of the *Táin* is outlined in Cecile O'Rahilly, ed., *Táin Bó Cualnge from The Book of Leinster* (1967). The classic analysis is Rudolf *Thurneysen, *Die Irische Helden- und Königsage* (1921). Translations include Lady *Gregory's version in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), and Thomas *Kinsella's *The Táin* (1969), which has a valuable introduction and maps. See also and J. P. Mallory, ed., *Aspects of the Táin* (1993).