

Fionn mac Cumhaill

Fionn mac Cumhaill (*anglice*, Finn McCool), is the hero of the *Fionn or Ossianic cycle of tales, and leader of a band of warriors [Fian] under the high king *Cormac mac Airt—one of many such bands of nomadic hunters and warriors who lived on the margins of society in early Ireland, but having strong connections with a tribal hierarchy which often called upon their martial skills. Fionn's troop, known as the Fianna, assumed pre-eminence in Irish storytelling tradition, and accounts of their exploits came to be known as *fianaigecht* or *fiannaíocht*.

As a member [*fénnid*] of a Fian and its leader, Fionn was to some extent an outlaw; yet he was also a poet, diviner, and sage, and therefore endowed with traditional and, in early Ireland, institutional attributes. His father, Cumal, was leader of the *Tara Fian in the service of *Conn Cetchathach, high king of Ireland, while his mother was Muirne (or Muireann) daughter of a *druid, Tadg, so that his parentage combined warrior and visionary elements. In **Acallam na Senórach* Tadg is said to be of the Tuatha Dé Danann [see *Mythological cycle]. Cumal abducts Muirne without Tadg's consent, incurs his enmity, and is killed by his soldiers at the Battle of Cnucha, being succeeded by his rival and Fionn's arch-enemy, *Goll mac Mórna. At this battle Cumal also loses the magical Corrbholg (Crane-bag) which the young Fionn recovers. After his father's death Fionn is fostered, his training by women mirroring that of *Cú Chulainn. The Early Modern **Feis Tighe Chonáin*, describing Fionn's first encounter with people other than his fosterers, refers to him as the Lad of the Skins, a feral creature. His unique daring in jumping a chasm wins him the favours of Donat, a woman of the *sídh.

As well as being endowed with physical courage, Fionn possesses the gift of special insight which he can summon by biting his finger. According to one account of its origin, he sustained an injury when a fairy-woman caught his finger in the door of the fairy-fort [**sídh*] at Femen (Slievenamon, Co. Tipperary) while pursuing Cúldub, an otherworld thief who stole the Fianna's food. Thereafter he finds himself inspired with *imbas* (great knowledge), whenever he puts the damaged finger into his mouth. In *folklore the injury is caused by Fionn's burning his thumb on the Salmon of Knowledge from the Boyne, which he is cooking for his druid teacher. By chewing his thumb to the marrow — an activity known as *teinm láida* (chewing the pith) — or by putting it under his *déad feasa* (tooth of knowledge) as in **Bruidhean Chaorthainn*, he can attain a state of wisdom. This power also brings him the gift of poetry, and many verses celebrating the beauty of nature in the cycle are ascribed to him.

As recounted in the twelfth-century *Macgnímartha Finn* [*The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn*], the High King Conn remains Fionn's enemy throughout his boyhood and fosterage, but they are reconciled in time, and Fionn also succeeds in making peace with Goll mac Mórna. When Cormac mac Airt becomes king, Fionn serves him and protects Ireland from foreign invasion, as narrated in **Cath Finntrágha*. Bran and Sceolan, his famous hounds, are said to be his cousins, his mother's sister having been turned into an animal during pregnancy by magic. Noted members of Fionn's warrior-band were **Goll* (until they fell to fighting again), **Caoilte mac Rónáin*, and **Conán mac Mórna* the buffoon. The mother of his son Oisín was Sadb, who came to him in the form of a deer. Fionn had his headquarters at the Hill of Allen in Co. Kildare (Almu) whence his maternal grandfather, Tadg, ruled over the otherworld in the fairymound underneath. In the main tale of the Fionn cycle, **Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, Fionn appears as a vindictive and jealous older man, initially threatened by the youthful Diarmuid but eventually getting Gráinne back.

When Cairbre, son of Cormac, becomes High King of Tara, he insults **Oscar*, Fionn's grandson, wishing to rid Ireland of the Fianna. War is declared, Goll's people siding with Cairbre against Fionn. At the Battle of Gabhra [*Cath Gabhra*], Oscar and many of the Fianna are killed. Afterwards Oisín is lured away to Tír na nÓg [see *sídh*] by Niamh Chinn Óir, subject of the poem by Mícheál **Coimín* on which **Yeats* based *The *Wanderings of Oisín*.

According to *Aided Finn* [see **tale-types*], Fionn is killed by the five sons of Ugríu after he has been weakened in combat with Fer-tai and Fer-li, a father and son who are related by marriage to Goll. In folk tradition he is still alive and ready to help Ireland in times of need. Caolite and Oisín survive into Christian times in **Acallam na Senórach*, the text which confirmed Fionn's standing as a central figure in Irish literary tradition. In those exchanges with Patrick, the warrior-poets Caoilte and Oisín lament the lack of heroic conduct in Christian Ireland, thus establishing a recurrent literary and folk-motif which represents Oisín as recalcitrant in honour of his father's in memory.

Fionn (meaning 'bright', 'fair') has been seen as a variation on Lug, a divinity of the Tuatha Dé Danann; he is also associated through his name with light, and linked to Welsh Gwynn, and points to a Celtic origin for Vienna. See Eoin MacNeill, ed., *Duanaire Finn*, Vol. I (1908), and Gerard Murphy, ed., Vo. III (1953); G. Murphy, *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (1961); and Joseph Falahy Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw* (1985). Lady **Gregory's*, **Gods and Fighting Men* (1904) presents a narrative of Fionn's life and deeds. There are a great many literary treatments of Fionn in Irish writing in English, from Alice

*Milligan's *The Last of the Fianna* (1899) to James *Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and Flann
*O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), while the stories are frequently retold for children.