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Pride of Kings

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THE PRIDE OF KINGS

Foreword

The three poems of this collection, The Exile of Uishnigh’s Sons, The Death of Fer Diad, and The Madness of Suibhne, have been inspired by ancient Irish epics. In these adaptations, I have strived to remain faithful to the spirit of these works, to their violence and to their sensuality which are the opposite of the bland meekness which such historians as Renan or Matthew Arnold, who had undoubtedly been influenced by the bowdlerized translations or adaptations of Macpherson, La Villemarqué and Lady Charlotte Guest considered as the predominant characteristic of Celtic poetry. For centuries, the characters who appear in these texts have haunted the imagination of poets. Today they still return to take their place on the scene of literature. Derdriu, the most beautiful girl in Ireland: she loved only Noisiu, and because of their passion the lovers were relentlessly pursued by her husband, Conchobor, the king of Ulster. The king paid a high price for his perfidy: Fergus mac Roigh, who had stood surety for the life of Noisiu, burnt down the king’s palace and laid waste his kingdom. Queen Medv (Maeve) had refused to accept that her husband, king Ailill, could own more riches than herself. Her pride led to the war which is the subject of the epic Táin Bó Cuailgne. Like Conchobor, the queen was eventually punished: she was defeated by Cú Chulainn, the champion of Ulster. Cú Chulainn and his foster brother Fer Diad were also the victim of their hubris: Cú Chulainn killed Fer Diad, just as pride also would cause him later to kill his own son Conle and wound the woman he loved, Fand, who came from the magic land of the Sídhe. Pride also caused the downfall of Suibhne mac Colmán, king of DálnaAraide. Suibhne (anglicized into Sweeney) had refused to welcome Saint Rónán in his kingdom and killed one of the saint’s attendants: the saint’s curse led to his madness, and eventually to his death. After many years of wandering in the wilderness, Suibhne recovered some of his reason, and Saint Mo Ling gave him shelter near his oratory. Saint
Rónán’s curse was not lifted, and Suibhne’s chest was pierced like the chest of the saint’s disciple, but Saint Mo Ling was able to lead the mortally wounded king into his church, where, hopefully, Suibhne died at peace with the Lord.

As for the pronunciation of ancient Irish names, one may refer to the translation of the Táin Bó Cuailgne by Thomas Kinsella (The Táin. Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1969), and to the foreword of Lorc’h ar Rouaned, by Reun ar C’halan (Lesneven: Hor Yezh, 1989, pp. 5-10). The reader may thus have an idea of what these names sound like, and also to have a better idea of their effect on the rhythm. One might believe, for instance, that words like bolga, Alba, Delga, Boirche, Colmáin or Fingin have only two syllables: they have three, since an auxiliary vowel sound is introduced between the consonants l, n, r and the consonants b, g, m, and ch (pronounced like German ch in the word “Nacht”). The auxiliary vowel is œ (the French “e caduc”). For similar reasons, such names as Redg and Garbh are dissyllabic, with the auxiliary œ inserted between d and g and r and bh.
The Exile of the Sons of Uisnigh

Cid caín lib ind laéchrad lainn
cengtae i nÉmain ēar tochaím,
    ardu do-cingtis día tig
tri maic adláechdai Uisnig:

Noísiu co mmid chollán chain
(folcud lim-sa dó ‘con tain,
  Ardán co ndaun nó muic maiss,
asclang Ainnlí dar ardaís.

Cid milis lib a mmid mass
ibes mac Nessa níithmass,
    baíthgium ‘riam, réin for brú,
biad menic ba millsíu:

O ro sernad Noísiu nár
julocht for foda fianchláir,
  Millsíu cach biud fo mil
Ara-rálad mac Uisnig.

Cit binni lib I cach mí
cuislennaig nó chornairi
    istí mo chobair in-díu
ro cúala céol bad biíniu.
   (Longes mac nUisnig)

Cathbad’s Prophecy
Derdriu, the Great Bard’s daughter,
Cried in her mother’s womb
Even before she was born
Derdriu, Fedlimid’s daughter
The one they would call
Derdriu of the Sorrows since
Mourning and suffering would be her lot
Such was Cathbad’s prophecy
“Cursed you’ll be, land of Ulad*
And cursed be this cruel day
When Derdriu will find her master
Let her the Bard’s daughter be kept
Forever in her prison
Let the secret of her beauty
Forever be kept hidden
From the warriors’s raw desires.”
*Gaelic name of Ulster

**Derdriu’s Dream**
She grew up in her prison
And Leborcham was her nurse
One day Leborcham’s husband
Was skinning a deer on the snow
A crow was drinking the fresh blood
Derdriu that night saw in a dream
The dazzling vision of a warrior
His forehead was as white as snow
His lips as red as fresh blood
His hair as black as a crow’s feathers
Long were his legs, piercing his eyes
And strong his arms, Ulad’s pride
On Derdriu’s pale cheeks
Tears flow ceaselessly
A limpid dew on the hawthorn
As she contemplates her dream
She confesses to Leborcham:
“Never will my heart know peace
If I don’t see that proud warrior
Whom I shall love more than my life.”

**The Ravishment of Derdriu**
The rumor has come to the king
Of the young beauty hidden
Far from the world on the mountain
As the dove is ravished
By the merciless hawk
The heifer has to yield
To Conchobor the bull
Conchobor mac Nessa
In the palace of Emain Macha
Her heart breaks with sorrow
As she dreams of her warrior
Vainly she calls for death

**Derdriu’s Three Calls**

Like a stallion between two foals
The warrior and his two brothers
Appears on the road
Her heart leaps in her chest
As Derdriu makes her first call
“O Noisiu mac Uisnigh, why.
Why are you abandoning me?”
And Noisiu asks his brothers
“What is that cry that I hear?
I find it hard not to stop.”
“It is only a lost curlew”
Answers Ainnlí. A second time
She calls:”Warrior whom I love,
Why are you abandoning me?”
And Noisiu:”I am telling you,
This cry breaks my heart.”
“It is only a lost plover”
Answers Ardán. A third call:
“O Noisiu, Noisiu mac Uisnigh
Why are you abandoning me?”
And Noisiu :« Never in this world
Was there a voise so full of anguish
This is not a lost bird
I will not take another step
As long as I have not seen the one
Whose heart I hear breaking.”
And Noisiu retraced his steps
Derdriu stood near the road
He took her in his arms
The leaf trembles on the aspen
And Noisiu swore his faith to her
Never shall he love another
The king’s guard are in pursuit
They flee to the Es Ruad Falls
And still further to Benn Etair
They’ll have to cross the sea
And seek refuge in Alba*
The sons of Uishnig will fight
Fearlessly for their new land.

[In order to trap Noisiu, Conchobor pretends to forgive the lovers and sends Fergus mac Roigh to invite them back. Noisiu accepts, in spite of Derdriu’s forebodings.]

**Derdriu’s Lament**
Then was heard Derdriu’s lament
Rising from her pale lips
« How hard I find my farewell
To this place so dear to my heart
Never was I as happy
As when I lay in the green clearing
Next to Noísiu in the Cuan Woods
And in the valley of Masan
There were plenty of salmon and deer
As soon as the sun rose
The house was full of light
And on the top of Da Ruad
Wrens kept warbling their song
Never will I forget
The rocks near Daigen
The sea so clear on the sand
Were it not for the man I love
Never would I leave this place
S’il n’y avait celui que j’aime
Jamais ne m’en irais d’ici.”

[Through an enchantment, King Conchobor has caused Fergus mac Roigh to be kept prisoner in Borrach Castle. Fergus swears he will punish the king who has made him break the guarantee of safety which he gave to Noísiu The treacherous king sennds his warriors to kill Noísiu and his brothers, but in spite of their numbers, they fail. The king then begs Cathbad the druid to use his magic powers against Noísiu].]
Cathbad’s spell
All day and all night
The sons of Uisnigh have fought
They have killed the king’s warriors
Each one has killed three hundred
So that the perfidious king
Had to retreat more ashamed
Than the fox who lost his tail
He has gone to his diviner
Ready to fall on his knees
“For pity’s sake, Cathbad, I beg you
Only the power of your spells
Will keep the sons of Uisnigh
From destroying my kingdom”
The druid has done the will
Of Conchobor the treacherous king
And the ocean rose up
Engulfing the sons of Uisnigh
Hard indeed would be the heart
Unmoved by such brave warriors
Defeated by the raging seas

The Sons of Uisnigh Yield To Their Fate
Conchobor searches in vain
For a vassal shameless enough
To kill defenceless enemies
Eogan mac Durthacht was tired
Of the endless war between
His kingdom and Conchobor’s Ulad
To bring an end to this war
He offered to put to death
Noísiu and his two brothers
Ardán then said to them
“I will first go to my death
Since I am the youngest”
But Ainnlí: “Shame to the elder
Who’d allow his younger sibling
To go first to his death”
The Noísu to Eogan mac Durthacht:
“We ask but one thing, king of Fernmag
We want to choose the sword
By which we’ll die
The sword of Manannan mac Lir”
The sons of Ulsnigh incline their head
A single stroke of their shoulders
All three together fall beheaded.

**Noísiu’s Death Song**
Derdriu tomb e de tout son corps
On Noísiu’s lifeless body
Her breast and her lips are red
With her lover’s red blood
“They killed the Sons of Uíshnigh
The most valiant warriors of Eire
The blame will fall upon you
Men of Ulad who did the will
Of your evil king Conchobor
No one will ever forget
Your cowardice before him
The whole world would have been yours
O Noísiu since you were the equal,
Of Eire’s greatest heroes
They killed the sons of Uísnigh
Aífe had raised them
And Scathach had taught them
The art of war and its secrets
All the women were in love with them
All the warriors feared them
Often I had no other bed
Than their spears and their shields
And my sleep was sweeter
Than on the softest bed
Next to the king my first husband
Life was so sweet near them
How bitter it’ll be without them
And each moment filled with sorrow
Life will be but a nightmare
Without Noísiu Ardán and Aínlí
Why did I not fall dead
Before the death of Uísnigh’s sons

**Derdriu’s Suicide**
Derdriu lived one more year
After the death of Uisnigh’s sons
Her sorrow knew no respite
And Conchobor in his anger
Calleld for Eogan mac Durthacht
“If I cannot comfort you
Eogan might do a better job
It was he who killed Noísiu
From now on you’ll be his whore”
Conchobor then pushed her
Into Eogan’s chariot
Derdriu looked at him with such contempt
That the king told her with a laugh
“Between Conchobor and Durthacht
Derdriu will look exactly like
A ewe between two randy rams”
Upon hearing such shameful words
Derdriu leapt out of the chariot
Her head broke against a rock
Thus perished the daughter of
D’un agnelle entre deux bêliers.”
A ces mots si pleins de vergogne
Derdriu se jette hors du char
Sa tête a porté sur la roche
C’est ainsi que périt Derdriu.

Fergus’ Revenge
Fergus mac Roich has set fire
To the four corners of Emain Macha
All the women were burnt alive
Fergus mac Roich has massacred
More than three hundred of the king’s vassals
And Maine, son of Conchobor
Also fell under his sword
In Connacht his set his camp
Fergus mac Roich and his warriors
Come every night into Ulad
To plunder kill and ransack
The war lasted six years and more
Without respite or end
All of Ulad was laid waste
The Death of Fer Diad


Queen Medb of Connacht (i.e., Maeve) was quite angry when her husband, King Ailill, boasted of his riches, which, he claimed, were far greater than hers. When an inventory was made of what each owned, it was found that the king had only one possession more than the queen: his bull Finnbennach. In all of Ireland there was only one other bull who was Finnbennach’s equal, Donn Cuailnge, whose owner was Dáire mac Fiacha, of Ulad. She sent him an embassy, asking Dáire for the loan of his bull for a period of one year, promising him in exchange fifty heifers, a chariot, and, as she said, “the ardent welcome of my two thighs”. Dáire accepted enthusiastically, but one of his servants heard one of Maeve’s envoys boasting that if Dáire had refused, they would have taken the bull by force. Dáire, quite angry, refused to give the bull. Thus started the war between Connacht and Ulad, the Táin Bó Cuailnge [The Cattle-raid of Cooley]. Maeve had under her command the warriors of Connacht, Mumhan and Laighean, as well as the Ulad warriors who had followed Fergus in Connacht. Unfortunately for Ulad, their warriors were then suffering from the curse laid upon their ancestors by Macha. She was the fastest runner in Ireland, and the men of Ulad had forced her to race against a chariot as she was pregnant. For this crime, she had cursed them to suffer, for an extended period, the excruciating pains of childbirth which she herself had borne; during that time, they were weaker than a new-born mouse. One Ulad warrior only escaped the curse, Setanta, whose father was the god Lug and mother Deichtine, the sister of king Conchobar. He had been nicknamed Cú Chulainn because, as a child, he had inadvertently killed the guard dog of the smith Ulan. As compensation, he had served as guard dog for the smith until a pup of the dog he had killed could take his place. He was only seventy, and the only defender of Ulad against Maeve’s army. ]

The Slaughter at Ath nGabla

"Fail ar dá mbeind, mana n-dig,
cend Fráech ocus cend Fochnáim.
Fail araile ar dá mbeind
cend Eirre ocus cend Innill."

Maeve’s army advanced
Meeting with no resistance
Cúil Silinne, Móin Coltna,
Sinann River, Mag Trega,
Cranaird, Iraird Cuillenn,
They were past Cúil Sibrille,  
Ath nGabla was in sight  
Cú Chulainn was waiting at the ford  

With a single stroke of his sword  
He had cut down a tree  
And put it in the middle of the ford  
No war chariot could pass  
To the right or to the left  
When the charioteers arrived  
They got a most pleasant welcome  
Err andInniu, Fráech and Fochnann  
Each was beheaded  
Cú Chulainn then placed  
Each head on a branch  
Horrible fruits to scare  
All those who would follow  
But the queen did not yield  
She would need more lessons  

Cú C'hulainn’s Feats  

* Tánic dano Lethan fora áth for Níth i crích Conailli Murhemme do chomruc fri Coin Culaind. Barropart forsin náth.  

As long as the men of Ulad  
Would suffer the pains of childbirth  
Cú Chulainn would have to fight  
Maeve’s army all by himself  
Her chariots raced after him  
So fast their axles nearly broke  
That is when Cú Chulainn cut off  
The head of Orlám, Maeve’s son  
One charioteer had dared  
Come close to Cú Chulainn  
Who with a stone cast from afar  
Broke the foolish man’s skull  
Arach’s three sons had thought  
They could ambush him  
Each one of them got his throat cut  
As did also their charioteers  
Fráech mac Fidaig lost his life
So did the queen’s dog Baiscne.
The river Níth in Conaille
Saw more of his feats of arms.
Lethan in the middle of the ford
Maine, the son of Ailill and Maeve
And sixty more warriors
Fell under Cú Chulainn’s sword
Maeve’s army melted away

**Finnabair’s Punishment**


Quenn Maeve was thinking
« Cú Chulainn has no peer
In Ireland unless I call
Cú Roi mac Dáiri to help me
Or a warrior like Nath Crantail”
Cú Roi refused at once
But Nath Crantail did not say no
If he got in exchange
Finnabair the fair maiden
Maeve and Ailill’s daughter
Nath Crantail won’t know her bed
For Cú Chulainn will cut his head
Not far from Ochaine
The Cú’s spear killed Buide mac Báin.
And also Redg the Mocker
This was in dthe land of Cúib
They fell by the hundreds
Nathcoirpthe in the forest
Cruithen in the middle of a ford
Near Focherd it was the turn
Of Cúr mac Daláth. There also
Were killed Teorá Mac n-Aignec'h
And others:: Lath mac Dabró
With Srubdaire mac Fidaig.
Fer Báeth mac Fir Bend had been
A good friend of Cú C’hulainn
At the time when both waged war
At the side of Scathach across the sea
Cú Chulainn did not want to
Fight with his old comrade at arms
But Fer Baéth was stubborn
Cú Chulainn was forced to kill him
Many more fell by his hand
They had been invited to come
For dinner under Maeve’s tent
Finnabair would serve them
Poured glass after glass of wine
And the queen whispered to them
“Cut off the head of Cú Chulainn
And Finnabair will be yours”
Each would accept but by the morrow
Each one of them has lost his life
Láirine who was the brother
Of Lúgaid mac Nóis was fool enough
To go alone against the Cú
Who seized him in his arms
He pressed so hard that all the shit
Came out of Láirine’s bowels
Who never more could empty them
Without crying out with pain
Cú Chulainn also killed
Lóc'h mac Mofébaís and his brother
And all those who were fool enough
To attack the Cú at night.
Soon regretted their mistake
There was seventy of them
Every one had his head cut off
That was near the ford of Ath Traigid.
This is also the place where fell
Six warriors of Clanna Dedad
The queen had sent her best men
Against the Cú: none survived
Much longer still would be the list
Of those whom Cú Chulainn did kill.
The rivers were red with the blood
Flowing from the victims’ wounds
Maeve and Ailill wanted a truce
They thought of offering Finnabair
Cú Chulainn accepted the girl
But it was only a new trick
They had placed a crown
On the head of Tamun the Fool
But Cú Chulainn saw through the trick
He broke the head of the poor Fool
Impaled him on a pillar of stone
The Cú captured Finnabair
Cut off her long blond locks
And impaled the poor girl
So that the pillar passed between
Her body and her chemise
Finnabair was not freed
Until dawn when Maeve and Aillill
Came looking for her
After this there was no longer
Question of truce or armistice

[Cú Chulainn was in desperate need of rest. He slept for three days and three nights: his father Lug had come from the land of the Sídhe to watch over his beloved son. The pains of childbirth did not afflict adolescents. Their bands were commanded by Follamain, Conchobor’s son, They wanted to help Cú Chulainn. For weapons, they took their hockey sticks. By Lia Toll they fought all through their hero’s sleep. Follamain had sworn he would not return without Aillill’s head at his belt: he was the one who lost his head. Upon waking up, Cú Chulainn heard of his death. In his fury he was taller than a giant: on his war chariot he raced through the enemy, mowing them down like rows of hay. After the death of the sons of Uisnigh, Fergus mac Roigh had settled in Connacht with his men. He hated Conchobor for his treachery, but he loved Cú Chulainn who had been his foster son. Dubthach the Black had suggested that the entire army attack Cú Chulainn, but Fergus shut him up: such a (forfeit) would bring them shame, and when the Ulad men would rise from their bed of pain, they would exact a terrible revenge. Ferchu Loingsig led a band a cattle rustlers: who stole from king Aillill’s herds. He thought that all his past crimes would be forgiven if he could bring Cú Chulainn’s head to the king. Their band of twelve would fall on Cú Chulainn in the middle of the night and kill him in his sleep. But at dawn their twelve heads adorned each a rock. Since then this spot bears the name of Cinnit Ferchu Loingsig. The next day Queen Maeve sent twenty nine of her best warriors against Cú Chulainn: Gáile Dána, his twenty seven sons and Glas mac Delga his nephew. Fergus mac Roich did not approve, but Maeve refused to budge: it is still a duel, since all these men are Gáile Dana’s flesh and blood. Fergus withdrew in his tent, and told his men: “To-morrow Cú Chulain shall be slaughtered?” “How could this be?, they exclaimed. No man can do it.” “No man can, but the poison will. The Gáile Dána put poison on their weapons. A single scratch on a man, and within a month he dies.” Fiacha mac Fir Febe volunteered to go and watch the fight. The Gáile Dána threw their spears all together, but Cú Chulain knew how to handle his shield. Then all the Dána rushed toward him. When Fiacha saw all the hands brandishing their poisoned swords, he drove his chariot along their line, cutting the hands as he rode by. “Just in time, said Cú Chulainn. Fiacha was
concerned: he had broken the pact between king Aillill and Fergus. What would happen if one of the Gáile Dána managed to survive and report him to the king? Cú Chulainn told him not to worry and cut off every Dána’s head. Twenty nine pillars were raised on the spot of the massacre.

The Invitation

"Finnabair na ferrga,
rígan ēarthair Elgga
ar ndíth Chon na Cerdda
A Fhir Diad, rot fía."

The queen and all here advisers
The chose to send a messenger
To Fer Diad mac Damáin
Whose skin was all armour
Harder than a sword.of steel
He was Cú Chulainn’s foster brother.
They both had studied the art of war
With Scathach and her daughter,
The one whose name was Uathach.
His fame was in every respect
Equal to Cú Chulainn’s
Except for one thing:
Cú Chulainn had mastered the use
Of the gae bolga*
And Fer Diad had not
Fer Diad did not care
Because of the skin of steel
Armouring his entire body.
Fer Diad at first refused
To do what the queen asked
But she had prepared a feast
For him,, and Finnabair
Was seated at his side
For each cup of wine he drank
She gave his three kisses
And very soon she offered him
The sweet apples of her breasts
Which he found much to his taste
The queen then asked him
-- Why do you think, my friend,
You have been invited here?
-- And why should I not be?
Is there any man in your camp
Who could claim to be my equal?
-- This is why I shall give you
A chariot, weapons, harness,
Half the land of Ai,
And Finnabair in your bed,
And if need be I will add
The ardent welcome of my thighs
-- You may offer me all your goods
Yet I never really could
Go against my foster brother
-- Cú Chulainn was quite right,
The queen answered with a mocking smile
Fer Diad swallowed the bait
Hook, line and sinker with it
-- What did he say? he asked
-- That the killing of Fer Diad
Would hardly be my hardest feat
-- I shall pierce his damned tongue
Said Fer Diad, all filled with rage
To-morrow I’ll be at the ford
-- And our wishes will be with you
Fer Diad, our protector
All that has been promised to you
Shall be given, gold, silver, arms and land
And Finnabair in your bed
As soon as the dog is muzzled
Fergus has saddled his horse
To give warning to Cú Chulainn
-- To-morrow Fer Diad shall come
Full of anger toward you
-- This fight could never please me
Not because I am afraid
But because of the love
I have always had for him
-- And yet fear would be justified
No steel has ever managed to pierce
The tough armour of his skin
-- Have no concern about me
I do not care for idle boasts
But you know I’ll be the winner
All night till dawn in his tent
Fer Diad could not sleep a wink
He knew it would be very hard
To win the fight with Cú Chulain

* The exact nature of the *gae bolga* is not known. Apparently, it was a kind of spear which was launched under water with some kind of thrower. When it had penetrated the enemy’s body, a powerful spring released sharp blades radiating from the shaft (somewhat like the ribs of an umbrella which opens up when one presses the trigger mechanism). The blades sliced through all the organs. To recover the weapon, it was necessary to dissect the victim’s body.

.[At dawn, Fer Diad’s charioteer remonstrated with him, reminding him of the time when both he and Cú Chulainn were waging war abroad. The enemies had disarmed Fer Diad, and Cú Chulainn killed one hundred of them to recapture his foster brother’s sword. Another time, when Fer Diad had entered the home of Scathach’s head servant without asking the man’s permission, the man hit him with his fork, throwing him down to the ground and threatening him, Cú Chulainn cut off the man’s head to save his friend’s life. Fer Diad then told his driver: “Had you told me all this yesterday, I would not now be quarrelling with Cú Chulainn who was my brother.” But it was too late, and to break the bonds of brotherhood they exchanged insults. On the first day, they fought with javelins and lances. In the evening, the fighting stopped, and they exchanged remedies and dressing for their wounds, and food. On the next day, they fought with the long lances, launching their chariots against each other. On the third day, they used the claymore and, as before they exchanged remedies, dressing and food.]

**The Death of Fer Diad**

*Is trúag aní nar tá de,*
  "nar ndaltanaib Scáthaiche,*
  missi créchtach ba chró*
  *tussu gan charptiu d’imlúad.*

*Is trúag aní nar tá de,*
  "nar ndaltanaib Scáthaiche,*
  missi créchatach ba chró garb*
  *ocus tussu ultimarb.*

*Is trúag aní nar tá de,*
  "nar ndaltanaib Scáthaiche*
  *tussu d’éc, missi beó brass,*
  *is gleó ferge in ferachas."
Fer Diad had felt in advance
That this would be his final day
With the shield and the sword
He had accomplished feats
Which had dazzled Cú Chulain
The Cú then gave this order
To Laeg his faithful charioteer
If ever you see me yield
Mock me so that I’ll be a raging beast
Fer Diad asked Cú Chulainn
-- Where shall we have our fight to day?
-- Right n the middle of the river
Fer Diad did not refuse
Although he felt his heart grow weak
The bravest of the warriors.
Found himself as powerless
As a kitten when Cú Chulainn
Resorted to the *gae bolga*
The invincible weapon which flew
On the water surface. It sharp point
Went into the enemy’s body
Releasing it thirty blades
Which sliced stomach, lungs and heart
Bowels, liver, spleen, and kidneys.
Fer Diad who knew all that
Wore a thick stone like an apron
Until noon they kept fighting
Accomplishing a thousand feats
But none could strike the winning blow
Cú Chulainn at last leapt
To strike a good blow from above
But Fer Diad raising his arm
Made the Cú fall in the river
Laeg then laughed at Cú Chulainn
“You really are just a pup
To let him treat you like a rag
One throws away into the trash
Cú Chulainn then became a beast
The fight became so violent
That the river has burst its banks
The Cú is cut and losing blood
The wound must be quickly bound
Cú Chulainn shouts: “Gae bolga!”
But throws a spear above the belt
Fer Diad has to raise his shield
The gae bolga hits below
Breaking the stone, piercing the skin
And triggering the thirty blades
-- You have killed me, Cú C’hulainn.
The blood will never dry on your hands
Cú Chulainn has carried the dead body
Ro the north bank of the river
So that it may forever rest
In the land of Ulad
And then he has lost consciousness
Laeg has run up to him: “Get up
Cúcuc. Foes will soon be here.
-- I might as well die right now
Have I not killed my own brother?
-- And did not your own brother
Give you that wound that bleeds to death?
-- What do I care if he is dead
He who was so dear to me
O Fer Diad, you were so wrong
To listen to that evil queen!
Now you are no longer alive
And I remain to mourn you
Laeg has cut up the dead body
To retrieve the gae bolga.
C. – Tis a pity to see to your corpse
O Fer Diad, lying there
So pale near the gae bolga
All red with your blood
And your empty chariot
Nothing will stop my sorrow
How cruel is my fate!

The Final Battle

And sain geibis Medb scíath dúthen dar éis fer nHérend. And sain fáitte Medb in Dond Cúalgne co coíca dá shamascib imbe oocus ochtor dá hechlachaib leiss timchell co Crúachain.
Gipé rashossed, gipé ná rossed, go rossed in Dond Cúalgne feib ra gell-si.
At last the labor pains had left
The men of Ulad. Cú Chulainn
Had been severely wounded
Ficce’s sons and Senoll Uathach
Came at last to take him away
Fingin the Leech dressed all his wounds
Conchobor had gathered all his men
To fight Ailill and Maeve’s army
Between Gáireach and Irgáireach
Maeve and Ailill were defeated
Some of Maeve’s men had taken
The Donn and his herd of heifers
To the lush meadows of Crúachan
The Donn, on the plains of Mag Aí
Came across the bull Finnbennach
Their duel lasted a whole day
The earth shook under their hooves
When they rushed against each other
Donn came back alone to Crúachan
Next morning Donn came back alone
To Crúachan. Finnbennach’s carcass
Hung from his horns, and the Donn left
For Cúailgne. Near Úi Echach
He fell dead on the green meadow.
And for seven entire years
Nowhere in all of Ireland
Was there a single warrior killed.
Suibhne’s Madness

Suibhne’s Sacrilege

*Is olc sén ar millessa*

*ainech Rónáin Fínn*

« That monk must be really crazy
If he has been impudent enough
To raise a temple to his god
On the lands of my kingdom.
Rónán Fínn will be sorry
For the day when he dared
Crossed the border of DálnaRaidé
Suibhne mac Colmáin is not a man
Whose strict orders can be ignored
Without the harshest punishment. »

Anger had filled me when his bell
Had pulled me out of my sweet sleep
The sweet companion of my bed
Eorann the Fair, had sought in vain
To calm my fury. She held me back
By the edge of my tunic
But it remained in her hands
I rushed out of my home
As naked as a new born babe
Taking only some of my spears
Rónán was busy with his cult
A weaker man might have been moved
By the white hair around his bald pate
A slap across his fingers and his book
Was at the bottom of the lake
Another slap would have hit
The monk’s ill-advised mouth
Had it not been for the messenger
Sent by Congal, kind of Ulad
He asked me to join his forces
On the big plain of Mag Rath
Rónán was bold enough to follow
He dared believe he would make peace
Between Congal, king of Ulad
And Domnall, his old enemy
That damn monk was swollen with pride
His band kept shouting: “Miracle!”
Because an otter had brought back
They claimed, the book fallen into the lake
In his pride he even dared
Invoke his god to curse my name
Prophesying that some day I would
Wander alone through the world
As naked as a new born babe
And his disciple by his side
Was preparing to throw at me
Some magic water with a fox-tail
The pup had hardly raised his hand
That a spear was flying straight
Toward the hollow of his chest
A second one would surely have
Found the heart of Rónán Fínn
But for the bell which was hanging
From his neck by an iron chain
And which turned away the spear
At once Rónán asked of his god
To make me fly as did my spear
And pierce my chest as I had done
To the chest of his acolyte

The Saint’s Curse

Do-rat mise it chumnmansa
Mallacht Rónáin Fínn

Before the two armies came to blows
They shouted war-cries more dreadful
Than if lightning had fallen straight upon me
Mais avant que les deux armées
My hands grew weak: they could no more
Hold my sword, the blood in my veins
Turned to water. And I took flight
Faster than any spear; all my limbs
Trembled far worse than aspen leaves
And I went to perch on a branch
It was such heartbreak to find out
From Angus my kinsman
That Congal Claén had been killed
That Domnall had carried the day
Angus himself fled for his life
But the hardest was to see
The contempt burning in his eyes
I had to fly farther away
And I flew like a crow
When at last I came to stop
It was, I think, in Tír Conaill
At Cíll Riagáin. Domnall’s warriors
Showed me their teeth like wolves
Poking fun at the black feathers
Which had gown over my body
Again I had to fly away

**The King’s Punishment**

_Mor múich i túsa in-nocht;
rothregd mo chorp in gaéth glan_

During seven long years I fled
Here and there, night and day
Over the top of the mountains
I had such bitter memories
Of the night I spent with Eorann
Before the day when cruel fate
Made me into this wandered
Cursed by the day when I happened
To meet that bloody Rónán Fínn
Whose bell and whose magic water
Turned me into this scarecrow
Cursed be the day when Congal Claén
Gave me this sumptuous present
This tunic with gold ornaments
The warriors who caught sight of it
Kept shouting to each other:
“Don’t let the bird hide in the brush”
They tracked me to Mac Coba
And I leapt among the trees
Arrows kept coming at me
Like hailstones in a storm
And faster than the wind
They hummed as they flew by
If I was not killed
It sure was not for lack of trying
The greyhounds chase after the hare flee
And like a hare I kept racing
I suffered through the long years
When I had lost all my good sense
Before my faithful Loingsechán
At last found me and gave me help

Suibhne sous la neige

Dúairc in betha beith gan tech;
truaig in betha, a Christ cain

It is snowing and i twill snow
It is freezing on the mountain
On the heights of Sliabh meic Sin
My skin is blue, my feet are sore
This is what Rónán did to me
And when I was on Benn Boirche
Freezing rain kept falling on me
Tonight by body will be racked
On the trunk of an oak ib Gáille
Far from the moors of Glenn Bolcán
Since feathers grew on my body
I have endured cruel tortments
Who will come to succor me?
I was no more than wild game
For the foe in hot pursuit
From Mag Line unt Mag Lí
And from Mag Lí to the Life
I will have to cross once more
The heights of Sliabh Fúait
Rath Mor Mag nAí et Mac Luirg
And before I reach Crúachán
From Sliabh Chua to Gáille
The way will not be easy
And the goal will still be far
A peaceful valley on Sliabh Breg
Hard is the fate of a mad king
Who has no other nourishment
Than the green cress of fountains
And nothing to drink by
The foaming water of mountain streams
I have had to seek shelter
Among wild wolves in the forest
And no one took pity on
Such a miserable life

Suibhne et Eorann

Súanach sin, a Eorann án
I leith leiptha ret lennán

At that time Eorann was sharing
Rge bed of Gúaire mac Congal
Gúaire was hunting in the woods
When Suibhne came to see her
-- The night is sweet for you
O Eorann, sleeping with your new love
Have you so quickly forgotten
The vows so dear to my heart?
An oath is soon forgotten
If you still have a warm bed
While I freeze on the mountain
-- Never shall I stop loving
The poor beggar who was my king
I may still have a warm bed
But my heart languishes in pain
Since the day when Suibhne my king
Lost his throne and his reason
-- The son of Congal is quite handsome
Feast with your new lover man
Forget the one of yesteryear
-- If ever I have been seated
Next to the prince in his banquets
Be sure that I would have preferred
To spend my nights by your side
Sleeping on the naked heath
-- Better for you, my poor Eorann
Live in peace in a rich palace
Than go and beg for your bread
With such a hideous scarecrow
-- If only I could ever choose
Between all the Irish heroes
It is with you, my dear Suibhne
That I would wander through the land
Living on cress and cold water
My heart breaks when I see you
O Suibhne. Cruel is the thorn
Which stings and tears at your flesh
How I would like to follow you
Covered with feathers like a swan
Flying with you above the sea
-- I did you wrong, O Eorann
My bed is much too hard and cold
For the lady who was my queen
Gúaire would be returning soon
And Suibhne had to run away

[In the course of his wanderings, Suibhne encounters his liege Loingsechan, and tells him about his life in the wilderness. Loingsechan gives him shelter in a mill, where Suibhne meets with an old woman who, by questioning him about his adventures, causes him to sink again into madness. When he regains his sense and tries to return home, the saint’s curse puts obstacles in his way. Finally, Saint Mo Ling takes pity on him and gives his shelter in his hermitage, although is powerless to lift Saint Rónán’s curse. Suibhne’s wanderings all through Ireland has given the author an opportunity to express his feelings for the harsh beauty of the land, as in the following two poems]

L’appel de la Garbh

Gáir na Gairbe glaídes re tosach tuinne

The Garbh roars towards the sea
Fish are at play in its waters
The sight of its waves crowned with foam
Rising against the current
Always rejoices my heart
I love to look at their struggle
And to hear the birds on the shore
As the tide breaks against the reefs
I love the deep song of the river
During the great rites of winter
I often rested on its bank
And its music lulled me to sleep
My heart burnt with nostalgia
When I was at Durtaigh Faighlen
Taking my rest on the mountains
As curlews screeched above the sea
And on the heights of Rinn Ros Bruic
In Saint Mo Ling’s ermitage
The holy man prayed to his god
The night is coll, in the distance
A stag is belling and starlings
Gather in the Fec Cuille Woods
Night has fallen, the storm is raging
Over Inbhear Dubhglaise
The wild cries of the Garbh
Join the sabbath of the sea
I love to see the salmon leap
In the falls of Eas Dubhtaige
But nothing could ever equal
The majestic voice of the Garbh
And often I have left the heights
Of Benn Boirche and Benn Bógain
When the powerful call of the Garbh
Reached the meadows of Benn Bólcaín
O Mo Ling, in your hermitage
I have found peace. There
My story shall find its end
May your god save me from evil!
*There is an auxiliary syllable [□] between the consonants r and bh

Suibhne

_M’airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir:_

_nì lántechdais bes sèstu_

Suibhne loved his oratory
“My oratory at Túaim Inbir
Is tiny but a palace
Would please me less. Gobhán
Built it but the Lord
Himself made the roof
One is safe from spear or arrow
My oratory On n’y craint ni lances ni flèches
Mon oratoire at Túaim Inbir
Is lighted by the stars.”
La mort de Suibhne
A Mo Ling, na connailbe
gus’ tucus cenn mo báire

However far did Suibhne wander
Every evening he returned
The milkmaid had made a hole
In the ground, lined with clay
She filled it up with some fresh milk
Suibhne threw himself on the ground
And lapped up the milk like a pup
The milkmaid was named Muirghil
And her husband was Mongán
The swineherd. He hated the care
His wife took of poor Suibhne
Next to the freshly poured milk
He planted into the ground
The sharp horn of a stag
Covered it up with tufts of hay
When Suibhne came to drink the milk
The horn went straight into his chest
Thus was fulfilled Saint Rónán’s curse
Before giving up his spirit
Suibhne confessed his sins to Mo Ling
Who gave him the final rites
Confessa sa faute à Mo Ling
Qui lui donna les huiles saintes

-- There was a time, said Suibhne,
When my heart took pleasure only
In blackbirds singing in the woods
Or in stags belling through the storm
And mocked the bell of the saint.
-- There was a time, said Suibhne
When my heart took pleasure only
In the eagle’s cry on the heights
And despised the voice of women
-- There was a time, said Suibhne
When my heart took pleasure only
In wolves howling in the forests
And despised the pious anthems
Of monks celebrating their god
Suibhne has lost all consciousness
The hermit with his disciple’s help
Looked for a pillar of granite
-- Here he will be buried
And this rock will mark the grave
Of Suibhne the poor mad king
I took pity on his sad fate
And for the sake of the poor king
I love the places which he loved
The streams and their green watercress
The rocks from which clear water springs
And where he liked to come to drink
I loved having him near me
And forever I’ll remember
The time we spent together
If it please the King of Heaven
Rise up, give me your hand
And may God answer my prayer!
The king had regained consciousness
Mo Ling carried him in his arms
To the porch of the chapel
Suibhne leaned against the portal
With a sigh he gave up the ghost
God welcome him in paradise!
The Exile of the Sons of Uisnigh
Cathbad’s prophecy
Derdriu’s dream
The Ravishment of Derdriu
The Three Calls of Derdriu
Conchobor’s Rage
The mission of Fergus mac Roigh
Derdriu’s Lament
Derdriu’s Prophecy
The Red Branch
Leborcham’s Mission
Traighthren’s Mission
Buinne’s Treachery
The Death of Illann Brea
Cathbad’s Spell
The Sons of Uisnigh yield to their fate
The Death Song of Uisnigh
Derdriu’s Suicide
Fergus’ Revenge

The Killing of Fer Diad
The Quarrel
The Mission
Macha’s Curse
Fedelm’s Prophecy
The Slaughter at Ath nGabla
Cú Chuláinn’s Feats
Finnabair’s Punishment
Cú Chulainn’s Sleep
The Prophecy of Fergus’
The Massacre of the Gáile Dána
The Request
The Duel
The Killing of Fer Diad
The Final Battle

Suibhne’s Madness
Suibhne’s Sacrilege
The Saint’s Curse
The King’s Punishment
Suibhne in the Snow
Suibhne and Eorann
Suibhne and Longsechan
Suibhne and the Old Woman of the Mill
Thw Call of the Garbh
The Orarory of Suibhne
The Death of Suibhne