

The Mythological Cycle: "The Children of Lir"
from Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (Faber 1994)

Ae/Aoife

The Children of Lir

for a tale layer

LIR, one of the Tuatha De Danaan, and his wife Eve had two children, Fionnuala and Aed, whom they loved dearly. After a few years twin boys, Conn and Fiacra, were born and their parents were delighted. But their joy was short-lived for shortly after the birth of the twins, Eve fell ill and died. Her husband was racked with grief. With his beautiful wife gone he wanted to die himself but his love for his children kept him alive.

Eve's father, the king of the Tuatha de Danaan at that time was called Bodb Dearg, or Bov the Red. He was a wise man and a beloved king and he too was very sad at his daughter's death. Because he loved Lir and did not want to lose his friendship he called him to his fort and gave him his second foster daughter, Aoife, to be his wife. Aoife was as beautiful as Eve had been and she loved her sister's children, so for a year or two Lir and his family were happy again. Everyone who met the children of Lir loved them and the king himself was so fond of them that he often left his own fort to come to Lir's house to visit them. As for Lir, he was so devoted to his children that they slept in his room so that he could see them first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

After a while Aoife grew jealous of all the attention that the children were getting from both Lir and Bodb. Her jealousy grew as the children grew and eventually it turned into hatred. In the end she could stand their presence no longer and took to her bed. For a year she lay tormented by jealousy. At last she decided to get rid of them so that she alone would have the love of her husband and her foster father.

One morning she called the children to her quarters and told them they were going to visit their grandfather, Bodb Dearg. The younger children were pleased for they loved the excitement of the king's house, but Fionnuala was afraid. The night before she had a

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children's story (Carol)

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disturbing dream and she sensed that Aoife was plotting harm. She tried to talk her stepmother out of going to visit the king but Aoife was determined to carry out her plan and would not listen to Fionnuala's plea. Sadly the girl resigned herself to her fate.

The charioteers were called and they yoked the horses to the chariot. Aoife hurried the children out of the house and into her chariot, for she did not want Lir to see her take them away. The horses were whipped up and they swept out of Lir's fort. Halfway to Bodb's fort Aoife ordered the charioteers to rein in. Leaving the children in the chariot she called the servants aside and ordered them to take the children into the wood and kill them. The charioteers were appalled by this command. They were warriors, hardened in battle, but they could not carry out Aoife's cruel orders. They told Aoife that they would not kill the helpless children and they warned her of the punishment that would surely follow such a crime. In a rage, the queen seized a sword from one of the men so that she could kill the children herself, but her cruel heart failed her and she could not bring herself to murder the children that she had once loved.

Fionnuala, waiting in the chariot, was suspicious and scared, but she did not want to alarm her brothers for they were unaware that anything was wrong and so she said nothing. When Aoife came back to the chariot to rejoin the children she was full of feigned affection and kindness towards them. They drove westward in the direction of Bodb Dearg's court until they came to a lake surrounded by oak trees called Lough Derravaragh, the lake of Oaks, and there they halted.

Aoife asked the children if they would like to bathe in the lake and wash off the dust of the journey. The three boys jumped down out of the chariot and rushed into the water, splashing and shouting, but Fionnuala hung back. When Aoife saw this she ordered the girl to join her brothers and Fionnuala waded into the lough.

As soon as the children were all together Aoife took a druid's wand from the folds of her cloak and, pointing it at each child in turn, she raised her voice and chanted a spell:

'Children of Lir, good fortune has always followed you but now

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your good fortune is over! From now on flocks of waterfowl will be your only family, and your crying will be mingled with the cries of birds.'

By the time her chant was over, Fionnuala, Conn, Aed and Fiacra had disappeared and swimming on the lake where the children had been were four beautiful white swans.

The four swans turned towards Aoife as she stood on the shore and speaking in the voices of the children of Lir cried out to her, 'Oh, why did you do this to us? We did you no harm. You were our stepmother. You loved us once, so have pity on us now! Give us back our own shape! Oh, please, we implore you do not leave us like this!'

Aoife did not answer them. She turned a deaf ear to their pitiful cries and stared unmoved as the frantic creatures thrashed the water. Fionnuala rushed to the edge of the lake and hissed at Aoife, 'You will pay dearly for this, Aoife! Our kinsmen will avenge us and they will punish you for this cruel spell. And they will comfort us as best they can.' Still Aoife did not speak. Fionnuala stretched out her long neck towards her stepmother and pleaded with her for the last time.

'Oh, Aoife, if you won't give us back our shape, at least put some limit on this enchantment! Do not condemn us to be swans for ever!'

Aoife's icy heart melted at last as she listened to Fionnuala's desperate pleas, but her remorse came too late to save the children.

'If I could break the spell now, I would,' she cried, 'but what is done is done, and the spell it is too powerful for me to undo. I cannot revoke it but I have the power to ease it. You will not be swans for ever. But you must keep the shape of swans for nine hundred years and must stay on the water, not on dry land! You will spend three hundred years here on Lough Derravaragh, three hundred years on the Sea of Moyle and the last three hundred years by the Atlantic Ocean. When a king from the North marries a queen from the South, and you hear the sound of a bell pealing out a new faith, you will know that your exile is over. Till then, though you will have the appearance of swans, you will speak with your

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own voices and reason with your own minds and feel with your own noble hearts! Your cry will not be the strange cry of the swan. Instead you will be given a gift of music so sweet that it will comfort all who hear it. But go away from me now! The very sight of you torments me. I cannot bear the sorrow and hardship I have brought on you and I dread Lir's anger and grief.'

Fionnuala's head dipped in despair as she turned slowly away from Aoife and swam back to rejoin her brothers. Then the four swans paddled slowly away. As the full horror of her deed dawned on her, Aoife ran from the shore to her waiting chariot. The frightened charioteers were as anxious as she to get away from the place, and they whipped up the horses and galloped to Bodb Dearg's fort. There Aoife was welcomed by her father, but when he saw that she was alone, he was surprised and disappointed.

'Where are your stepchildren?' he asked her. 'Why didn't you bring them to see me?'

This was the moment Aoife had been dreading, so she had a story ready.

'I came alone,' she said to Bodb Dearg, 'because Lir is jealous of your love for his children and he would not let me bring them to your house. He is afraid that you will take them and keep them as your own!'

When Bodb Dearg heard this he was very angry at first but then he became suspicious. He felt that Aoife was telling a lie, so he sent a message to Lir inviting him to come and visit him the next day as he wanted to talk to him. He told him to be sure to bring his children with him. When Lir received this message he was horrified. He had been alarmed when he had heard that Aoife and his children had hurried away from his fort and had gone to visit the king without telling him. He knew that his wife had come to hate his children and now he was afraid that she had harmed them.

Early next morning Lir and a company of his household set out for Bodb's fort to learn the fate of the children. They took the same south-westerly route as Aoife had taken and eventually they reached Lough Derravaragh.

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From the middle of the lough, the children saw the chariots and troop approaching and joyfully Fionnuala called to her brothers to look towards the shore. Aed, Fiacra and Conn watched the company approaching as their sister cried out, 'I know who this is! It's our father's household and, look, there's Lir himself leading them. They are searching for us. That's why they look so sad! Let us get closer to them so they can hear our voices.'

The four swan-children flew to the lakeside and landed there with a clatter of wings. They called out their father's name and the names of his company. Lir heard his children's voices but he could not understand where the sound came from. He stood puzzled, straining his ears, and the children repeated his name. When Lir realized that it was the four swans that called to him he was heartstricken. He knew then that this enchantment was Aoife's evil work and that these swans were his children.

'Fionnuala, Aed, Fiacra, Conn! My beloved children! How can I help you?' he cried out. 'Is there any power that can restore you to your own shapes?'

'None!' Fionnuala called back. 'It was Aoife's jealousy that brought about this change on us. We are doomed to keep this shape for nine hundred years and no power of any kind can change that.'

When they heard this, the whole company let out a shout of anger and Lir cried, 'Come ashore, my dear children. Oh, my children, you have your own senses and voices and you can come on to dry land and live with us and we'll keep you safe.'

'We can't stop on dry land or live with our own people until nine hundred years have passed,' Fionnuala replied. 'We must stay here on the waters of Lough Derravaragh for three hundred years.' Then, seeing the sorrow on her father's face, she tried to comfort him. 'But we can talk to you and sing to you. Our music is enchanted music and it will comfort you and you will be able to forget what has happened.'

The swans started to sing and the desolation that Lir felt began to fade. His rage left him and he and his household were so soothed by the music that they stayed there listening until nightfall when they fell into a peaceful sleep.

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In the morning the swans were far out on the lake, and Lir's grief returned. He cursed the day he had brought Aoife to his house and he called out the names of his children again and again. The swans flew to the lakeside and talked to him. Then he took a sad farewell of his swan-children and set off to tell the king the terrible news.

Bodb Dearg was waiting for him with Aoife at his side and when he heard the clatter of hoofs, he ran outside to meet Lir. When the king heard the story of Aoife's treachery he turned on her in a fury. 'You have brought a cruel fate on the children of Lir, so you deserve a great punishment. I will turn you into a demon of the air, doomed for ever to be driven through the clouds and the upper skies!'

As he pointed his druid's wand at her, a bitter blast swept suddenly through the place and in an instant Aoife was seized and flung aloft like a withered leaf, her screams mingling with the howling of the wind. As the hushed crowd watched, she was blown higher and higher until she disappeared from view, but they could still hear her shrieks and moans echoing in the gale. People say that you can still hear her voice on a stormy night sighing and sobbing above the sound of the wind.

When Aoife's cries had died away, Lir, Bodb and their followers went to Lough Derravaragh. The children were delighted with the company and talked to their friends and comforted them with their singing. People flocked from all over Ireland to listen to the music that brought peace and comfort to the sick at heart. Bodb Dearg and Lir stayed there, and gradually a large settlement grew up around the lake. Every evening the swans would swim to the shore and tell stories to the crowds and hear the news from all over Ireland and then they would sing the gathering to sleep.

Season followed season, and the children of Lir, surrounded by loving families and loyal friends, sometimes forgot what had befallen them and were as happy as it was possible for them to be, given their cruel fate.

Years turned into decades, and decades into centuries, until one morning Fionnuala knew that three hundred years had gone by and the time had come for them to go. Sorrowfully she broke the news to her brothers and to Lir and Bodb Dearg.

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swans

'Father, we must leave you very soon,' she told Lir. 'We have only one night more on Lough Derravaragh. The years we were allowed to spend here are over and we have to go north to the Sea of Moyle. Your love and companionship have made these calm waters a home from home for us, and it's a bitter blow that we cannot go back to our real home with you. It is our dreadful fate that, instead, we must now leave this quiet lake for the desolate waters of Moyle. There'll be no one there to talk to us or comfort us as you have done here. There'll be nothing for us there, but loneliness and pain.'

Lir and Bodb were as heartbroken as the children, and together they stayed at the side of the lough all that day telling stories and lamenting the cruel spell that was separating them. Then, as night fell, the swans began to sing their enchanted songs. Their father and friends listened to the music for the last time, and their grief melted away at the sound, as it had done throughout the three centuries of vigil, and they fell asleep.

At the break of day the whole company assembled at the water's edge and after a sad farewell the four swans rose into the air. They circled the wailing crowd below them and then, wheeling to the north with Fionnuala leading them, the four swan-children set off for the Sea of Moyle. They flew in arrow formation, dipping and rising, warbling plaintively to themselves as they went. A long sigh rose from the crowd as they gazed at the empty sky. Bodb Dearg and Lir, old men by now, got ready to return to their forts, for they could no longer bear to stay beside Lough Derravaragh. As soon as Bodb reached home he passed a law forbidding anyone to harm a swan and so it remains to this day.

The swans flew northward, impelled by Aoife's curse, until they reached the Sea of Moyle. This was a stormy band of water between Ireland and Scotland. It was lashed by gales in spring, by ice and hail in winter. In this desolate place the only company the children had was seals and seabirds. Huge waves buffeted them and they were cold and lonely. There was no one to listen to their stories or appreciate their exquisite music. There was no one to be comforted by their song and it brought no ease to their own sad hearts.

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One night a fierce storm rose up. Fionnuala shouted to her brothers above the thunder of the waves that if they were separated they must go to the Rock of Seals, Carraignarone, and wait there for one another.

The storm got worse. Great black thunderclouds piled up in the sky and the wind increased. Waves crashed into waves and rose like walls. Lightning split the sky, and the swans were scattered apart like sea spray. All night long they were flung through the air by the fierce gales and when dawn broke Fionnuala was so exhausted she could hardly fly, but she made her way to the meeting place she had named and landed there. She watched the sun rise out of a calm sea and climb into a clear sky, but there was no sign of Conn, Fiacra or Aed. Scanning the skies, Fionnuala began to weep at her own fate and the fate of her brothers. She sank down on the rock in despair, lamenting her loneliness and loss.

Suddenly she saw Conn flying towards the rock. He was so tired he could scarcely clear the waves. He landed beside her, too exhausted to speak, and Fionnuala put him under her right wing. A while later Fiacra appeared on the horizon, his wings heavy with seawater and his head drooping, and when he landed wearily on the rock his sister put him under her left wing. At last Aed arrived, beaten and spent, and crept beneath the feathers of Fionnuala's breast and there they rested till their strength returned.

One cruel winter there was a frost so hard that the Sea of Moyle turned into a sheet of ice and the children of Lir huddled together on a rock to try to keep warm. Their feathers became as hard and brittle as glass and they knew they must fly or freeze to death. When they tried to rise they discovered that they were frozen to the rock. They struggled to free themselves and when they finally did, they left behind them the skin of their feet and the tips of their wings. When the sea melted, they suffered the agony of the salt water in their wounds.

Winter after winter they suffered cold and every spring they were flung from rock to rock by the gales. They began to think their sufferings would never end.

One day as they were swimming near the mouth of the River

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Bann on the northern coast of Ireland, the swan-children saw a troop of horsemen galloping along the riverbank. They swam to the side of the river asking each other in their own voices if they recognized the handsome band of riders. The horsemen heard the swans speak and knew they were the children of Lir. They had heard about Aoife's cruelty, for they were the sons of Bodb Dearg. The children talked eagerly to their friends, enquiring about Lir and Bodb. The horsemen told them that the two old men were together at Sidhe Fionnachaid, Lir's fort, celebrating the Feast of Age. Except for their sorrow at the loss of the children, they were happy and content. Fionnuala remembered her former life and cried out with home sickness:

'Lir and his household are happy tonight drinking and feasting in a warm house while his children live without shelter.

'Once we dressed in royal purple, now white feathers are our only covering.

'We used to drink wine and mead from precious goblets and now our drink is salt water and our food grains of sand.

'Hard rocks are our beds, or the crests of the waves, we, who used to sleep on pillows made from the soft down of birds.

'The sons of kings galloped with us across Bodb's hills, but our only companions now are the white waves of the sea.

'I, who loved to lie on the fragrant grass and feel the sun, must ride, without rest, the cold currents of the Sea of Moyle.'

The horsemen listened sadly to Fionnuala's lament and then said goodbye to her and her brothers and rode off to Lir's fort with the news of his children.

One day Fionnuala called her brothers to her and told them once more that three hundred years had gone by and it was time for them to leave the comfortless Sea of Moyle and go to the western ocean, to Inish Glora where they would spend the last term of their exile.

'And on the way,' she said, 'we will call at Sidhe Fionnachaid and see our father.'

They flew to Carraignarone, the rock where they had sheltered from so many storms and landed there. They took a last look at

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the desolate stretches of the Sea of Moyle and then rose gratefully into the sky and headed west.

As they flew over the lovely landscape of their childhood they scanned the ground below for their first glimpse of Lir's fort, but there was no sign of it. Bewildered, they flew lower and lower, wondering if they had lost their way, until, at last, they saw the familiar hill. They circled the place where Sidhe Fionnachaid had stood, their alarm growing with every turn. There was no sign of the rath or its walls, ramparts or green playing fields. There was no sign of life at all, only a rough grassy mound covered with weeds. Sadly they came to land in the centre of it and there they huddled together staring in disbelief at the scattered heaps of stones and the broken earthworks, the terraces overgrown with nettles and the ragwort and stunted gorse bushes that grew thickly on the slopes.

As they cowered there, their feathers ruffled by the wind that shivered across the drumlins, they remembered Sidhe Fionnachaid as they had left it with Aoife on that fateful morning, and their hearts nearly cracked with grief. They recalled the royal feasts, the chieftains and ladies listening to music, the harpists and the bards reciting their heroic tales. They remembered their comrades, the young men and beautiful girls who laughed together as they watched the hunts and chariot races, the chess games in the halls, and the hurling outside on the green. They remembered the druids with their wisdom, and the champions with their feats of strength. Now there were no doors, no fires, no feasts, not another living thing in sight.

The children of Lir raised their voices and keened a lament for all that had been lost, and the sound re-echoed round the deserted mound with only themselves to hear. Sadly they rose into the air and circled the ruins for the last time. Then they flew on to the western ocean to spend the last three hundred years of their exile.

The Atlantic Ocean was stormy but not as cold and deserted as the Sea of Moyle. When storms swept in from the west, the swan-children could shelter in the inlets and bays that indented the coastline. In one of these bays sat a small island called Inish Glora and on this island was a little lake where the swans would fly for

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shelter. There they would sing their matchless songs and birds would flock to Inish Glora from Achill and Aran and the other islands around the west of Ireland. They settled in the trees and listened in silence to music far sweeter than any they could ever make and the lough became known as the Lake of Birds. The music of the swans, full of longing for another age, would float across the water on a calm day and people who heard it would recall the old story of the children of Lir.

A new age had dawned in Ireland and the Tuatha De Danaan had been displaced by another race. A new religion had spread across the country, brought by Saint Patrick and his monks, and the people now worshipped the Christian God. The old Gods had gone underground. Mannanan, Lugh, Nuada, the children of Lir themselves, had become legends.

On a tiny island on the Lake of Birds a holy man had come to live. He had heard about the swans of Inish Glora who spoke with human voices and, like many others, he had heard the legend of the fate of the children of Lir. He felt that the time for their release must be close at hand and he wanted to be there to help them. He built a little church on the island and every morning and evening he rang a bronze bell as he began to pray.

One night the swans flew back to Inish Glora from the south. At dawn Conn and Fiacra and Aed woke in alarm as a sound they had never heard before rang out across the water. They moaned with fear and Fionnuala awoke. She too heard the sound, but her cry was one of happiness. She knew that the ringing of this bell announced the freedom that Aoife had promised nearly a thousand years before.

The four swans looked towards the wood on the little island and there they saw a small hut. Through the door they could see the hermit on his knees and beside him shone the bell that had awakened them. They listened to the monk chanting matins and answered with their own sweet music, but now the loneliness and longing of a thousand years was replaced by a note of hope.

Hearing the sound, the hermit hurried down to the lake. There in the morning light he saw four swans. He called to them across the

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water: 'Are you the children of Lir? Are you Fionnuala and Aed and Fiacra and Conn?'

The four swans crowded together on the lake but they didn't answer his question and they would not come close to land. Then Fionnuala dipped her head in assent.

'Don't be afraid! I won't hurt you,' said the saint. 'It is for your sake I have come to this lake. For hundreds of years people have heard echoes of your beautiful singing and have told the story of your exile. Your ordeal is nearly over now. A new religion, a religion of love has come to Ireland. Through it you will be freed.'

The swans listened to the hermit's comforting words and trusted him, so they followed him ashore. He made a silver chain and tied it round their necks and linked them together, so that they would never be parted again. The children of Lir lived in the saint's hut, talking and praying with him. He fed them and protected them, and they sang for him in return. Although the last part of Aoife's spell had still to come to pass before they could regain their own shapes, they were happy there and peaceful at last.

Now while they were living with the monk on Inish Glora, Lairgren, the king of Connacht, went south to Munster and took a king's daughter for his wife, and through this marriage the last part of Aoife's prophecy came to pass.

When the new queen arrived in Connacht, she heard about the music of the wonderful swans who lived on the Lake of Birds. She told her husband to bring them to her so that she could hear them for herself. Lairgren refused for he knew that the saint would not allow the swans to leave his island. But his wife was determined to hear them and she threatened to leave her husband and go back to her father's house if her wish was not granted. This would have been a great disgrace for Lairgren, so he sent a message to the hermit ordering him to send the swans to his court as a gift for the new queen. The saint refused and the messenger reported this to the king. Lairgren was furious that his orders had been ignored, and he went in person to the Lake of Birds. The hermit saw him coming over the water and put the swans into the little church for safety. Then he went down to the shore to meet the king.

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'Is it true that you turned my messenger away and would not grant the favour I asked?' the king demanded.

'It is true,' said the holy man. 'I refused the king's messenger and I will refuse the king himself. The children of Lir have found sanctuary in my church and there they will stay!'

Lairgren pushed the monk aside and stormed into the church. He seized the chains that linked the swans to one another and dragged the frightened creatures out of the church. The terrified swans struggled with all their strength, frantically beating the air with their wings, but Lairgren pulled them away from the door and towards the water. He had only taken a few steps when the tumult behind him stopped and he turned round quickly to see why. As he looked, the plumage of the swans fell away and lying on the ground, chained together, were four people, ages old, a frail wrinkled woman and three feeble old men. Filled with horror at what he saw Lairgren rushed to his boat and fled from the place with the hermit's angry words ringing in his ears. Gl. 9

The monk hurried to the side of the four, frightened, old people lying helpless on the ground and tried to comfort them. Fionnuala, who knew her life was coming to an end, asked the saint to baptize her brothers and herself. He sprinkled water on their heads from the Lake of Birds and blessed them. When this was done Fionnuala said to him, 'We are dying. My kind friend, we are as sad to leave you as you are to see us go. Bury us here where we found peace. When we were swans, I sheltered my brothers under my wings, Conn at my right side, Fiacra at my left and Aed beside my breast, so let us lie like this in our grave.'

Then the children of Lir died peacefully, the saint at their side, and were buried as Fionnuala had requested. Over their grave the hermit raised a stone and on it, in ogham script, he carved their names.

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