

The Ulster Cycle: The Death Tales

by Patrick Brown

The Death of Celtchair mac Uthechair is found in the Book of Leinster (c.1160) and MS XL in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh (14th century). *The Death of Conchobor* is found in two almost identical versions in the same manuscripts. *The Death of Cú Chulainn* comes from the Book of Leinster, and *The Death of Láegaire Búadach*, *The Death of Cet mac Mágach*, *The Death of Fergus mac Róich* and *The Death of Medb* all come from the Advocates' Library MS XL.

Da Choca's Hostel is found incomplete in two manuscripts, the sixteenth century H.3.18, and the seventeenth century H.1.17, although it is apparently much older, judging by the reference to the Book of Druimm Snechta, a lost manuscript of the early 8th Century. A complete text can be compiled from the two of them. *The Battle of Airtech* is found in the Book of Lecan (c. 1400), and the sixteenth century manuscript H.3.18, where it follows directly on from *Da Choca's Hostel*.

The Death of Ailill and Conall Cernach is mentioned in a list in the Book of Leinster, but the version presented here, found in the 15th century Glenn Masain MS and MS H.2.17, probably dates to the 13th century.

The Death of Conchobar's Sons comes from MS 1363 (formerly H.4.22) in Trinity College, Dublin.

The Death of Celtchar mac Uthechair

The Death of Blai Briuga

Blai Briuga was a famous Ulsterman, who had seven herds of cattle, with 140 cows and a plough-team in each herd. He was also the keeper of a hostel. There was a *geis*¹ on him requiring him to sleep with any woman who stayed there without her husband, and one day Brig Brethach, Celtchar's wife, came to stay.

'You have done me wrong, woman,' he said. 'Coming here as you have is a *geis* to me.'

'It's a wretched man indeed who breaks his *gessa*,' Brig replied.

'That's true,' said Blai. 'I'm an old man, and you're hard to resist.'

So that night, he slept with her.

Celtchar heard about this, and went to seek his wife. Blai went for protection to Conchobor's royal house, and Celtchar followed him there. On the floor of the royal house, Conchobor and Cú Chulainn were playing *fidchell*,² and Blai was standing over the board. Celtchar thrust his spear through Blai's chest and into the wattle of the wall behind him. A drop of blood ran down the spear and fell on the board.

'Bloody hell, Cú Chulainn!' said Conchobor.

'Aye,' said Cú Chulainn.

They watched as the blood flowed from one side of the board to another, waiting to see which one of them it would end up closest to, and therefore which of them avenging Blai fell to. While they waited, Blai died.

Celtchar fled south, to the land of the Dessi in Munster.

'This is terrible,' said the men of Ulster to Conchobor. 'It will mean war with the Dessi. It's bad enough that we have lost Blai Briuga - let Celtchar come home.'

'Then he will come home,' said Conchobor. 'I will send his son to fetch him and act as his safeguard.' In those days in Ulster a son

¹ *Geis*: a taboo. To break your *gessa* (plural form) would lead to your inevitable downfall.

² *Fidchell*: 'wood-sense', a board game, probably similar to chess or draughts.

was not held responsible for the crimes of his father, nor was a father held responsible for the crimes of his son.

So Celtchar's son went south to fetch his father home.

'What brings you here, my son?' said Celtchar.

'I'm here to bring you home,' his son replied.

'What is my safeguard?'

'I am,' said the son.

'Subtle (*séimh*) is the treachery (*muin*) the Ulstermen commit against me,' said Celtchar, 'that I should come home on my son's guarantee.'

'Then that shall be his name, and the name of his descendants,' said a druid, and that is why that place in the land of the Dessi is called Semuine.

So Celtchar came home. In compensation for the killing of Blai Briuga, the Ulstermen demanded that he rid them from the three worst menaces that would come to Ulster in his lifetime.

The Death of Conganchnes mac Dedad

Conganchnes mac Dedad came to Ulster to avenge his nephew Cú Roí mac Dáire mac Dedad. He brought devastation to Ulster, and no sword or spear could harm him - they just bounced off his tough skin.

'Rid us of this menace, Celtchar!' said Conchobor.

'I will indeed,' said Celtchar.

So on a certain day he went to speak to Conganchnes, and he beguiled him by offering him his daughter Níab, as well as a feast for a hundred men every afternoon. Then Níab beguiled her new husband, asking him how he could be killed.

'You must thrust two red-hot spits into my soles and up through my shins,' he replied.

So Níab told her father to prepare two long spits, and a sleeping spell, and to gather a large army. So it was done, and they crept up on Conganchnes on their bellies. They thrust the spits through his soles with a sledgehammer, right into the marrow, and that was the end of Conganchnes. Celtchar cut off his head, and a cairn was raised over it. Every man who passed put a stone on it.

The Death of the Luch Donn

The second menace was the Luch Donn ('brown mouse'), a dog which had been found as a pup by the widow's son in the hollow of an oak, and which the widow raised until it was huge. Eventually, it turned on the widow's sheep, and killed her cows, and then her son, and finally the widow herself. It fled to Glenn na Mórmuici (The Great Pig's Glen). Every night, it would devastate a settlement of the Ulstermen, and by day it slept.

'Rid us of this menace, Celtchar!' said Conchobor.

Celtchar went to the woods and found a log of alder. He hollowed it out so that he could fit his arm through it, and then boiled it in fragrant herbs, honey and grease until it was tough and supple. Then, early in the morning, he went to the cave where the dog slept, and waited for it to return from the slaughter.

When the beast arrived, it raised its snout at the smell of the fragrant wood. Celtchar held the log out towards it, and it took it in its jaws. It bit into it, and its teeth stuck in the tough wood. Celtchar pulled the log towards him, and the dog pulled in the other direction. Celtchar thrust his arm through the log and down the beast's throat, seizing its heart in his hand and pulling it out through its mouth. Then he took its head.

The Death of Dóelchú

A year later, to the day, cowherds heard the squealing of pups from inside Conganchnes's cairn. They dug it up and found three pups: one speckled, one brown, and one black. The speckled dog was given as a gift to Mac Dathó of Leinster, and because of it a multitude of Irishmen fell at Mac Dathó's house. The brown dog was given to Culann the Smith.³ Celtchar kept the black one, and called it Dóelchú ('Beetle-dog'). It wouldn't let anyone but Celtchar handle it.

Once, when Celtchar wasn't at home, the dog got out, and no-one from Celtchar's house could catch it. It turned on the herds and flocks of Ulster, and every night it would kill a cow or a sheep.

'Rid us of this menace, Celtchar!' said Conchobor.

³ This isn't the dog Cú Chulainn killed to earn his name. As a gloss explains, that happened earlier, and the dog in question came from Spain.

Celtchar went to the glen where the dog was, taking a hundred warriors with him. He called the dog three times, and it came running towards its master, and licked his feet.

‘It’s terrible what’s going to happen to this dog,’ everyone said.

‘I will no longer be incriminated because of you,’ said Celtchar, and he gave it a blow with his spear, the *lúin Cheltchair*,⁴ through the heart, which killed it.

‘Woe!’ everybody cried.

‘Indeed,’ said Celtchar. He lifted the spear, and a drop of the hound’s blood ran down it and through Celtchar’s body to the ground, killing him.

A lament was raised for him there, and his stone and tomb erected. And that was the death of Blai Briuga, and Conganchnes, and Celtchar mac Uthechair.

⁴ *Lúin Cheltchair*: a famous spear known from the Mythological Cycle. Whenever killing was expected from it, it needed a cauldron of blood to satisfy it, or else it would burst into flame and kill its master. It would kill a man with every thrust, and nine with every throw.

The Death of Lóegaire Buadach

How did the death of Lóegaire Buadach come about? Not hard to tell.

Áed mac Ainninne was Conchobor's poet, and he had an affair with Conchobor's wife, Mugain Gorse-Hair. They were found out, and Áed was seized at Conchobor's command.

The poet requested that his death be by drowning, and Conchobor granted him that wish, but at each lake he was taken to he sang a spell over the water so that it dried up, and there was no water in which to drown him. There was no lake or river in Ireland that they could drown him in, until they came to Loch Laí, where Lóegaire Buadach's house was. There, the spell didn't work. But while they were trying to drown him, Lóegaire's steward came out of the house.

'Help me, Lóegaire!' cried Aed. 'They couldn't find a place to drown a poet in the whole of Ireland until they came to this place!' Lóegaire took his sword in his hand and leapt into action.

But as he did so he cracked the crown of his head on his own door-lintel, taking off the back of his skull and scattering his brains on his cloak. Still, he managed to kill thirty of the drowners before he died, and Áed escaped.

And that is the death of Lóegaire Buadach.

The Death of Cú Chulainn

The beginning of the story is missing in the Book of Leinster, but a few fragments survive in another manuscript. It begins with a conspiracy among the children of three men killed by Cú Chulainn.

Calatín Dána, whom Cú Chulainn had killed along with his twenty-seven sons and his nephew on the Cattle Raid of Cooley, left his wife pregnant. She gave birth to six children, three boys and three girls, and they were brought up to avenge their father.

The sons learned druidry, curses and summoning spells. The daughters learned knowledge and books and witchcraft. All six of them were blinded in the left eye. Great was their longing to avenge their father with the arts they had learned.

They teamed up with Lugaid, son of Cú Roí (whom Cú Chulainn killed in The Death of Cú Roí), and Erc, son of Coirpre Nia Fer (whom Cú Chulainn killed in The Battle of Ros na Rig).

‘No, it was no joke for my father to oppose Cú Chulainn,’ said Erc. ‘Perhaps it will be no joke for me, if I undertake it.’

...

‘When shall we go against Cú Chulainn?’ said Erc.

‘Not hard to tell,’ said the sons of Calatín. ‘As soon as the three weapons to attack him with are made. It will be the work of a week.’

A week later, Lugaid and Erc said, ‘We think it’s time to muster the men of Ireland.’

‘It’s not time yet,’ said the sons of Calatín. ‘The work of a week is the work of seven years, with one day every year spent making the spears.’

It fell to Maine, a venomous man, to rivet and smooth the spears.

So, seven years later, they mustered their army and marched upon Ulster. Once more, the Ulstermen were struck down with their pangs.

The Great Rout on Muirthemne Plain

The Ulstermen advised Cú Chulainn not to go forth to battle until they could accompany him.

‘Never before have I had to endure the wails of women and children and not been able to do anything about it!’ said Cú Chulainn.

Fifty queens came forth, and bared their breasts in front of him. They were the same women who first bared their breasts to him, and brought three vats of water to quench his fury. That day he was not allowed to go to battle.

‘I see your summoning spells haven’t managed to bring Cú Chulainn to us, sons of Calatín,’ said Lugaid. ‘The men have come from Dún Cermnai and Belach Con Glais and Temair Luachra and Commar na Trí nUisce, only to wait here at Béoil Menbolg. Your summoning spells are useless - they’re taking far too long to draw Cú Chulainn out.’

‘We’ll make him come tomorrow.’

The next day the sons of Calatín made it appear that Emain Macha was surrounded by armies, with a cloud of smoke from the fire and devastation over the plain of Macha. It seemed that Emain would fall to the armies, and the weapons fell from their racks. The news was brought to Cú Chulainn.

Leborcham said, ‘Arise, Cú Chulainn, and turn your skills and feats to defend Muirthemne Plain from the men of Leinster. We beat our hands over the destruction of our lands. Cormac can’t help us. Conchobor’s mighty household is far off. Conall Cernach is not nearby. Lugaid, the son of a man you killed, will carry out his vengeance, unless you arm yourself and rise to attack!’

‘Stop it, girl,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘No matter how dangerous the enemy, I can’t defend Conchobor’s kingdom alone. It’s not wise for me to fight while Ulster is in its pangs. I’m no eager chariot chief, hungry for battle, today.’

Níab, Celtchar’s daughter and Conall Cernach’s wife, was the next to speak. ‘That’s all very well for you,’ she said. ‘Conall, Amergin’s mighty son, would mount his chariot, and stand in muddy fords, striking and beheading the enemies of Ulster.’

‘Woman,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘I may be doomed, but I will not violate my honour. I have not yet met my match, or lost my prowess. I will not avoid my death.’

Cú Chulainn leapt for his weapons. He wrapped his cloak around him, but that first cloak tore, and the brooch fell from his hand. ‘This cloak is not my enemy,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Nor is the brooch that pierces my foot. It’s giving me a warning. Shields will be shattered, blades broken before my right fist. I will shed proud blood. My contempt will wound the choicest men, south of Muirthemne where women wail.’

He wrapped his cloak around him, and took up his shield with the notched edge.

‘Friend Láeg,’ he called to his charioteer, ‘yoke the chariot for us!’

‘I swear by the god my tribe swears by,’ said Láeg, ‘if the whole of Conchobor’s province were surrounding Liath Macha, they couldn’t drag him to the chariot. He has never refused you before. That spirit which has always delighted me has deserted him. If you wish, come and call Liath yourself.’

So Cú Chulainn went to him, but three times the horse turned his left flank to him.

‘Liath, you beauty, never before have you turned your left side to me in anger.⁵ Remember how we drove off horses and armies, smashing chariot-frames, yokes and cushions until your reins were red. But we were safe, and the Badb could never touch us. Our determination never faltered in the face of death.’

At that, Liath Macha came to Cú Chulainn, letting great round tears of blood fall at his feet.

Cú Chulainn leapt into the chariot, and raced off southwards along the road to Midluachair. He saw a girl before him. She was Leborcham, daughter of Áe and Adarc, two slaves from Conchobor’s household.

‘Don’t leave us, Cú Chulainn,’ she said. ‘Your worthy face, your generous, glowing cheek, your fine scars - your doom will bring us great sorrow. Woe to our women and children! Woe to our hopes! If

⁵ Turning to the right, with the sun, brought good luck. Turning to the left was an insult.

you continue on this course, to the battle where great men will die, there will be great wailing and keening on Muirthemne Plain.’

She said this in a loud voice, and she was echoed by the three fifties of women in Emain Macha.

‘It would be better not to leave them,’ said Láeg, ‘for you have never violated the command of your mother’s line before today.’

‘Alas,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘Stick to your own business, Láeg. It’s a charioteer’s job to take care of a chariot, but it’s a chariot-chief’s job to defend a territory. A supporter advises, a man does manly deeds, a woman weeps. Take me to the battle, and save your pity. It does you no credit.’

The chariot was turned to the left, and the troop of women gave a cry of lamentation and beat their hands, for they knew Cú Chulainn would not return to Emain Macha.

Before him on the road was the house of the foster-mother who had raised him. Cú Chulainn would always pay her a visit whenever he went by southwards or northwards, and she would always have a drink for him. He drank it, said farewell to his foster-mother, and carried on along the Midluachair road, across the Plain of Mugain.

Before him he saw three sorcerous hags, all blind in the left eye. They had cooked a lap-dog with charms and spells on spits of holly. It was *geis* for Cú Chulainn to pass a hearth and refuse an invitation to eat there, but it was also *geis* for him to eat the flesh of his namesake. He hurried past them, because he knew they were not there for his good.

‘Come and visit us, Cú Chulainn,’ said one of them.

‘I will not,’ said Cú Chulainn.

‘Because all we have to eat is a dog?’ she replied. ‘If we had a great roast, you’d visit us, but since we don’t have much, you refuse. Anyone who won’t endure humble things does not deserve great things.’

So he visited them, and the hag served him half the dog from her left hand. Cú Chulainn took it from her and put it under his left thigh. The hand he took it with and the thigh he put it under were seized from end to end, and all the strength went out of them.

They continued southwards along the Midluachair road, around Sliab Fuait. Cú Chulainn said, ‘tell me what you can see, friend Láeg.’

‘Many doomed men, and great carnage,’ said Láeg.

‘Woe, alas!’ said Cú Chulainn.

As Cú Chulainn continued along the Midluachair road, he saw the army encamped on Muirthemne Plain. They saw him too.

Erc son of Coirpre said, ‘I see a fair chariot approaching, drawn by two horses. One, lynx-grey, the other, jet black with a white face. In the chariot is a man with fair, flowing, curly hair, a fiery, red weapon in his hand. His hair is of three colours - dark at the scalp, blood-red in the middle, and a golden corona on the outside. The dullest part of that warrior’s hair is like the sun shining on buttercups on a summery day in mid-May.’

‘The man who approaches is the man you’re waiting for, men of Ireland.’

A mound of cut turf was raised under Erc son of Coirpre, and a hedge of shields built around him. The men of Ireland were drawn up into three equally fine, fierce battalions.

‘Arise, men of Ireland, prepare for that man, Cú Chulainn,’ said Erc.

‘What preparations shall we make?’ they said. ‘How can we match his feats?’

‘Not hard to tell,’ said Erc. ‘Here is my plan. Let the four provinces of Ireland come together in a single army, and make an unbroken barrier of shields around you and above you. Station three men on each hill around the army - two of the strongest men, who will trade blows with each other, and a satirist with his hazel rod, to make a disgracing demand for Cú Chulainn’s spear, which is named Blad ar Bladaib, triumph of triumphs. It is prophesied that a king will be slain by his spear, unless it is demanded of him. And give a wail of lamentation and a cry of distress, for then his fury won’t come upon him, or upon his horses, and he won’t demand single combat with you like he did on the Cattle Raid of Cooley.’

Everything was done as Erc said.

Then Cú Chulainn came upon the army, and he performed three thunder-feats standing on his chariot: the thunder-feat of a hundred, and the thunder-feat of three hundred, and the thunder-feat of three nines, to clear the army from Muirthemne Plain. He attacked the army, using all his skill in arms against them. He plied his sword and shield and spear and feats equally, so that as many as the sand

of the sea, the stars of heaven, the dewdrops of May, snowflakes and hailstones, the leaves on the trees, buttercups on Breg Plain, and the blades of grass under horses hooves on a summer day were the number of split skulls and severed hands and red bones scattered across the plain of Muirthemne. The ground was grey with their brains after Cú Chulainn's devastating attack on them.

Then he saw two men having a fight. He made no attempt to separate them.

'Shame on you Cú Chulainn, for not stopping them,' said the satirist.

So Cú Chulainn leapt at them, and gave them both such a punch in the head that their brains came out their ears and noses.

'Well, you've certainly stopped them now,' said the satirist. 'Neither is harming the other.'

'They wouldn't have stopped if I'd just asked them,' said Cú Chulainn.

'Give me that spear,' said the satirist.

'I swear by the oath of my people,' said Cú Chulainn, 'my need of it is greater than yours. The men of Ireland are attacking me here, and I need it to attack them.'

'I will satirise you if you don't hand it over,' said the satirist.

'I have never been satirised for being stingy,' said Cú Chulainn. And with that he threw the spear at him, butt-end first, and it went straight through his head and killed nine men standing behind him.

Cú Chulainn went through the army to the far side. Meanwhile, Lugaid son of Cú Roí took one of the three spears prepared by the sons of Calatín.

'What will fall by this spear, sons of Calatín?' said Lugaid.

'A king will fall by that spear,' said the sons of Calatín.

Lugaid threw the spear at the chariot, and it hit Láeg mac Rianganabra, spilling his innards over the upholstery of the chariot. 'Bitingly I have been wounded,' said Láeg.

Cú Chulainn drew out the spear, and bade farewell to Láeg. 'Today I must be both chariot-chief and charioteer,' he said.

When he reached the other side of the army, Cú Chulainn saw two men fighting before him. A satirist, with his hazel rod, was with them.

‘Shame on you for not separating us, Cú Chulainn,’ said one of the men.

Cú Chulainn leapt down towards them, threw them aside, and dashed them to pieces against a nearby rock.

‘Give me that spear, Cú Chulainn,’ said the satirist.

‘I swear by the oath of my people,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘my need of it is greater than yours. It’s down to my hand and my valour and my weapons to clear four of the five provinces of Ireland from Muirthemne Plain.’

‘I will satirise you,’ said the satirist.

‘I only have to yield to one demand in a day, and I have already paid for my honour today.’

‘Then I will satirise the Ulstermen on your account,’ said the satirist.

‘The Ulstermen have never been satirised on account of my stinginess,’ said Cú Chulainn. ‘However little of my life remains, they will not be satirised on my account today.’ He gave the satirist the spear butt-end first, so that it went straight through his head and killed nine men standing behind him. Then he went through the army as before.

Erc son of Coirpre took one of the spears prepared by the sons of Calatín. ‘What will fall by this spear, sons of Calatín?’ he said.

‘Not hard to tell,’ said the sons of Calatín. ‘A king will fall by that spear.’

‘That’s what you said about the spear that Lugaid just threw,’ said Erc.

‘And it was true,’ said the sons of Calatín. ‘The king of the charioteers of Ireland fell by it - Cú Chulainn’s charioteer, Láeg mac Riangaobra.’

‘I swear by the oath of my people, I won’t kill the same kind of king Lugaid killed,’ said Erc. He let fly his spear at Cú Chulainn, and hit Liath Macha.

Cú Chulainn drew the spear out, and bade his horse farewell. Liath Macha went off, with half the yoke around his neck, to Linn Leith, the grey’s pool, in Sliab Fuait. Out of this pool he had come to Cú Chulainn, and to it he returned when he was wounded.

‘My chariot must be yoked to a single horse today,’ said Cú Chulainn. He put his foot under one end of the yoke, and made his way through the army as before.

He saw two men fighting in front of him, and a satirist with a hazel rod. He separated them on no less effective manner than he did the previous four.

‘Give me that spear, Cú Chulainn,’ said the satirist.

‘My need of it is greater than yours.’

‘I will satirise you,’ said the satirist.

‘I only have to yield to one demand in a day, and I have already paid for my honour today.’

‘Then I will satirise the Ulstermen on your account,’ said the satirist.

‘I have paid for their honour too.’

‘Then I will satirise your family.’

‘However little of my life remains, no land I haven’t seen will hear shameful stories about me,’ said Cú Chulainn. He threw the spear at the satirist butt-end first, so that it went straight through his head and killed three times nine men standing behind him.

‘That is an angry gift, Cú Chulainn,’ said the satirist.

After that, Cú Chulainn went through the army to the other side, and Lugaid took the third spear prepared by the sons of Calatín.

‘What will fall by this spear, sons of Calatín?’ he said.

‘A king will fall by it,’ said the sons of Calatín.

‘That’s what you said about the spear that Erc just threw,’ said Lugaid.

‘And it was true,’ said the sons of Calatín. ‘The king of the horses of Ireland fell by it - Liath Macha, Cú Chulainn’s horse.’

‘I swear by the oath of my people, I won’t kill the same kind of king Erc killed,’ said Lugaid. He threw the spear at Cú Chulainn, and hit him, spilling his innards over the chariot’s upholstery. Then Dub Sainglenn, his other horse, left him, taking half the yoke with him. He went to Loch Dub, the black lake, in the district of Muscraige. Out of this lake he had come to Cú Chulainn, and to it he now returned, making the lake boil.

The chariot sat alone on the plain.

‘Let me go down to that lake over there,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘so I can have a drink from it.’

‘You have our leave, they replied, ‘so long as you come back to us.’

‘If I can’t make it back by myself, be sure to come and get me,’ said Cú Chulainn.

Cú Chulainn gathered his innards up in his arms and went off to the lake. When he got there he put his arms tightly round his belly to hold his innards in, and took a drink and washed himself. That lake on Muirthemne Plain was named Loch Lámraith, hand-boon lake, because of that. Then he sprang away, and called out for them to come for him.

A wide plain spread west of the lake. Cú Chulainn cast his eye over it, and headed for a standing stone in the middle of the plain. He put his belt around it, so that he wouldn’t die sitting or lying down - he would die standing. The men surrounded him, but didn’t dare approach, thinking he was still alive.

‘Shame on you,’ said Erc son of Coirpre to the men, ‘for not taking that man’s head in vengeance for my own father’s head, which was carried off by Cú Chulainn and buried with the body of Eochaid Nia Fer, whose head was struck from his body and taken to Síd ar Nenta across the water.’

Then Liath Macha returned to guard Cú Chulainn while his spirit was still in his body and his hero’s light still shone from his brow. Liath Macha made three red charges around him, and fifty men fell by his teeth and thirty by each of his hooves. He killed so many that “Liath Macha’s victorious onslaughts when Cú Chulainn was slain” are proverbial.

A raven alit on Cú Chulainn’s shoulder. ‘That stone isn’t usually a perch for birds,’ said Erc son of Coirpre. So Lugaid gathered Cú Chulainn’s hair up behind his head, and struck his head off. Cú Chulainn’s sword fell from his hand and cut Lugaid’s hand off, and Cú Chulainn’s hand was cut off in revenge.

The army set off for Tara, taking Cú Chulainn’s head and right hand with them. That’s where his head and hand are buried, together with the gold panelling of his shield.

Conall Cernach's Red Rampage

They marched on southwards until they came to the river Liffey. There, Lugaid said to his charioteer, 'My full belt weighs heavy on me. I want to bathe.' So he set off apart from the army, who carried on the way they were going. Lugaid caught a fish between his calves as he washed himself. He tossed it up to his charioteer, who at once kindled a fire to cook it.

It was then that the army of Ulster, having recovered from their pangs, came southwards from Emain Macha to Sliab Fuait.

Cú Chulainn and Conall Cernach, in their rivalry and mutual boasting, had made a deal, that whichever of them was killed first would be avenged by the other. 'If I am killed first,' Cú Chulainn had said, 'how fast will you avenge me?'

'I will avenge you before sunset on the day you are killed,' said Conall. 'If I am killed first, how fast will you avenge me?'

'I will not let your blood grow cold on the ground before I avenge you,' said Cú Chulainn.

As Conall approached in his chariot in the front of the army, he came upon Liath Macha, bloody and wounded, on his way to Linn Leith. He followed Liath Macha on a circuit of the battlefield, and saw Cú Chulainn at the stone. Liath Macha went up to Cú Chulainn's body and put his head upon his breast.

'Liath Macha grieves for that corpse,' said Conall. He kicked the hedge of shields that Lugaid had set up, and said, 'I swear by the oath of my people, this is a great man's hedge!'

'You have named the place,' said a druid. 'It will be called Airrbe Rofir, Great Man's Hedge, forever.'

Then Conall set off in pursuit of the army.

Lugaid was bathing, and said to his charioteer, 'Watch the plain for us, so no-one can come upon us unseen.'

The charioteer kept watch. 'There is a lone rider approaching,' he said. 'He rides so fast, you would think that the ravens of Ireland were above him, and that snowflakes covered the plain before him.'

'The rider approaching is no friend of ours,' said Lugaid. 'That is Conall Cernach on Derg Drúchtach. The birds you saw are the clods that fly up from Derg Drúchtach's hooves, and the snowflakes

are the foam from his mouth and bridle. Keep watching, and see which way he comes.'

'He's going towards the ford, the same way the army went,' said the charioteer.

'Let him go,' said Lugaid. 'The last thing we need's a fight with him.'

When Conall Cernach came to the middle of the ford, he looked around. 'There's steam from a salmon over there,' he said. He looked around again. 'There's steam from a charioteer over there,' he said. He looked a third time. 'There's steam from a king over there,' he said. 'I'd better go and have a look.'

Conall went up to Lugaid. 'Welcome is the face of a debtor,' he said. 'Your creditor demands payment. You owe me a debt for killing my comrade Cú Chulainn, and I'm calling it in.'

'It would not be right to fight me here,' said Lugaid. 'It would give you greater honour if you were to fight me once I had reached Munster with the spoils of my victory.'

'I'll go along with that,' said Conall, 'so long as we don't travel there together or speak to each other as equals.'

'That won't be difficult to arrange,' said Lugaid. 'I will go this way, along the Gabrán road, past Smechun Gap. You go that way, across Gabor and over Sliab Mairgen in Leinster, and we'll meet in Airgetros Plain.'

Lugaid got there first. Then Conall Cernach arrived, and threw a javelin at him. It hit him in the foot as he stood against a standing stone on Airgetros Plain, and that stone was named Coirthe Lugdach, Lugaid's Pillar, from then on.

After this first wound Lugaid went to Ferta Lugdach, Lugaid's Mound, among the causeways of Ossairge. There he and Conall met.

'I demand fair play from you,' said Lugaid.

'In what way?' said Conall.

'Since I only have one hand, you should fight me with one hand.'

'I'll go along with that,' said Conall, and one hand was tied to his side with cords.

They fought for three hours that day, and neither could get the better of the other. When Conall couldn't get the upper hand, he looked up at his mare, Derg Drúchtach. She had a head like a dog, and she used to kill men in battles and combats. The mare attacked Lugaid. She took a bite from his side, tore out his innards and spilled them at his feet.

'Alas!' said Lugaid. 'That's hardly fair play!'

'I only promised on my own behalf,' said Conall. 'I made no guarantees for dumb animals.'

'I know you won't leave without my head,' said Lugaid, 'since we took Cú Chulainn's head. Put my head on your head, and add my nobility to your nobility, and my weapons to your weapons. I would prefer it if you were the chief warrior of Ireland.'

Then Conall took Lugaid's head. He set off with it, and met the Ulstermen in Roiriú in the land of Leinster. They left the head on a stone there, and forgot about it.

When they reached Gris, Conall asked, 'Which one of you brought the head?'

'We don't have it,' they all said.

'I swear by the oath of my people,' said Conall, 'this deed is half a crime.' That place was called Midbine, Half-Crime, in Roiriú after that. When they went back for the head, this is what they saw - the head had melted the stone and sunk right through it.

The Ulstermen didn't let anyone bring victory spoils to Emain Macha that week. Cú Chulainn's spirit appeared to the fifty queens he had dishonoured when he went to battle. They saw him in his ghostly chariot above Emain Macha.

Liath Macha went to bid farewell to Emer. He put his head on her breast, and circled sunwise around her three times, and around Dún Imrith, and Dún Delga.

The Death Of Conchobor

Once, when the Ulstermen were very drunk at Emain Macha, a great dispute arose between Conall Cernach, Lóegaire Buadach and Cú Chulainn, and they began to compare trophies.

‘Bring me the brain of Mes Gegra,’⁶ said Conall. ‘That’ll shut these two up.’

It was a custom among the Ulstermen to take the brains of warriors they had killed in single combat and mix them with lime to make a hard ball. These made very prestigious trophies when contentions like these arose.

‘Well,’ Conall said to Conchobor, ‘until my rivals perform a deed like this in single combat, they aren’t worthy to compare trophies with me.’

‘That’s true,’ said Conchobor. So the brain was put back on its usual shelf, and the next day the warriors went their separate ways.

Now the biggest menace in Ireland at that time was Cet mac Mágach, and he went on a foray into Ulster. When he arrived at the green of Emain, he had the heads of three Ulster warriors with him. He saw some jesters playing with Mes Gegra’s brain on the green, and when he heard one of them say whose brain it was, he snatched it out of his hand and made off with it. He knew of the prophesy that Mes Gegra would avenge himself after his death, and from then on, every time the men of Connacht fought against the men of Ulster, Cet would carry the brain in his belt, hoping he could bring about a famous deed by killing an Ulsterman with it.

Once, Cet came east to raid the cattle of Fir Ros. The Ulstermen pursued him, but as they caught up with him, the men of Connacht arrived from the opposite direction to rescue him. Battle was joined, and Conchobor himself was fighting in the forefront.

The women of Connacht begged Conchobor to come to one side so they could admire his looks, for there was no-one to match Conchobor in looks or figure or clothes. In wisdom, manners and eloquence, in weapons, wealth and dignity, in bearing, valour and lineage, Conchobor was without peer. So he went aside to enjoy the admiration of the women.

⁶ Conall killed Mes Gegra in The Battle of Étair – see *Tales of Athirne*.

However, it was Cet who had instigated this, and he crept among the women, loaded Mes Gegra's brain into his sling, and shot it straight at Conchobor's head, so that two thirds of it was buried in his skull. Conchobor fell forward to the ground. The Ulstermen surrounded him, and carried him away from Cet.

The place he fell was the ford of Daire Dá Báeth. His grave is there, with a pillar-stone at his head and another at his feet.

Under pressure from the Ulstermen, the men of Connacht fell back to Scé Aird na Con, but regrouped and drove the Ulstermen back to Daire Dá Báeth.

'Get me out of here!' said Conchobor. 'I'll give my kingship to anyone who can carry me home.'

'I'll carry you,' said his attendant, Cenn Barraide ('shorn head'). He put a rope around him, and lifted him onto his back, and carried him as far as Arddachad on Sliab Fuait, where his heart gave out. For that reason, 'Cenn Barraide's kingship over Ulster' is proverbial as a short period of time, for the king was only on his back for half a day.

The battle continued for another twenty four hours, and the Ulstermen were defeated.

Fingin, Conchobor's physician, was sent for. He could tell from the smoke rising from a house how many people were ill inside, and what was wrong with them.

'Well,' said Fingin, 'if I remove the stone, you will die immediately. I can heal your head with the stone inside, but that will leave you disfigured.'

'We would rather he be disfigured than dead,' said the Ulstermen, so Fingin healed his head, stitching the wound with gold thread to match Conchobor's golden hair. He told him to be careful – he was not to get angry, ride a horse, have sex, over-eat, or run. He lived for another seven years, during which time he could hardly do anything but sit in his seat.

Seven years later there arose a great storm, and the earth shook. Bachrach, a druid from Leinster, explained that these wondrous signs were happening because Jesus Christ, the guiltless son of the living God, had been crucified by the Jews (although some say it was Altus, a consul sent to the Irish by Octavian to seek tribute, who told Conchobor of the crucifixion).

‘That man,’ said the druid, ‘was born on the same night as you, the eighth day before the Calends of January, although in a different year.’ It was then that Conchobor believed. He was one of only two people in Ireland to believe in God before the coming of the Faith, Morann being the other one.

‘I will kill a thousand men to rescue Christ!’ said Conchobor, and he seized his two spears and shook them so violently they broke in his hands. He drew his sword and attacked the woods around him until it was an empty plain, which is now Mag Lámraige in Fir Ros. ‘If I could reach them, this is how I would avenge Christ on the Jews and those who have crucified him.’

His fury caused Mes Gegra’s brain to burst out of his head, and his own brain with it, and he died. Everyone now says that, because of his profession of faith, Conchobor is now in heaven. And that is the death of Conchobor.

Da Choca's Hostel

After The Death of Conchobor, the men of Ulster held a council to discuss who to give the kingship to. Some said that Fergus would be an ideal choice, but many had suffered at Fergus's hands when he was in exile, and they declared they wouldn't have him as their king. Other suggested Cormac Connlongas, Conchobor's son. Conall Cernach wanted the kingship to go to his foster-son, Cúscraid Mend Macha, another of Conchobor's sons.

The Ulstermen were on the verge of battle over the succession, but Cúscraid refused to fight, fearing that the clans of Rudraige would destroy each other. Conall Cernach had not been there to advise him, and he reproached his foster-son for this refusal.

Genann Gruaidhsolus (bright cheek), son of Cathbad, said, 'I know who most has the makings of a king in Ireland – Cormac Connlongas, son of Conchobor, the noble youth of Ireland. He is endowed with all the gifts – looks, courage, hospitality, truth, and so on. Conchobor named him on his deathbed as the one we should give the kingship to, for Cormac was his eldest son, and he is the foster-son of Fergus, who never plundered us when he was with Cormac.'

The Ulstermen agreed to Genann's suggestion. They sent the following envoys to Connacht, to bring him home to be crowned: Genann Gruaidhsolus, son of Cathbad; Amergin the Poet; Imbrinn son of Cathbad; and Uathechtach son of Feradach. Their troop of charioteers set off for Cruachan Aí.

Ailill and Medb were there, and so was Fergus, and they made them welcome. Medb asked for their news, and they announced that they had come to make Cormac king of Ulster in place of his father. A messenger was sent to Cormac, who was hunting by Síð Nenta across the water.

Cormac came to Cruachan, and Medb made him welcome. 'Remember us with favour,' she said. 'You are our foster-son, and you have been well-treated here.'

'I will be amicable towards you,' replied Cormac. 'I will refuse you no request – it will be my pleasure to grant it.'

Then Genann told Cormac the reason he had come. So Cormac sent a message to his people, who were billeted around Connacht, and they came quickly, from Irross Domnann and the outlying districts of Connacht, woman, man and child.

Cormac's *gessa*, which Cathbad the druid had put upon him when he was born, were these: to listen to Craiphtine's hole-headed lute; to hunt the birds of Mag Dá Cheo; to drive his horses over a yoke of ash; to swim with the birds of Loch Ló; to tryst with a woman in Seo-áth Mór; to hunt the animals of the hillside of Mag Sainb; to cross the Shannon with dry feet; and to visit Da Choca's hostel.

The next day, Cormac set off from Cruachan, with 300 warriors, plus women and boys and hounds and servants in his company. He split the company into three bands.

The first band wore blue forked cloaks with silver brooches, and over them short capes, with short, knee-length kilts. Each man had a mighty spear in his hand, and carried a fringed and speckled shield, and wore a sword with a pointed hilt.

The second band wore ribbed shirts against their skin, and beautiful speckled cloaks with white-bronze brooches. Their long hair was swept back on their heads. They carried bright shields, five-barbed javelins, and shining, ivory-hilted swords.

The third band wore hooded shirts, tunics of satin thread, and purple, five-folded cloaks with silver and gold brooches. Their shields were huge and brown, and they wore swords on their belts. Each man had an eight-edged javelin in his hand. In the middle of this group was a warrior with long, fair hair, a strong and mighty guardian, surrounded by the clamour of a king and the din of an army – Cormac himself.

The druids, however, saw ill omens for Cormac. The journey, they said, would be neither easy nor quick.

On that very day, some of Cormac's *gessa* were broken. His hounds hunted on Mag Sainb, and he pursued the birds of Mag Dá Cheo, which today is known as Loch na nÉn (the lake of the birds). Furthermore, Craiphtine the harper went to him, and played his hole-headed lute for him in an effort to ruin his reign and his life, because his wife, Scenb daughter of Scethern, was Cormac's lover.

Then, as they were going through the woods, the yoke of Cormac's chariot broke, and was replaced by a yoke of ash. Then they went through the district of Maine Fer dá Giall (Man of Two Hostages) and came to Loch Ló, and Cormac, not realising which lake it was, went in and swam among the birds.

Craiptine realised that this was Loch Ló, and he changed 150 youths into birds, and put a poisonous spell on their wings, and they went onto the lake. Then they fell asleep by the side of the lake, and as they slept Scenb came in the form of a hawk, and killed all the birds but one.

From there, they went to Druim Airthir, now called the Garman, on the shore of Áth Luan. There they unyoked the chariots. While they were there they saw a woman in red on the edge of the ford, washing her chariot and its cushions and harness. When she lowered her hand, the river became red with gore and blood; but when she lifted her hand out of the river, not a drop of water came with it.

'What that woman is doing is horrible,' said Cormac. 'One of you go and ask her what she is doing.' So someone went and asked her. Standing on one foot, with one eye closed, she chanted a prophesy, that the harness she was washing belonged to a king who would soon perish. The messenger returned to Cormac, and told him of the evil prophesy the Badb⁷ had made. Cormac went to the edge of the river, and asked her whose harness she was washing.

'It is your own harness, Cormac,' she replied.

'Your prophesies are grim and full of evil omen,' said Cormac.

While they were there, they saw a beautiful maiden coming towards them. She wore a light green cloak wrapped around her, and a precious brooch on her breast. Under her cloak she wore a bright, hooded smock, embroidered with gold. On her feet she wore white-bronze sandals. She sat down next to Cormac, and he made her welcome.

'Are you coming on the journey with us?' Cormac asked.

'No,' she replied, 'and I wish you wouldn't go either, for the ruin of your life awaits you. The man who played his hole-headed lute for you this morning was grim Craiptine the harper. He came

⁷ The Badb: one of the interchangeable Irish furies or war goddesses, aka the Morrígan or the Nemain. Badb means "crow".

to break your *geis*, and shorten your life. I am leaving now, and we will never meet again.'

As Cormac slept at the end of the ford, he had a terrible dream.

Meanwhile, a division of Connachtmen pitched their camp in Mag Derg after a successful raid on a settlement of the men of Ulster.

The Ulstermen said to Cormac, 'it isn't right that the women and cattle of the Ulstermen should be held hostage by foreigners in our presence. We must give battle!'

'We must not,' said Cormac, 'because that would outrage Medb and her people. The attack was not made against us.'

Dubthach said, 'Shame on him who goes to be crowned king of the Ulstermen, but who allows them to be ravaged by their natural enemies! The people of Connacht are not really our friends.'

'Then let's go,' said the Ulstermen. 'We will attack, whether Cormac is with us or against us.' So the Ulstermen raised their battle banners and marched to Mag Derg (which was named after Derg Dolair of the Fomóire, who was killed by the Tuatha Dé Danann in the Battle of Mag Tuired).

They marched with dry feet over Luan's Ford, due east against the men of Connacht, and the two armies met. They fought a short, hard battle, hacking, mangling and striking one another. It was a fight between sworn enemies. Finally, after much violence and death on both sides, the men of Ulster won the field.

After the battle, the Ulstermen gathered together in one place. Lonfiach son of Lámfota, a leader of the Connacht forces, said, 'You have done wrong against Ailill and Medb by killing their people. The evil of your deeds will rebound upon you!'

'Don't threaten us,' said Dubthach, thrusting his spear at him. So Lonfiach went away angry and hostile, and reported to Ailill and Medb.

After their great victory, the Ulstermen set off for their own land. However, it was the end of the day, and many of them were wounded, so they began to discuss where they should sleep.

'Let's stay here,' they said, 'in the house of Da Choca the Smith, and his wife Luath daughter of Lumm Lonn, at Sliab Malonn.'

‘No,’ said Amergin. ‘The district of Fir Malonn, where Da Choca’s house is, belongs to Ailill and Medb. It’s too close to our enemies, so soon after inflicting defeat on them. We must carry on to our own country, night or not. Medb’s deeds are mighty. Never underestimate her.’

‘While Fergus is still in Cruachan,’ said Dubthach, ‘we need never fear a surprise attack from her.’

So, after more discussion, they decided to stay at Da Choca’s house, and set off towards it. Da Choca’s house on Sliab Malonn was one of the six Royal Hostels in Ireland. Each hostel stood at a crossroads. Everyone who stayed there would only get one stab of the flesh-fork into the cauldron, but whatever was on the fork was enough to satisfy him. Each hostel was also a place of refuge for anyone who had shed blood.

Da Choca and his wife Luath, daughter of Lumm Lonn, welcomed Cormac and his people, and they all took their seats in the house.

While they were there, they saw a big-mouthed, swarthy, swift, sooty woman, lame and squinting with her left eye. She wore a dark, threadbare cloak. Every inch of her from head to foot was as black as a beetle’s back, and her thin grey hair fell back over her shoulder. She leant her shoulder against the doorpost, and began prophesying evil. She saw severed limbs and headless bodies on the clay of Da Choca’s hostel. Then the Badb left them.

There came news about the Ulstermen from the north. They thought their envoys were delaying bringing Cormac back, so they had mustered a large band and marched south to Cruachan, intending to meet with Cormac and press him hard to come and be made king. They were told that they had missed him, and that he had set out for Sen-Áth Mór (the Great Old Ford). They followed his trail as quickly as they could, and on the way to Sen-Áth Mór they came to Mag Derg and saw the battlefield.

‘This is surely the trail of Cormac’s sword-point,’ they said, and headed towards the hostel.

Back to Cormac and his people at the hostel. It wasn’t long since the Badb had made her terrible prophesy, and everyone was gloomy and full of foreboding. Then they heard Genann’s voice

from the walls of the hostel. ‘I see warriors coming across Mag Derg from the West,’ he said. ‘I think they are Ulstermen.’

The sight of their people’s battle-soldiers approaching filled Cormac and his people with pride and exultation. The Ulstermen entered the hostel and took their places on couches in the proper order of precedence. Amergin sat in the Champion’s Seat on Cormac’s right. Cacht sat at the doorpost facing him. Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe sat in the Champion’s Seat on Cormac’s left, with Fiacha Cecht, son of Fergus, at the doorpost opposite him. Illann Finn, son of Fergus, sat next on Cormac’s right, and Dubthach was next on the left. Every man after that sat where his lineage entitled him to.

Back to Lonfiach. When he arrived at Cruachan, he told Ailill and Medb what had happened. They held a council of the men of Connacht and asked them what they should do.

‘I shall go to Fergus, and make sure he doesn’t leave,’ said Medb. ‘The men of Connacht shall pursue Cormac, and whatever house he sleeps in tonight, they shall storm it.’

Medb began to poison Fergus against Cormac. ‘It would be easy for you,’ she said, ‘to crown the son of the man who exiled you from Ulster, the son Conchobor begat on your own wife Ness.’ Fergus agreed to pursue Cormac.

After Cormac went Cet mac Mágach and his brothers, and Aille Aird-agach, and Eochaid Becc son of Eochaid Ronn, and Maine Intogaid son of Maine Morgor, and Maine son of Cet, and Mog Corb son of Conchobor Abratruaidh (red-brow) son of Finn mac Rosa. Lonfiach went ahead, to guide them. Their army numbered 1,000 men, and none of them lacked a shield, a sword or a spear.

Suamnach son of Samguba, who was a seer and a foster-father of Cormac, prophesied victory for the men of Connacht, saying that all would fall before them. So the army marched to the hostel, and made camp nearby, waiting. They sent Mog Corb and Corb Gaille as spies into the hostel, and they soon returned to tell them what they had seen.

‘First we came to a huge palace,’ said Mog Corb, ‘full of angry, furious folk, with various wondrous garments, and beautiful foreign bucklers, and sharp pointed javelins. Some of the men had their long, fair hair swept back on their heads, and some had hair of equal length all over their heads.’

‘We know who these men are,’ said Lonfiach. ‘They are the household of the king, and his soldiers. Woe betide any who attacks them. Those warriors will wade in gore to defend their lord.’

‘Then,’ said Mog Corb, ‘we came to another house on top of the hill. In it were bright-limbed women with hyacinth eyes, wearing multi-coloured garments of red, blue and green. Also there were gentle, broad-browed boys, and hounds on leashes, and musicians and minstrels and players. From every direction a multitude comes to this house. We saw no warriors or soldiers there, though.’

‘We know these too,’ said Lonfiach. ‘They are the womenfolk of the queen, Níab daughter of Celtchar mac Uthechair. In that house their blood will be defended vigorously.’

‘Then we came to another house,’ said Mog Corb, ‘on the slope of the hill. Inside were lords and mighty men and kings’ sons and great princes and beautiful bright nobles. There were no lamps or torches inside, but there was enough radiance to light the whole house from their garments, and their ornamented brooches, and their gilded shields, and their bright swords ornamented with gold wire. I didn’t recognise Cormac, unless he was the one at the midbeam of the house: a tall, noble-looking man, with one gleaming eye in his head; even teeth, broad-browed, narrow-chinned, with long, golden, flaxen hair and a long forked beard. He wore a purple gown with a silver brooch, and a hilted sword. He looks like a king, and the tumult around him is that of a High King.’

‘That sounds like Cormac,’ said Lonfiach.

So they sat down and waited until nightfall to storm the hostel.

Inside the hostel, while the Ulstermen made merry, Amergin slept for a while. He dreamed that the men of Connacht were destroying the hostel around them, with great slaughter all around. He awoke from his sleep in horror.

‘Be quiet a while,’ said Cormac. ‘What’s that noise?’

‘The low roar of champions,’ said Amergin. ‘Arise, men! Ready your weapons, for your enemy is coming to attack you!’

Not long after this, the army came, and made three circuits of the hostel, shouting their battle-cry. ‘What we feared has happened,’ said Amergin.

‘They will get their answer among us,’ said Cormac. ‘We have warriors for them!’

Suamach son of Samguba had come eastwards, following the expedition, to warn Cormac. He came to Dulach Dér (the Hill of Tears – named after the tears of blood the Dagda⁸ shed on hearing of the death of his son Cermait), and from there he could see the flames of destruction inflicted on his foster-son. He couldn't bear it, and his heart broke within him. From then on the hill was called Druim Suamaig (Suamach's Ridge). The men of Connacht laid siege to the house Cormac was in, and set it on fire. When he saw this, Lonfiach regretted having led the army to attack his foster-brother. He went inside, intending to fight Cormac himself, but Dubthach struck him with a claymore, beheading him. That was the hostel's first death-blow.

Fires were set in every part of the hostel. Fergna son of Finnhonna rushed out, armed and fit for combat, and killed fifty Connachtmen. He put out the fires, drove the attackers out over the ridges, and returned unhurt.

But they soon returned, and set fires around the hostel again. Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe rushed out, put out the fires, killed 100 warriors, and drove the Connachtmen from the hostel.

Again they returned and set four huge fires in the hostel. Dubthach went out and put them out. He drove the attackers bitterly and remorselessly, killing a hundred, before returning to the hostel.

And again they returned, setting five fires in the hostel. Illann Finn, son of Fergus, rushed out, killed a hundred, put out the fires, and drove the army from the hostel. But Lugaid Lámderg (red hand) took a great battle-stone on his shoulder, and hurled it at Illann, killing him. Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe picked the stone up and threw it back, killing Lugaid. Then Cet picked it up and threw it at the hostel, and killed an Ulsterman with it. Fiachra Caech, son of Fergus, hurled it back and killed a Connachtman. Seven men were killed inside the hostel, and seven outside, by that stone. Eventually Dubthach picked it up and threw it out over the hostel, and it is now the single stone in the Well of Cell Lasia (Cell Lasia is where the hostel once stood. At that time every Royal Hostel had water running through it or near it).

⁸ The Dagda: the 'Good God', also known as Eochaid Ollathair, 'All-Father', is the principal Irish father-god, connected with fertility and the seasons. Cermait, also known as Ogma, was the god of eloquence and learning, and was killed by Lug Lámfada, whose wife he had slept with.

The Ulstermen then marched forth to meet the Connachtmen. 'It is better to go out and meet as warriors,' said Cormac, as they went forth to the fight. They broke out of every side of the hostel, and came together from every point to form phalanxes. The battle was hard and keen, and many heroes found their grave-beds on the battlefield. The blood reached the belts of the warriors on both sides.

Cormac found a rock and hurled it at Mog Corb, shattering his shield and knocking him to the ground. This is the stone that is now in the middle hostel. Mog Corb hadn't managed to struggle to his feet when Cormac and Cacht son of Ilguine arrived to finish him off. Every brave champion who had been inside the hostel bore himself valiantly into battle, and afterwards both sides were decimated.

The Ulstermen returned to hostel in triumph, but few of them were left to celebrate. Dubthach's two sons, the two Ons, had slain nine men each before they fell, and his wife, Caindlech, was also dead. Many more Ulstermen had fallen, and hills and fords and ridges nearby were named after them.

Then a combat came about: Cet, his brother Ailill Ardágach, his son Maine, and Buanan son of Damán on one side; Cormac Connlongas, Dubthach, Amergin and Cacht son of Ilguine on the other. Dubthach killed Buanan, and Anergin killed Maine. Cacht and Ailill fell together. Corb Gailne ran into the middle of the combat, and he and Cet killed Cormac.

This is what the Book of Druimm Snechta says: that Cet beheaded Cormac, and that Anlón son of Doiche mac Mágach took the head to Áth Luan. Others say that Amergin forbade the beheading, and chased Cet away from Cormac's body, wounding him three times. However, it is the other version that is in the books.

Da Choca himself was killed in the hostel. His wife Luath, daughter of Lumm Lonn, went to Loch Luatha, where her heart broke from her chest in a burst of blood. The lake is named after her.

Of the thousand Connachtmen who came, only five returned alive. Of the three hundred Ulstermen, only three survived: Amergin the Poet, Dubthach, and Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe. Imbrinn son of Cathbad had fled the night before the battle. Amergin made the king's grave and mound, and sang a eulogy for him, proclaiming

his qualities. Songs were sung about Cormac, and Illann, and all the others who fell at the hostel.

As for Fergus, while he was still in Cruachan, his servant Ergaib came and told him of the march of the Maines and the sons of Mágu after Cormac and his people, to storm whatever house they were staying in. Fergus had his horses harnessed and his chariot yoked, and went after the army to stop the destruction. But it was no use. When he got there he found no-one alive in the hostel save Amergin, Dubthach and Fiacha, red with blood and wounds.

Fergus mourned and made a mighty lamentation over his foster-son, and beat his hands together, and shed tears of blood. Then he made a swift circuit of the battlefield and found the bodies of his friends and foster-sons and household. It was sad enough to just watch the grief Fergus showed as he went from one body to the next; and gazing at Cormac, lying in a pool of blood, he even forgot his grief over his own sons.

Returning from his circuit of the battlefield, Fergus came to where Amergin and Dubthach and Fiacha were, and consoled and praised them, for seeing their grief and their wounds affected him greatly. And they sang songs in memory of all who had fallen.

The preceding is some of their deeds, and the tale of Da Choca's Hostel.

The Battle of Airtech

After the death of Cormac Connlongas at Da Choca's Hostel, the Ulstermen held an assembly. They placed the kingdom under the control of Conall Cernach, and offered him the kingship.

'No,' said Conall. 'I will not accept it. It is beyond my strength and my skill. Instead, give it to my foster-son, Cúscraid Mend Macha, son of Conchobor. Whoever is his equal in prowess, and can lead you across wood and plain, day or night, in the gap of danger against your enemies, for they are everywhere and in large numbers, is the right person to be your battle-chief.'

So Cúscraid was proclaimed king, and he bound them with oaths. Then Conall spoke the following words, lamenting Conchobor:

Great sorrow has consumed me,
A mist of heavy grief wastes me away
for the loss of my mighty sovereign,
the diadem of a renowned prince,
Conchobor of the comely face,
glorious king of glorious Emain.

I have no more strength than a woman in labour.
I am powerless, I am useless, after the great deeds of noble
Emain.

The sinews of my body do not stir
Even at the hearing of a wondrous deed.

Let this be my choice:
Let my death be dealt to me in the midst of my comrades
Before my deeds humilate me before raw striplings
In the order of youthful championship.

My body is wounded,
I am useless, unprofitable, sickly,
After the fierce one of the Heights of Ulster,
and that is what has consumed me.

Then Conall gave the following instruction to Cúscraid:

‘Arise, noble Cúscraid, upon the path of a noble father. Let your assemblies be frequent concerning the right of borders, for meeting of nobles who deserve hospitality and generosity. Bestow upon them cattle and horses, treasure and jewels. Be a follower of sovereign law. Fulfil the word given on oath. May the rule of law prosper, and don’t let your misdeeds ruin the heavy fruits of the people that increase under your protection.



‘Be skilled in every language, and don’t be ignorant, so no-one should be able to argue with you. Be just and righteous in your judgements, and don’t suppress speech by the representatives of the strong or the weak. Don’t be boorish in the mead-court.

‘It is incumbent on you to exalt the good, to enslave the oppressor, and to destroy criminals. Be a fierce and mighty champion, gathering armies, ardent, warlike, contending against foreign lands, and in the defence of your great territories. Beware of sudden, obstinate, ignoble strife, so that the sorrow of the sick-bed may not be added to your many sorrows. May your enemies not attack you or lay hands on you.’

Then Cúscraid Mend Macha divided his land among his brothers, the Clann Rudraige and the rest of Conchobor’s sons, as follows.

- To Conall Cernach he gave everything from the strand of Inber Colptha to Coba, which from then on was called Caille Chonaill Cernaig.
- To Furbaide Fer Bend he gave the two Tethbas, northern Tethba and southern Tethba.
- To Glaisne son of Conchobor he gave Fir Maland and Fianclair na Bredcha.
- To Irial Glunmar, Goll and Irgoll, he gave the land of Gerg son of Faeburdel.

- To Follamain son of Conchobor, Fernmag.
- To Maine son of Conchobor, Lough Erne.
- To Lama son of Conchobor, Lamraige.
- To Benda son of Conchobor, Corcu Oche.
- To Conaing son of Conchobor, the Mugdorna.
- To Fiacha son of Conchobor, Ailechthir.
- To Dubthach Beetle-Tongue and his two sons, Corc and Conroi, he gave Tír Liath Maini and the place where Lough Neagh is today.

In this way he divided the province of Ulster among the children of Conchobor, as was fitting.

The nobles of Ulster said it would be a good thing if Fergus mac Róich were to come home, and peace made with him, for with him they would be so much stronger against their enemies. For the evil deeds of the men of Ireland were mighty against them, and they were being raided and maimed and slaughtered left and right. The news reached Fergus, and he made peace with the Ulstermen, and he and Cúscraid bound each other with a treaty.

Medb tried to stop Fergus going back to Ulster, and offered to pay him the honour-price of his sons, Ilann Finn and Fiachna Goll, who were killed at Da Choca's Hostel. But Fergus went east to Ulster with a great retinue, and his wife Flidais came with him. The land Fergus claimed was the land of Sualtam mac Róich and his son Cú Chulainn, Crích Cúailnge, Muirthemne Plain, Crích Rois and *Brug Mna Elcmairi*.⁹ This land was given to him, and he lived there until Flidais died, after which he went back to Ailill and Medb, for his household was the poorer without Flidais. That is how he met his death, through the one act of jealousy of Ailill mac Máta.

A great dispute then arose between Ailill and Medb and Conchobor's province concerning Crích Maland. It had been given to Conchobor in compensation for the men who were killed around him on the Cattle Raid of Cooley. Medb maintained she had given the land to Conchobor and no-one else. The Ulstermen replied that

⁹ *Brug Mna Elcmairi*: the 'Dwelling of Elcmar's Wife', i.e. Bóann, the goddess of the Boyne. This is therefore the Brug na Bóinne, the ancient burial mound now known as Newgrange.

they wouldn't give up the land unless it was taken from them on the battlefield.

The war that broke out between them because of that was awful and indescribable. Many were the intractable battles, many the great deeds and exploits, many the swift-slaying heroes who fell in that war. The Ulstermen fell around Cúscraid, and around Conall Cernach, and Amergin son of Eccet Salach the Smith, and Follamain and Furbaide, Conchobor's sons. In that war fell Cet mac Mágach, Ailill mac Mágach, and Ailill son of Cet mac Mágach, Doiche, Mug Corb, and Bélchú of Brefne and his sons.

The Ulstermen mustered a great army in the province of Ol nEgmacht, and they began to ravage the land until they came to the territory of Airtech Broad-chest son of Tomanten, son of Fer Choga of the Fir Domnainn.

The three tribes of Connacht, the Fir Domnainn, the Fir Craibe and the Tuatha Taiden, then assembled. However, the men of Ol nEgmacht wouldn't let Ailill and Medb accompany them into battle. The warlords of the men of Ol nEgmacht¹⁰ were:

- Mac Cecht
- Cet mac Mágach, huge and fierce
- Maine Athramail
- Sanb son of Cet
- Maine Mathremail
- Ailill of Brefne
- Loingsech of Loch Rí
- Aengus, king of the Fir Bolg
- Fer Deiched, son of Fer Diad mac Daman
- Aengus son of Ailill Finn
- Mata son of Goll Eilech
- Troga and Flaithri, the two sons of Fróech mac Fidaig
- Imchad son of Lugaid.

¹⁰ An archaic name for Connacht.

The warlords of the Ulstermen were:

- Conall Cernach son of Amergin
- Amergin the poet
- the sons of Conchobor
- Fiac son of Fergus
- Fergus son of Eirgge Horse-mouth
- Sothach son of Sencha mac Ailella
- Fiachu son of Laidgen, king of the Fir Bolg
- Guala son of Gerg son of Faeburde.



They formed batallions on both sides, each as great and lofty as the other, and charged towards each other on the battlefield. They met, and each man began striking and hacking at the next. The fighting between the men of Ol nEgmacht and the Ulstermen was rough and sharp, with envy and hatred and malevolence on all sides. There was uproar and tumult on both sides, from the hollering of the men, the outcry of the soldiers, the groans and wails of the strong, the clashing and clattering of swords, the whiz and whir of the spears and arrows, and the rumbling and thundering of the huge rocks as they crashed on the shields and breastplates and helmets of the veterans and wardogs. The noise was mighty, for there have never since been such heroes as the heroes of those days, for vigour and strength and spear-throwing, for valour and daring and prowess.

Ailill Ardagach and Scannal, two sons of Mágu, fell to Conall Cernach. Ailill of Brefne and Loingsech of Loch Rí fell to him on the same day. Aengus, king of the Fir Bolg and Fer Deiched son of Fer Diad fell to Cúscraid son of Conchobor, king of Ulster. Aengus

son of Ailill Finn fell to Amergin son of Eccet Salach the Smith. Mata son of Goll Eilech fell to Irial Glunmar son of Conall Cernach. Troga and Flaithri, sons of Fróech mac Fidaig, fell to Glaisne son of Conchobor. Imchad son of Lugaid fell to Guala son of Gerg.

But the Ulstermen also fell in great numbers in the battle. Fiachu and Conaing were killed by Mac Cecht and Cet. Corc son of Dubthach Beetle-tongue fell to Sanb son of Cet. Guala son of Gerg was killed by Maine Athramail. Two fell by each other's hands in the battle, Benna son of Conchobor and Cet son of Ailill and Medb.

After that the battle went against the men of Ol nEgmacht, so great was the strength of the assault and the slaughter against them, and the Ulstermen pursued them from the battlefield. Amergin pursued the two Eithiars, sons of Fergus mac Róich, until they fell by one another at Imlech Aí. Then the men of Ol nEgmacht raised a red wall against the Ulstermen, for the Ulstermen never followed up a slaughter if a wall was set up against them.

It was in the Battle of Airtech that the Fir Domnainn were finally destroyed. After which the Ulstermen returned home, carrying great spoil with them.

The Death of Cet mac Mágach

How did the death of Cet mac Mágach come about? Not hard to tell.

Once, Cet went to Ulster, looking to kill someone. This was something he often did. Since he was a child, he had never gone without killing an Ulsterman. Soon he was heading back west with the heads of 27 Ulster warriors. Conall Cernach was sent after him.

Snow had fallen, so Conall was able to follow his tracks, and he caught up with him in Brefne in Connacht, where he and his charioteer were cooking a meal in an unoccupied house. The horses were under the chariot outside.

‘That’s Cet,’ said Conall. ‘It wouldn’t be a good idea to fight him, because of his ferocity and fierceness. He is a savage man.’

‘I can’t believe you said that,’ said Conall’s charioteer. ‘The menace who is ravaging Ulster is in that house, and you’re not going to storm it! It would be no disgrace to fall in combat against someone as courageous as him.’

‘Oh father,’ said Conall, ‘I will not give my life to any of the men of Ireland. But I will leave a token with the horses.’

So Conall took a lock from one of the horses’ manes, put it on the front of the chariot, and set off east to Ulster.

‘Oh no,’ said Cet’s charioteer when he saw this.

‘There’s nothing to be scared of,’ said Cet. ‘It’s good that he spared the horses. This is Conall’s calling card. It’s a sign of his good intentions, I’m relieved to say.’

‘You can’t let the man who has killed so many Connachtmen disgrace you like this,’ said the charioteer. ‘Your name will not be remembered until doomsday unless you kill him or put him to flight this evening.’

‘You’re right,’ said Cet, and they followed him as far as Áth Ceit (Cet’s Ford).

‘Now, Conall,’ said Cet.

‘What, Cet?’ said Conall.

‘You’re not getting up from this one, you crook.’

‘Reckon so,’ said Conall, turning towards him, and they began to fight. The sound of the blows they struck, and their shouting and panting, and the snorting of the horses, and the charioteers egging on the heroes in the ford, could be heard for miles around. They fought until they both fell, exhausted, on either side of the ford: Cet, dead; Conall, in a dead faint.

When Conall came to, he ordered his charioteer to drive back to Ulster before the men of Connacht could take their revenge. However, the lad couldn’t lift Conall into the chariot, so he bade farewell and went home without him.

‘This is bad,’ said Conall, ‘for I have vowed that no single Connachtmen should kill me. Even if I could have the kingship of the world, I would give it up for another Connachtman to come and finish me off, so that my death wouldn’t be at the hands of a single warrior.’

The first to come by was Bélchú of Brefne. ‘Here is Cet,’ he said, ‘and here is Conall. All Ireland will now be happy, that these two slaughter-hounds, who between them have ruined Ireland, are dead.’ As he said this, he put the butt-end of his spear on Conall.

‘Be careful with that,’ said Conall. ‘I’m not dead yet, no thanks to you.’

‘I can see you would like me to kill you,’ said Bélchú, ‘but I won’t. You’re as good as dead already.’

‘You wouldn’t even have the guts to wound my cloak, you wretched old woman,’ said Conall.

‘I won’t kill you now,’ said Bélchú. ‘Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll take you back to my house, and have you healed, and when you’re fit, then I’ll fight you.’

So Bélchú lifted Conall onto his back, and half carried, half dragged him to his house. He sent for physicians to come and treat him until he was well again.

‘Listen to me,’ said Bélchú to his sons. ‘This man will escape from me, and will do us no good. Our only hope is to kill him before he leaves. Tomorrow night, I’ll leave the house open for you. Come then, and kill him in his bed.’

But the wounded man, Conall, was aware of Bélchú’s evil intentions towards him. ‘Close the house,’ he said. Bélchú went

forth, but left the house open. ‘Now, Bélchú,’ said Conall, ‘get into my bed.’

Bélchú refused, but when Conall threatened to cut off his head, he complied. He went forth again and closed the house, then got into Conall’s bed. When he had fallen asleep, Conall got up and opened the house again.

When Bélchú’s sons arrived, they went to the bed their father was in and put their three spears through him, killing him. Conall arose and plied his sword on them until their brains were scattered around the walls. He took all four heads and set out eastwards, and reached his own house before morning.

And that is the death of Cet, and of Bélchú of Brefne and his sons.

The Death Of Fergus Mac Róich

How did the death of Fergus mac Róich come about? Not hard to tell.

Fergus was in exile in Connacht, after his honour had been violated over the sons of Uisliu. He had been one of the guarantors of their safety, along with Dubthach Beetle-tongue and Conchobor's son Cormac Connlongas, who were in exile with him. They had been in Connacht for fourteen years, and during that time they caused great fear and strife every night in Ulster.

It was Fergus who killed Conchobor's son Fiachra, and Gerg son of Illand, and Eogan son of Durthacht, and it was he who led the Cattle Raid of Cooley. He did many great deeds while he was in the household of Ailill and Medb, although he and his men were more likely to be abroad in the land than in that household. His company of exiled Ulstermen numbered three thousand, and his comrade in Ailill's household was Lugaid Dalléces (the Blind Poet), Ailill's brother.

Once, after deeds of valour, they were camped on the lake on the Plain of Aí, and games were held. On that day the whole army went down to the lake to bathe.

'Go down to the lake, Fergus,' said Ailill, 'and dunk the men.' 'They aren't good in water,' protested Fergus, but he went anyway. As Fergus went into the water, all the gravel and stones at the bottom came to the surface. Medb was filled with desire for him, and went down to the lake. She swam until she was on Fergus's chest, and entwined her legs around him, and Fergus swam around the lake with her.

Ailill was consumed with jealousy. When Medb had left, he said to Lugaid, 'It is delightful how the hart and the doe play in the water.'

Lugaid, whose aim was unerring, said 'Why not kill them?'

'Go on – have a throw,' said Ailill.

'Point me in the right direction,' said Lugaid, 'and bring me a spear.'

Ailill made sure his chariot was nearby. Fergus was washing in the lake, with his bare chest towards Lugaid, and when Lugaid threw his spear, it went into Fergus's chest and out the other side.

'That throw hit home!' said Lugaid. 'That's true,' everyone said. 'It is the end of Fergus.'¹¹

'How terrible that I should have killed my friend and foster-brother innocently,' said Lugaid.

'Bring me my chariot!' called Ailill, and the whole army, both Connachtman and Ulster exile, began to flee towards the shore. Fergus pulled the spear from his chest and threw it after Ailill, but it hit a greyhound which was behind the chariot. He then dragged himself out of the lake to a nearby hill, where he straightened himself out, and died. And that is the death of Fergus mac Róich.

¹¹ The original Irish contains an untranslatable pun on the word *bruinne*, which means both 'end' and 'breast'.

The Deaths of Ailill and Conall Cernach

There was a fierce man of Ulster, Conall Cernach, the greatest warrior in Ireland, who ever since he was a child, if ever he had a spear in his hand, he also had the head of a Connachtman. He was a deadly enemy of the Connachtmen, for they had killed his brothers, and there was no man in Connacht who hadn't lost a son, a brother or a father to Conall.

It was he who killed three of Ailill and Medb's sons, and Bélchú of Brefne and his three sons, and the six sons of Mágu of Connacht: Anlúan, Docha, Mac Corb, Finn, Cet and Ailill. It was he who killed Ailill son of Mata Muresc, the king of Connacht (Mata Muresc was his mother; his father was Ross the Red of Leinster. Ailill contested the kingship of Leinster in the East, and won the kingship of Connacht in the west by right of his mother, so in the west he was known as Ailill mac Mata).

At last however, after his foster-brothers Conchobor and Cú Chulainn had been killed, Conall grew old and tired. Great sadness fell upon him, and he lost even the strength to walk. So he considered which household was best able to look after and feed him.

'Why,' he said, 'nobody but Ailill and Medb have the resources to provide for me. My hatred for them is great; nevertheless, it is there I must go.'

So he went to Cruachan, and Ailill and Medb welcomed him into their stronghold. A house was made for him by the wall of the stronghold, and a pig, a bullock, a wether, twelve cakes, a cauldron of broth, and the leftovers from Ailill and Medb's table were brought to him, which he ate in one sitting. He lived there a year, and every day he ate the same meal. Every day he would entertain the men of Connacht with stories of how he killed their sons, brothers and fathers. They all brought their spears to him to be set and sharpened, and he would always have that done before any of the cows woke up.

Now Medb was well known for her great power, honour and dignity, and equally great was her sexual appetite: she needed thirty men a day, or Fergus once, to satisfy her. But her husband Ailill was a man of equal dignity. He was without blemish – no fear,

jealousy or stinginess marred his character, and he was brave, handsome and wise. If he was playing a game, and Medb sent a servant to summon him, he would always insist on finishing his game before going to her. He also saw other women behind Medb's back, and this made her very jealous, so she brought Conall into her household to keep an eye on him, in case he did anything without her permission.

On Beltaine,¹² early in the morning, Conall was in his house by the wall, setting spears for the men of Connacht. Meanwhile, Ailill was meeting a woman by the side of the stronghold. Medb knew what her husband was up to, and she went out after him, and saw the hazel bush the pair of them were hiding behind moving.

'Well Conall,' she said, 'until now your name has been Conall the Victorious.¹³ From now on it will be Conall the Wicked Wretch! While you were Conall the Victorious, no-one would have dared break your word. Today this outrage goes on right under your nose!'

'This is a chance to avenge Fergus,' said Conall, and he took aim with his spear, throwing it right through Ailill's body (although some say he wounded him in an empty house by throwing his spear through the thatch of the roof). The Connachtmen all came to Ailill's aid, and carried him inside. 'Who did this?' they asked. 'Conall!' replied Ailill.

'That's not true!' said Conall.

'Yes it is,' said Medb.

'Alright, so it is true,' said Conall, 'but I did it in revenge for Fergus.'

'Curse you for what you have done,' said Ailill. 'Get out of my presence, for the men of Connacht will surely kill you when I die.'

'It will be enough for me if I can reach my chariot in front of the stronghold,' said Conall.

¹² Beltaine: May Day - the festival of the beginning of Summer.

¹³ The translation of 'Cernach' as 'Victorious' is doubtful. The *Cóir Anmann* (Fitness of Names) gives the following alternatives: 'angular' (*cernach*), from the impression of a shield on his forehead, received in a dispute over a woman; 'man-valiant' (*cern-niadh*); from Latin *cerno*, 'I see', because he could see as well by night or by day; or 'victorious', from *cern*, 'victory'. Some commentators have linked him to Cernunnos, the Gaulish horned god.

‘I won’t die until then,’ said Ailill. So Conall went to his chariot, and as soon as he reached it, Ailill died. The Connachtmen pursued him, hurling their spears, and Conall killed many of them.

However, he soon came to a ford. Conall had a *geis* against crossing a ford unless it had been strained for him, and there were miners washing ore upstream. He couldn’t cross the polluted river in front of him, and the Connachtmen were catching up behind him. He killed many more of them before falling to their swords. Then the Three Red Wolves of Martine, of the Men of the Plain of Erne, who were in Ailill’s household, cut off his head in revenge for Cú Roí, whose head the Ulstermen had carried north.

It is still there, and it’s big enough that several calves, or four men playing *fidchell*, or a couple on a litter, could fit inside it. There is a prophesy that one day it will be taken south again, and the Ulstermen will gain his strength by drinking milk from it: hence the saying, ‘the destruction of Ulster from the destruction of Ulster’.

It was then that Medb arrived in pursuit. She said:

‘O pale head, carried off by the Three Red Wolves of Martine after the battle’s decided. It is the head of a hero, the head of Conall son of Amergin.’

The Death of Medb

The three sons of Finn were Conall Anglonnach, Eochaid Finn and Eochaid Feidlech. Eochaid Feidlech had three sons: Bres, Nár and Lothar, who were known as *Trí Finn Emna* – the fair triplets; and three daughters: Eithne Úathach – the Terrible, so called because she used to eat children – Medb of Cruachan, and Clothru of Cruachan.

The three *Finn Emna* wanted to seize the kingdom from their father. Despite the protestations of their sister Clothru, they declared war on him. Clothru predicted that, because of their great wickedness, they would probably die in battle, and because they had no children, she took them to bed in an effort to produce an heir. Again she tried to dissuade them, arguing that they had committed enough crimes against their family with this incest without adding patricide. Sure enough, Eochaid defeated them, but Clothru had conceived a son, Lugaid Riab nDerg – of the Red Stripes – who was known as the son of the Three *Finn Emna*.

And so it was Clothru who inherited the kingdom of Connacht from her father. She used to spend the tributes she received on Inis Clothrand on Loch Rí. She was murdered by her sister Medb while pregnant by Conchobor of Ulster. The child, a boy, was cut out of her womb, and was called Furbaide Ferbend, son of Conchobor. After this, Medb assumed the kingship of Connacht, taking her husband Ailill into sovereignty with her.

Medb also used to spend her tributes on Inis Clothrand. In fact, Medb was under a *geis* to bathe every morning at the entrance to the island.

Furbaide went to Inis Clothrand and stuck a stake, the same height as Medb, into the flagstone where Medb bathed. He attached a rope to the stake, and used it to measure the distance between the flagstone and the shore of the loch. Then he took the rope back home. When the youths of Ulster played games, this was the game Furbaide played. He stretched out the rope and stuck a stake in the ground at either end. Standing at one stake, he practised with his slingshot until he could hit an apple on the other stake with unerring accuracy.

Once, there was an assembly of the men of Ulster and Connacht held at Loch Rí. That morning, Medb came out to bathe. Everyone who saw her remarked on how beautiful she was. ‘Who is that?’ asked Furbaide. ‘That’s your mother’s sister,’ he was told.

He was eating a piece of cheese, so he didn’t waste any time looking for a stone. When Medb turned her head toward him, he let fly the piece of cheese from his slingshot, hit her smack in the middle of the head, and killed her. And so Furbaide avenged his mother’s murder.

The Death of Conchobor's Sons

A man went out hunting at Emain Macha, and killed three hares. He went to cook them on the edge of a rock. When he got there he heard a voice, which spoke these verses to him from the rock:

They were noble, they were venerable,
They were not berries on a hide;
They were swift in Emain Macha,
The three princes.

They were comely, they were bold,
They were noble, agile;
They were warriors, each vigorous,
They were wise.

Many were their armies in Emain,
Great were their households;
They were royal heirs without treachery,
The true stuff of princes.

‘It's shameful what you have done, man,’ said the voice. ‘The three sons of Conchobor mac Nessa were there: Cormac Cond Longas, Cairpre and Cúsraid Mend Macha. They had come to *Síd na Céile*¹⁴ in the form of three hares, and it is them you have killed.’

The hunter was horror-stricken, and went away leaving his game.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Síd na Céile*: the “mound of the vassals”, presumably one of the mounds of Emain Macha.

¹⁵ The hare appears to have been sacred in early Britain: Julius Caesar (*De Bello Gallico* 5.12) says the Britons of his time regarded it as unlawful to eat hares, and Cassius Dio (*Roman History* 62.6) says that Boudica employed a form of divination where she released a hare from her cloak and foretold the future from the direction it ran.

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