

## “The Wooing of Etain [Tochmarc Étaíne]”

Adapted from a radio talk by Myles Dillon in 1959

**The Wooing of Étaín** is one of the two chief tales of the **Mythological Cycle**. The other is **The Battle of Moytura** from the **Book of the Dun Cow**. Owing to loss of leaves from that book, many sections of the text were missing until discovered in 1935 in a gathering of leaves held in the Phillipps Collection at Cheltenham which proved to be lost parts of the **Yellow Book of Lecan** – another copy of the earlier original of both which is lost forever. The discovered pages, which are now held in the National Library of Ireland, contain the complete text of **The Wooing of Étaín** – acknowledged to be the extant earliest romance in European history.

The **Wooing** is, in fact, three-stories-in-one which appear as a sequence in the two manuscripts that contain them. There is a strange beauty about them which perhaps no other Irish stories share in quite the same degree. The spirit of romantic love is there—embodied in the idea of love-sickness, as well as the power of magic and a happy ending. In it the **Dagda** becomes the lover of **Boann**, wife of **Elcmar** of the **Bruig (New Grange)**, and from their union springs **Oengus**. Oengus is then given in fosterage to **Midir of Brí Léith** (near Ardagh, Co. Longford). Later when he has grown to manhood and has come into possession of **Brugh na Boinne**, his mother’s home, Midir came to visit him. While there, however, he suffers an insult at the royal court and claims the **Étaín** in compensation. In what follows, the Oengus wins Étaín from her father for Midir and, with the help of the **Dagda**, he clears twelve plains of rocks and makes twelve rivers flow there to nourish them, before giving Etain’s weight in gold and silver to her father as a bride-price.

After Midir returns home his wife **Fuamnach** strikes **Étaín** her with a magic wand and turns her into a pool of water. In the heat of the bedroom where she is trapped, the water evaporates and a caterpillar rises from it which becomes an insect of wonderful size and beauty (a butterfly, perhaps). Wherever the creature flies sweet music can be heard and the air becomes wonderfully fragrant. **Midir** soon discovers that the beautiful creature is **Étaín** and **Fuamnach** drives her away from the fort with a magic wind that carries her far off to the rocks and waves of the sea. For seven years she lives in misery until she finally she alighted on the breast of **Oengus** who is out looking for her. For some time he carries her about in a sun-lit cage of crystal, but when jealous **Fuamnach** gets to know about it, she invades his home and drives her off again with the same magic wind. This time Étaín comes to rest on the roof of a house in Ulster, falling into the cup of **Étar**, who is the wife of an Ulster champion warrior and petty king. **Etar** swallows the fly and in this way **Étaín** is re-born as her daughter. It is now a thousand and twelve years from the time of her birth as daughter of the fairy Ailill to the time of her birth in the house of Étar. That is the end of the first story.

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The second story begins after the interval of a thousand years, when the **Tuatha Dé Danann** have retired into their fairy-mounds and the **Gaels** are established in Ireland. But we are still in a period of pure legend, so you must not expect any dates. The king of Ireland in this story was succeeded by a king whose son was killed in **Da Derga’s Hostel** shortly before the period of **Cú Chulainn** and the Ulster heroes, according to the learned tradition.

When **Eochaid Airem** becomes king of Ireland, the people refuse to pay tribute to a king who has no queen. He then sends out messengers to find the loveliest girl in Ireland, and they bring him Étaín the daughter of Étar. Eochaid has a brother called **Ailill** who now falls sick for love of **Étaín**, and none can cure him. Eochaid went on his royal circuit of Ireland, leaving Étaín to care for **Ailill**, so that his grave might be dug, his lamentation made and his cattle slain. (The slaying of a dead man’s cattle is of some interest for the religious ideas of the pagan Irish.)

One day, as they are together in the house, **Ailill** confesses to **Étaín** the cause of his sickness, and she tells him she would gladly cure him with her love but that it must not be in the house of the king. She makes a tryst with him on the hill outside the court. But at the hour appointed, a magic sleep comes over **Ailill** and a man in his likeness comes to the meeting-place instead of him to keep the tryst with **Étaín**. Three times this happens, and the third time **Étaín** protests that it was not with him that she has made the tryst. The stranger says: 'It were fitter for you to come to me, for when you were **Étaín** daughter of **Ailill**, I was your husband.' And he tells her that he was **Midir of Brí Léith**, and that they had been parted by the sorcery of **Fuamnach**. He then asks her to come away with him, and she refused to go without the consent of her husband, the king of Ireland. That is the end of the second story.

As it is narrated in **The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel** [**Togail Bruidne Dá Derga**] from the Ulster Cycle, Conaire became High King when he is instructed by magic birds he meets while hunting to approach Tara naked at the moment when they are looking for a new ruler. His death comes about at the end of that story when he breaks each of the *geasa* (or taboos) placed upon him by the magic birds. In the wonderful events that conclude the story, Conaire fights for his life in the hostel called **Dá Derga** [Red House] when it is attacked by the sons of **Dond Désa** whom he has exiled to Scotland, now returned for vengeance. Conaire grows trusty after much killing but the rivers of Ireland will not fill his cup and finally he is beheaded by his enemies. In the *Leabhar Gabhala* his reign is said to coincide with that of **Augustus Caesar** (27 b.c. to 14 a.d.) but in Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Eireann*, the first chronological history of Ireland, he is said to have reigned from 63 to 33 BC. In either case, he is regarded as a historical character whose long reign at Tara came to a bad end. In early Scottish histories, the kings of Scotland are said to be descended from him.

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In the third story about the beautiful **Étaín**, a stranger visits the hero and offers to play a game of chess with him. The hero wins three times, but the stranger wins the last game, and lays a penalty on the hero. The main events in that episode take this form:

One time on a lovely summer day, **Eochaid Airem** king of Tara arose and climbed the terrace of Tara to gaze over Mag Breg [the central plain of Co. Meath]. It was radiant with flowers of every colour. As **Eochaid** looked around, he saw a strange warrior on the terrace before him. A purple tunic was about him, and his hair was golden yellow and reached to his shoulders. His eyes were bright blue. He had a spear in one hand and a shield in the other with a white boss and ornament of gold ...

**Eochaid** said 'Welcome to the warrior whom we do not know.' 'It is for that we have come,' said the warrior (That is to say: 'I come as a friend, not as an enemy'). 'We know you not,' said **Eochaid**. 'But I know you,' said the warrior (*Aithníonn tusa mise [agus] ní aithnim-se thú*). 'What has brought you?' said **Eochaid**. 'To play chess with you,' said he. 'The queen is asleep,' said **Eochaid**, 'and it is in her house that the chess is.' 'I have here,' said **Midir** — for he was the stranger — 'a set of chess that is as good.' That was true: a silver board and golden men, and each corner of the board lit up by a precious stone, and the bag for the chessmen was of plaited links of bronze.'

They play three games of chess and **Eochaid** wins each time, for which **Midir** pays him in rich rewards. The fourth time they play for a stake to be named by the winner. This time **Midir** wins the game and the stake he claims is an embrace from **Étaín**. **Eochaid** was vexed at that, but he bade **Midir** come a month from that day to receive his prize. On the day appointed **Eochaid** had gathered his warriors around him and the doors were locked. But **Midir** appeared in the banqueting-hall all the same, using magic powers to enter saying, 'What was promised me is now due'. Then he put his arms around **Étaín** and rose with her into the air and out through the roof of the house; and then they flew away in the form of two swans.

**Eochaid** and his men set out to recover **Étaín** and attacked **Brí Léith**, the fairy-mound which was **Midir's** home. After he had resisted many attempts by the digging party to break into his home, **Eochaid's** finally

**Midir** appeared before Eochaid and promised to restore **Étaín to him** on the condition that he could still recognise her. The next morning fifty women appeared at Tara all looking like **Étaín** in form and dress so that **Eochaid** was in doubt which one to choose. The one he chose turned out to be not **Étaín** herself but her daughter and his daughter own too, another **Étaín**. She bore him a girl-child which was put out on the hillside to die as the child of an incestuous union, in keeping with the custom. But the baby was found by a herdsman who had no children of his own and was happy to bring her up as his and it is no surprise that when she grew the herdsman's daughter had the walk of a queen. About this time **Etarscéle** became King of Ireland and when he heard about the beauty of the herdsman's daughter from his people one day he desired to see her. Of course this was **Étaín** reborn. **Etarscéle** made her his wife and in time she bore him a son called **Conaire Mór**, who later became High King of Ireland.

This brings us back to the opening chapter of the **Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel**, a saga of the Ulster Cycle. The passage describing a young **Étaín** at the beginning of that story exemplifies the the incandescent imagination of early Irish story-tellers and their profound sense of mortal beauty:

He saw a woman at the edge of a well, and she had a silver comb with gold ornament. She was washing in a silver basin in which were four birds of gold, and bright little gems of purple carbuncle on the chasing of the basin. She wore a purple cloak of good fleece, held with silver brooches chased with gold, and a smock of green silk with gold embroidery. There were wonderful ornaments of animal design in gold and silver on her breast and shoulders. The sun shone upon her, so that the men saw the gold gleaming in the sunshine against the green silk. There were two golden tresses on her head, plaited in four, with a ball at the end of every lock. The color of her hair was like the flower of the iris in summer or like pure gold after it had been polished. She was undoing her hair to wash it, so that her arms were out from beneath her dress. White as the snow of one night were her hands, and her lovely cheeks were soft and even, red as the mountain foxglove. Her eyebrows were as black as a beetle's back. Her teeth were like a shower of pearls. Her eyes were as blue as the hyacinth, her lips as red as Parthian leather. High, smooth, soft, and white were her shoulders, clear white her long fingers. Her hands were long. White as the foam of a wave was her side, long and slender, yielding, smooth, soft as wool. Her thighs were warm and smooth and white; her knees small and round and hard and bright. Her shins were short and bright and straight. Her heels were even and lovely. If a rule had been laid upon her feet it would hardly have shown any imperfections in them, unless it should crease the flesh or the skin. The blushing light of the moon was in her noble face, a lofty pride in her smooth brow. The radiance of love was in her eyes; the flush of pleasure on her cheeks, now red as a calf's blood and changing again to snowy whiteness. There was gentle dignity in her voice. Her step was firm and graceful. She had the walk of a queen. She was the fairest, loveliest, finest that men's eyes had seen of all the women of the world. They thought she was of the fairies. Of her it was said: "All are lovely till compared with **Étaín**. All are fair till compared with **Étaín**".' (pp.15-25.)

This may be the literature of a warrior caste who are intent on celebrating their own status, but it is also a work of imagination which ranks with the greatest passages of world-literature in its grasp on the idea of human perfectability, at least in the physical sense though probably some idea of spiritual perfection is included in the vision also.