

The Children of Lir: Senior

Introduction

The 'Oidhe Chlann Lir' or 'The Fate of the Children of Lir' is one of Ireland's most famous and popular legends. The story is closely associated with Lough Derravaragh in Co. Westmeath.

Based in ancient Ireland, this tale is part of a saga that is generally called 'Tri Truagha na Scealaidheachta', or 'The Three Sorrows of Storytelling'. The other two stories are 'The Exile of the Children of Uisneach' and 'The Fate of the Children of Tuireann'.

It is an ancient tale of good and evil, with a few magical twists. Read on to find out about the fate of the Children of Lir.

Background

Lir and Aebh

Legend has it that many, many years ago the Tuatha Dé Danann were one of the first tribes of people to live in Ireland. They were skilled in the use of magic. When the time came for them to select a new king, a noble man called Bodb Dearg was chosen. Lir had been the other main candidate and was very angry because he felt he deserved it more.

But Bodb respected Lir and did not want them to be enemies. To ensure Lir's friendship, he offered him the choice of any one of his three beautiful daughters as a wife. Lir thought they were all stunningly beautiful, but decided

to choose the eldest because he felt she was the most noble of the three. Her name was Aebh. Together, they went home happily to Lir's castle that night.

Joy and Tragedy

Lir and Aebh fell very much in love. Soon Aebh gave birth to a daughter and a son, called Fionnuala and Aodh. They were beautiful children and anyone who saw them could not help but fall in love with them.

A few years passed and Aebh gave birth to two more sons, called Fiachra and Conn. They were as good-natured and handsome as their older brother and sister. However, poor Aebh never lived to see her youngest boys. During their birth she passed away tragically. Lir was heartbroken.

Now Lir and his four children were left to look after one another. It was only the love of his children that helped him to survive the death of his dear wife. After a while, he thought it would be better for the family if he found a new wife.

Aoife's Spell

Lir marries Aoife

Bodb Dearg took pity on Lir once again, and offered him Aedb's sister, Aoife, in marriage. At first, Aoife enjoyed the company of Lir and the children very much and the family began to recover their spirits.

However, as the children grew older, they became famous for their beauty and were beloved by all the Tuatha Dé Danann. Lir's devotion to his children also

awoke a resentment in Aoife. She was torn apart by jealousy of the children and guilt about her sister's death.

An evil touched her heart and turned Aoife against the children. She hatched a plan to get rid of them, so that she could have Lir all to herself. She concocted a terrible spell that would remove the children of Lir from her life forever.

Lough Derravaragh

A morning came when Lir was out hunting. Aoife took the chance to take the children out in her chariot. She told them they were going to visit their grandfather, Bodhbh Dearg.

The previous night, Fionnuala had seen in a dream that Aoife was planning something evil. She was very worried about going but she had no choice in the matter. Stopping at Lough Derravaragh, Aoife led the children to the water to bathe.

As soon as they were out in the lake swimming, she unleashed a wand and struck them with a magic spell, saying: 'Out with you, children of the king, your luck is taken away from you forever; it is sorrowful the story will be to your friends. It is with flocks of birds your cries will be heard for ever!'

And with that, they changed immediately into four beautiful swans. But even as swans, the children could still sing better than any human. They called out in harmony: 'Oh, what have you done to us, witch? It is a bad deed! When will we be free?'

Aoife replied: 'I have put a spell on you. Now everything you have will be mine. You will be swans for nine hundred years. Three hundred here will be spent at

this lake, a further three hundred on the Sea of Moyle and three hundred more on the Bay of Erris!

Aoife's Comeuppance

With her terrible deed complete, Aoife went on to her father Bodb Dearg's house. He was surprised to see her without his dear grandchildren, who he had been looking forward to seeing so much. Aoife lied to her father, telling him that Lir had kept the children at home. Bodb Dearg suspected trickery in his daughter's voice, so he sent his messenger to Lir to find out the truth.

When Lir heard the lie, he knew that something terrible had happened. He immediately set off for Bodb Dearg's castle in his chariot. Charging along past Lough Derravaragh, he was suddenly halted by the purest, most enchanting, saddest song he had ever heard. Spellbound, he stopped the chariot at the bank.

The swans were at the lake waiting for Lir. Fionnuala looked up at him from the water with her swan eyes, and told him the truth. Lir spent the night at the bank with his children, crying and listening to their songs.

The next day, Lir continued onto Bodb Dearg's house in desperate grief. He found Aoife there and told her father of her treachery. Enraged, Bodb Dearg put a spell on her, turning her into a witch of the air. The second he waved his wand, she blew away with the wind, never to be seen again.

The Fate of the Children

First three hundred years

Once Aoife's spell was cast, the children of Lir were destined to spend three hundred years trapped on Lake Derravaragh. However, things were not so bad there. Every day, they were visited by family and friends. The people of the Tuatha Dé Danann loved the swans and came from near and far to hear their enchanting song, which lifted the spirits of all who heard it.

In this way, the first three hundred years passed fairly contentedly. However, the time came when swans had to leave to fulfil the next stage of the spell. They were now destined to spend three hundred years in the Sea of Moyle, a fierce, cold stretch of sea between Ireland and Scotland.

Second three hundred years

Fionnuala, Aodh, Fiachra and Conn said farewell to the Tuatha Dé Danann and made for the icy sea of Moyle. There was great sadness in their hearts, as they feared they would not see their people again.

A sadness covered the whole of Ireland when it was heard these four beautiful swans were to go to the harsh, bitter sea of Moyle. As a result, there was a decree that no swans should be killed from that day on throughout the whole of Ireland, on pain of severe penalty.

In the day time, the swans could stay on the banks of the Sea of Moyle in Ireland and Scotland, but when night fell they were forced to return to the sea. They endured many terrible nights, often becoming separated in the chaos of the icy storms.

Between the hard rocks and heavy waves, Fionnuala, Aodh, Fiachra and Conn endured three hundred slow years until the time came to move on once more.

Final three hundred years

The swans' final destination was the Bay of Erris, close to the land of the Tuatha Dé Danann, where they had lived as children. On their way to Eris, they passed over their old house. It had changed so much that they barely recognised it. Their father's old castle was in ruins, and the landscape was overgrown.

The lives they had known as children were gone. Trapped in swan's bodies with no one in familiar faces but one another's, the last three hundred years was a lonely time for the children of Lir. However, in Eris, at least, it was warmer than the Sea of Moyle and they had plenty of food.

Finally Free

Salvation

The swans lived at Eris for many years until a holy man called Mochua came to see them. He was a disciple of St. Patrick and had a good heart.

The fame of the children of Lir had spread, and Mochua was interested in their story. He became their friend and stayed with them in the daytime. Together, they would sing and pray until the time came when the swans went back to the bay to sleep.

Time passed like this until the fateful day when the swans were released from

the spell. All of a sudden, the four birds transformed back into people. Nine hundred years had passed, and the children of Lir were no longer children. They were now so old that they had little time left to live.

In accordance with their wishes, Mochua baptised Fionnuala, Aodh, Fiachra and Conn. Not long afterwards, they all passed away at the same time. They were laid to rest together to rejoin their father and mother in heaven.