

Myles Dillon, 'The Irish Sagas' (1959)

Adapted by Bruce Stewart from a lecture on RTE

The old **Irish sagas** are the most important part of early Irish prose literature in the absence of historical records on the lines of the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicles**. Those sagas, written in narrative form consistent with their origins in public story-telling, are comprised of myth and legend intermixed with poetry and with numerous examples of the tale-types of early Irish literature including **Woings** and **Pursuits**, **Voyages** and **Visions** – each members of the system of classification used by the men who wrote them. In a modern perspective, the Irish sagas fall into four main cycles: the **Mythological Cycle**, the **Ulster Cycle**, the **Fenian Cycle** and the **Historical Cycle** (or **Cycles of the Kings**). Although the material dealt with in them is very ancient – ranging from prehistoric times to the eighth century – our sources are relatively modern – rarely before the twelfth century. And this implies that they were copied down long after their original, oral composition, though many anterior written versions may have been lost, as suggested by the archaic language in some of them.

The oldest **Irish manuscripts** are copies of the Psalms and of the Gospels, all written in Latin – the earliest of which is the **Cathach** of St. Columba written towards the end of the sixth century while the most famous, known as **The Book of Kells**, has been assigned to the late eighth or early ninth century on calligraphic evidence. The sagas were likewise written down on vellum in great folio manuscripts of which the earliest date from the twelfth century and these are thought to be redactions of much earlier manuscripts, possibly as old as the *Cathach* itself.

The three most important such manuscripts in existence today are the **Book of Noughaval**, commonly called the **Book of Leinster**, held in Trinity College today; the **Book of the Dun Cow** held in the Royal Irish Academy, and a MS of which the Irish title has been lost, listed as **Rawlinson B 502**, in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Next in importance is the **Yellow Book of Lecan**, written towards the end of the 14th century and held in Trinity College. These were certainly copied from earlier manuscripts which are now lost since the language of many of the sagas told in them is as old as the ninth century judging by the language to be found in the few poems and law-tracts which survive from that period.

The **Mythological Cycle** is the earliest in subject-matter as dealing with heroes who were believed to have lived in Ireland before the coming of the **Gaels** who arrived in a series of migrations or invasions narrated in it. (The authenticity of this invasion-narrative is uncertain and a diffusion theory of the arrival of Celtic culture in Ireland is preferred by many.) That cycle is the chief source of our understanding of the religion of the **pre-Christian** Irish of which, sadly, very little is known. We can see that they believed in an Otherworld set in the western sea where some of the gods dwell and which heroes sometimes visit. This is more like a 'happy isle' than the Christian heaven to which good Christians ascend after death. Our best picture of it is to be found in the tale of Oisín and Niamh which tells of his journey there with his lover Niamh and his discovery on his return that the world is three hundred years older, and all her former his companions long gone. And, since he relates the tale to St Patrick, this must be regarded as a transitional account – though, in literary terms, it is full of a surprising appreciation of the distinctive merits of the pagan world view

Besides this notion of a happy isle beyond the sea there is a strong tradition of a **race of supernatural beings** who inhabited Ireland before the coming of the Gaels, and who withdrew into fairy-mounds all over the country when a later race arrived in Ireland to defeat them. The peculiarity of the idea is that they are still there, living a parallel life to ours. It is probable that this idea reflects a blend between of **pre-Celtic** and Celtic religious ideas which generously – or else fearfully – makes room for the older faith. It is worth noting that there seem to have been two contending mythologies in Ancient Greece as well involving the gods of Homer on the one hand and others such as **Demeter** and **Persephone** associated with agriculture and who play no part in heroic tradition.)

A few of the names of the earlier divinities of Ireland appear to be Celtic in their philological form and may be part of a religious culture that reached the Island with Celtic immigrants as early as 1500 B.C. Otherwise, they are names of pre-Celtic gods who have, in time, acquired a Celtic form. Chief of these is the **Dagda** (i.e., ‘Good God’) together with his **Oengus** and **Boann** (the tutelary goddess of the river Boyne and – in that sense – the river itself) who features in the sagas as his mother. **Lug**, another hero-god mentioned in the Mythological Cycle, bears a name which reoccurs in place-names such as Loire and London (formerly *Lugdunum* meaning ‘fort of Lug’). Taken together, the gods of the Mythological Cycle and their followers are known as the **Tuatha Dé Danann** meaning the ‘peoples of the goddess Danu’, a divine personage of whom nothing more is known than the name itself – although there is a British *Don* who may have been the same divinity. (The quasi-homophones *Diana* and *dun* for ‘fort’ are not thought to be relevant.)

The association of the pre-Celtic gods of Ireland with extant passage graves or earth-mounds such as **New Grange (Brí na Boann)** in Co. Meath, which is said to be the dwelling-place of Oengus in the tales, may have its origin in an era of nature worship or animism when rivers, trees, wells and mountains were all worshipped by the inhabitants of Ireland. Relatedly, the association of the passage-graves with the idea of reincarnation and their topographical orientation towards the equinoctial sun suggest an affinity with the cult of reincarnation. Certainly the theme of metempsychosis has a place in Irish legend as in the story of **Étain** to be found in the Mythological Cycle who is re-born three times: first after falling into the cup of a mortal queen in the shape of a beautiful dragon-fly and next as the daughter of **Eochaid Airem**, King of Ireland, after her mother visits the fairy-mound of **Bri Leith**, and finally as the daughter of this third Étain who grows up as a hostage of Oengus in the mound. (The ‘fairy mounds’ of Ireland were only discovered to be passage-graves during eighteenth-century excavations.)

After the Mythological Cycle comes the **Ulster Cycle** of which **Cú Chulainn** is the central figure. **King Conor Mac Nessa** is king of Ulster and **Maeve** [or **Mebdh**] is queen of Connacht and the date is in or around the first century of the Christian era – though Christianity has not yet arrived in Ireland. The longest of the sagas in this cycle and the only one which is epic in scale and temper is the famous **Cattle-Raid of Cooley (Táin Bó Cúailnge)** which concerns Cú Chulainn’s defense of Ulster when he stands alone against the whole army of Queen Maeve who seeks to steal the **Brown Bull (Donn Cúailgne)** from **Conor**. It is a martial tale involving all the elements of the heroic warrior code in which even the female characters join. A very different tale is the story of **Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach** told in the same cycle in which young lovers defy the ageing king **Conor (Conchobhar)** and chose youth and love and the joys of nature rather than submit to his power. Then there is **Bricriu’s Feast**, full of marvellous and good humour, and the story of **Mac Da Thó’s Pig**, in which the champions of Ireland contend for the hero’s portion at a feast as we are told the Gaulish warriors used to do in Caesar’s time.

The events of the **Fenian Cycle** are set in a later period than either of the other cycles and, in fact, exhibits a clear affinity with the Romance tradition identified in popular thinking with King Arthur – a British tale of chivalry which, in fact, betrays its Celtic origins, not least in its location on the Welsh borders. The Fenian Cycle is set in the reign of **Cormac Mac Airt** who was thought to have reigned at **Tara** in the third century AD. Here are stories about **Fionn** and **Oisín** and **Caolte**, **Conan Maol** and **Goll Mac Morna**, many of which could still be heard from storytellers in the rural parts of Ireland – especially in the **Gaeltachtaí** or Gaelic-speaking regions in Co. Galway and Co. Donegal. **The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne** is the chief love-tale of the cycle, a pursuit of lovers by a jealous king in many ways similar to the saga of **The Sons of Usnach** and obviously akin to the pursuit of **Tristram and Iseult** by **King Mark** associated with the Celtic realm of **Cornwall**. So lasting was the memory of the tales of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his son Oisín that the latter became a character in a famous meeting with St.

Patrick related in **The Colloquy of the Ancients (Acallam na Senórach)**, a twelfth-century manuscript which is famous toponymic tour of the place-names of Ireland.

The **Historical Cycle** related the lineage of several rulers of the sixth to the eighth centuries with dramatic tellings of their battles, though often adapted to support the claims of contemporary kings at the time of writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The birth of **King Cormac Mac Airt** and his accession to the **Kingship of Tara** is among the foremost tales here while the story of a young queen married to an aged husband and her love for her stepson occupies the text of **Fingal Ronáin**. Some of them were translated and rendered as poetry by the great nineteenth-century scholar-poet Sir Samuel Ferguson, while the stories of the other cycles supplied inspiration for numerous writers of the Irish Literary Revival including chiefly Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats, John Millington Synge, George [“AE”] Russell and Padraic Colum while numerous later writers have retold the stories whether for adult or children’s audiences. A knowledge of the Irish myths and legends is, in general, part of the common property of Irish men and women irrespective of their grade of education. In this sense, the sagas of Ireland have been successfully perpetuated as the cultural legacy of the Irish nation and is constantly available for allusion and for parody—as in the case of the satirical works of Eimar O’Duffy or the hilarious works of Flann O’Brien.