

Legends of the Land: Locating Folkloric Narratives within the Irish Landscape

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Introduction:

There is an undeniable symbiotic relationship between a land and its people. At the most fundamental level, a given geographical site provides for its inhabitants in the form of natural resources, which can then be cultivated in the form of sustenance, but this is a severely simplistic approach to interdependence as mankind derives allegorical elucidations from the world around them. A solely biological outlook neglects the humanistic tendency to ascribe supernatural attributes to those temporal engagements that are unfamiliar or not so easily understood. The motivations behind these types of ascriptions are multifaceted, but at its crux is the realization that one's interactions and identity cannot be grasped outside the context from which they are formed. Therefore, when an aspect of the world in relation to the self is inexplicable, the ever-curious individual sets out to gather information which inevitably leads to fact and fiction weaving together to create new meanings. The aforementioned byproducts of man's exploratory endeavors are then loosely formalized into the vast genre of folk legends as they come into contact with a receptive society who is responsible for absorbing the implicit and explicit messages of the narrative. The collective listeners are the integral determinants of whether a legend should enter into the regional or national cultural endowment, but this relies upon two things. The first is the teller's ability to ground their story in the same environment from which their trepidation and uncertainties arose, and the second is the listener's ability to look beyond the objective truth of the legend to how its events might convey a larger moral statement or observation about the elements of said environment.

Folklorist Linda Dégh engages with this troubling topic in her work entitled, "Legend and Belief," in which she points to the acute tension that occurs when audiences and scholars prioritize the facts of a legend over its socio-cultural implications for a people's existence. She is

able to identify an all-consuming obsession with exposing whether legends are verifiable or fallacious; when instead, one's attention should be directed toward the act of believing or non-believing as it is a key component in the preservation of stories and the building of culture for generations to come. As Degh writes, "We want to emphasize this again: it is not necessarily the belief of the narrator or the belief of the receiver-transmitter that we have to consider. Rather, we must consider, abstractly, so to speak, the *belief itself* that makes its presence felt in any kind of legend" (p. 301). It is by moving past the neurotic positing of opinion that one can fully come to appreciate antiquity. On that account, legends must be regaled for the historical and cultural insights into the land and its people, and this can be asserted through the following examination of three major geographical sites found within Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that are responsible for educating natives and migrants alike on the ways of the ancient Celts and the medieval Irish.

Part I: The Mythological Cycle, The Hill of Tara, and the God Lugh

With reference to the forenamed qualities of the legend in mind, it should be noted that the most prominent stories emerged from one of four prose cycles: the Mythological, the Ulster, the Fenian, or the Cycle of the Kings. Each cycle can be characterized by an abundant literature that correlates to specific places and involves particular themes. The earliest literary examples of this coalescence between time, space, and tradition can be seen in the compositions of the Mythological Cycle, involving the godly race of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Also referred to as the "Peoples of the Goddess Dana," the Tuatha's folkloric narratives centered on topics of governance and battle in the days of old. The French linguist Marie-Louise Sjoestedt who specialized in Celtic studies and Irish mythology described this mythological cycle as "a period

when beings lived or events happened such as one no longer sees in our day” (p. 2). Moreover, the essential notion behind Sjoestedt’s definition is the recollection of a pre-Christian Ireland in which every sort of craftsmanship was learned and imbued with a “magic” that would aid them against their adversaries. The most notable tales speak of four crafted talismans brought by the Dé Danann to Ireland: the Lia Fáil (the Stone of Destiny), the sword of Nuada, the spear of Lug, and the cauldron of Dagda. It is the foremost of these that necessitates further consideration as its present position atop the Hill of Tara in County Meath creates a bridge between the past and present.

Although not the most visited historical sight within the Boyne Valley, the legends involving the Hill of Tara provide an invaluable look into the structures of a prior society which makes it one of the most significant places within the Irish landscape. As it so happens, Tara was established by the first settlers as the seat from which the gods and kings would govern, so when the Tuatha Dé Danann arrived in Ireland and encountered the inhospitable *Fir Bolg*, they engaged in the *First Battle of Mag Tuired* to claim their ascendancy to Tara’s kingship. According to the work of Irish linguist Proinsias Mac Cana, King Nuadha of the Dé Danaan led his compatriots to victory but at the expense of his arm and his position as his disfigurement made him unfit to rule (p. 58). Thus, the narrative follows that Bres the Beautiful, a half-*Fomorian* raised among the Dé Danaan by his mother, took up the mantle, lost their talismans, and led the people into decline at which point Nuadha, fit with a new silver arm, asked him to resign. Angered by this behest, Bres turned toward his *Fomorian* allies, the under-demon race, to raise an army against the Dé Danann just as the Sun god Lugh was arriving at Tara. Nuadha, not trusting the newcomer, put Lugh through a series of tests in which it was unveiled that he was the most-skilled craftsman and warrior of all- the one prophesied to bring down his

Fomorian grandfather known as Balor of the Evil Eye (Slavin, p. 60). Henceforth, Lugh was dubbed the *Samildánach* (he who possesses many skills) and was given authority over the Dé Danann (Sjoestedt, p. 58). He exemplified his wisdom by gathering the druids, the smiths, the physicians, and all others who possessed special capabilities at Tara to prepare them for the *Second Battle of Mag Tuired*. The outcome of this battle was in Lugh's favor as he regained the cauldron of Dagda, slayed Balor, and drove the rest of the Formorians into the sea before returning to Tara where the Lia Fáil remained. As written by Michael Slavin in his book on Tara, "Lugh became the leader of the Dé Danann after that and held the kinship of Tara for many peaceful years. It is not known whether he ever died, for it is told that one Samhain eve he just disappeared" (p. 62).

Today, the Hill of Tara is no longer a setting for mystical battles as Sjoestedt alluded to in her definition of the Mythological Cycle, but the aforesaid legends attached to the land still render it geographically noteworthy and serve as an educational tool for those visiting the site. The individuals who walk beside the Mound of the Hostages, the Lia Fáil, or along the banqueting hall are intellectually transported to the Bronze Age and have the opportunity to appreciate the practices of their forebears, which ultimately facilitates the continued maintenance of Tara in the twenty-first century. For example, one is able to discern from the Tuatha Dé Danann's rule of Tara that the governance of any organization or group requires the development of not just one skill but of many. This moral requires one to strip away the magic behind the De Danann's crafts, but once this does happen, the message becomes pertinent in any age. Likewise, Lugh's rallying before the *Second Battle of Mag Tuired* teaches that one must strategize and establish new leadership when oppressive forces are at hand. The physical mounds actualize these lessons to make them not only applicable in the past but relevant to the present. The most

poignant instance of this is Daniel O’Connell’s decision to campaign at the Hill of Tara as highlighted by Irish archaeologist Peter Harbison. Harbison writes, “Daniel O’Connell held one of the largest political rallies ever seen in Ireland here in 1843, bringing hundreds of thousands to hear him plead for a repeal of the Act of Union- without a megaphone in sight” (p. 126).

O’Connell’s rally at Tara cannot solely be attributed to the folkloric narratives of the Mythological Cycle, but one should not deny that they set a certain precedent for Ireland’s governmental proceedings. In other words, the legends give meaning to the land, but the upkeep of and engagement with the land ensures that these legends and lessons are not lost.

Part II: The Ulster Cycle, Newgrange, and Cú Chulainn

To further fortify this discussion on land and legend, one can look approximately 57 kilometers north of the Hill of Tara to the largest burial mound within the *Brú na Bóinne* complex. Formally declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, the Newgrange passage tomb has been a source of archeological intrigue, dating to the Neolithic age. Information provided by Henry Boylan in his book, *A Valley of Kings: The Boyne*, indicates that it stands at nearly forty feet high and about three hundred feet in diameter, composed of some 200,000 tons of earth and stone (p. 81). This massive structure was uncovered in 1699 by Edward Llwyd with major excavations being carried out nearly 300 years later by Professor M.J O’Kelly (Harbison, p. 115). Boylan goes on to state that, “A visit to Newgrange will make even the most prosaic of observers wish to know more about the monument itself and its builders,” and it is the last item of this quote with which legends are associated (p. 84). The Mythological Cycle and the succeeding Ulster Cycle bleed together within the walls of the passage tomb as the Tuatha Dé Danann’s offspring ring in a new era. The resulting literature of this period is not dissimilar to the prior

age, but it diverges from the features of the Mythological in that the Ulster Cycle is less focused on the kingship and governance such that has never been seen before and instead hones in on the independent hero. As Mac Cana notes, “The primary concern of heroic literature is with heroic action, and in this the Ulster Cycle runs true to type” (p. 94). In this case, Newgrange enters the picture as the establishing set-up for the greatest folkloric narrative within the Ulster Cycle and within Irish history.

The build-up to the tales of *Táin Bó Cuailgne* begins with the previously introduced god Lugh and the sister-or daughter- of King Conchobor of Ulster, Dechtire. The latter of the two acts as a charioteer, harnessing nine chariots to hunt birds for the people of Ulster, which brings her distances far and wide. In Sjoestedt’s chapter, “Gods and Heroes of the Celts,” Dechtire arrives near *Brú na Bóinne* after a long night of hunting. Conflicting details emerge from this point about how exactly Dechtire came to arrive at Newgrange, but it is agreed upon that this was a sacred place for the Tuatha Dé Danann as it was once home to the Dagda. Ergo, upon her entry into the passage as a place for rest, Lugh of the Dé Danann approached her in a dream, telling her that he is the one that brought her into the tomb and that she will bear his son (Sjoestedt, p. 77). In some versions of the folkloric legend, this child is a reincarnation of the sun god himself, and in others, he is thought to be the son of Conchobor who drunkenly reproduced with his sister. Both of these versions are a part of a larger set of motifs in the Ulster Cycle involving incestuous relationship and procreation by a god (Mac Cana, p. 101). Nevertheless, this dream comes to fruition, and a child is born by the name of Sétanta who goes unmatched in heroism throughout his youth. In accordance with his character, Sétanta gains the title of *Cú Chulainn* by slaying the hound that guards the land of Culann after it attacks him and subsequently vowing to act as a guard in the animal’s place (Mac Cana, p. 102). Tales of his

might and fury only grow from there as is commonplace with Indo-European heroes, but in like manner, the higher he climbs, the greater his fall. By the end of his legendary saga, *Cú Chulainn* is injured so severely that he ties himself to a pillar to die standing.

From a divine birth to a mortal death, *Cú Chulainn*'s legacy is tied to Newgrange and to the larger Boyne Valley territory. When one steps into the passage tomb, the individual is walking the path that Dechtire did, bringing to light the themes of fertility and trust in the divine, which precedes her son's birth. Comparable to the lessons derived from the Tuatha Dé Danann, the events of the Ulster Cycle can be extricated from their magical components to reveal important features about society and the world. To illustrate using the concepts above, visitors to Newgrange who are exposed to the legend of Dechtire and Sétanta are taught about the sacredness of procreation in pre-modern Ireland and the belief that it may require divine intervention. This can be easily tied to couples today who pray or manifest for a child to enter into their lives. Similarly, people who enter into this landscape are educated on how *Cú Chulainn* received his noble name, which conveys a paramount lesson that an individual's heroic acts, no matter how big or small, can help protect and preserve their community. The land of Newgrange carries these cultural insights from the past into the present and communicates the genuine character of the Irish people to people across the globe.

Part III: The Fenian Cycle, The Giant's Causeway, and Fionn

Furthermore, it would be remiss to leave Northern Ireland out of this conversation as there was a moment in history in which the partition did not exist. This was a time before the all-consuming domination of the British Empire, where the flow of Celtic legends between peoples was permitted. Consequently, this lack of a harsh boundary created a folkloric history

that is now shared between the Republic and the UK, and it is unquestionable that citizens of both nations have a cultural claim to the sites and stories in the foregoing discourse. However, in spite of this mutual heritage, there is a somewhat ironic tonal shift that accompanies the transition from the Mythological Cycle and early stories of the Ulster Cycle that take place in the Republic to the Fenian Cycle that takes place in the North. This change has less to do with character arcs and supernatural elements and more to do with the romanticization of the Irish countryside that had never before been capitalized on. Another UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Giant's Causeway and the Antrim Coastline became the source of a nostalgic longing for the past that was advanced by Fionn and his band of followers. Mac Cana calls attention to this new era of heroes by writing, "The stories of Fionn mac Cumhaill and his companions seem always to have enjoyed popular favor and they remained prominent in the repertoire of Gaelic storytellers even to our own time" (p. 104). To that end, the rare basalt columns that make up this natural wonder, and that act as the setting for Fionn's adventures, support a jovial exploration of how culture moves beyond borders.

Correspondingly, "The Tale of Two Giants" in Philip Watson's book on the Causeway perfectly encapsulates this nature of cultural transmission. In the legend, Fionn declares battle against a Scottish giant after he mocks Fionn's strength. Realizing that there are no boats large enough to carry the giant across the narrow sea, Fionn builds the causeway bridge so the giant can walk across dry land, but when he arrives, he is more fearsome than Fionn realized. Fionn then flees for advice, and a wise woman offers a solution by disguising Fionn as a babe and inviting the giant to tea where she asks him not to disturb Fionn's "sleeping child" (Watson, p. 10). The Scottish giant thinks that if the child was that large then Fionn must be even larger, so he retreats back home, destroying the bridge as he goes and demonstrating that a little bit of

cunning goes a long way. Thus, this story and the Giant's Causeway doubles as a lesson on wit and on the role migration plays in the passing down of oral traditions and histories from the past into the present. When legends of the land become tied to geographical locations outside their original national context, while also retaining their initial magnitude and impact, there is the opportunity for new growth, education, and appreciation which makes the world a more hospitable place.

Conclusion:

Circling back to Degh's scholarship, it is clear that legends leave a substantial impact on individuals and communities as they signify a contiguous past and present. In respect to Ireland, this manifests in an unbroken and evolving cycle of legendary literatures that recount the disposition of a people and that can be actualized in visiting the related historical sites. By absorbing folkloric narratives within physical landscapes, one has the chance to move past the veracity of the story to focus on the socio-cultural lessons that give a place its meaning. The Hill of Tara, Newgrange, and the Giant's Causeway are just a few examples of this wider phenomenon of preservatory practices surrounding land that implies a care and nostalgia for a temporally-transcendent culture and indicates a need for continuous participation with neighbor and nation.

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