

Táin Bó Cuailgne

Introduction

The Táin Bó Cuailgne, or Cattle Raid of Cooley, is one of the most remarkable mythological tales in the Irish language and one of the greatest epics in the world. It was recorded in the Book of Leinster, which is the oldest surviving manuscript written entirely in the Irish language. The Book of Leinster dates to the 12th century and is now kept in The Long Room, Trinity College Library, Dublin. The manuscript was originally known as *Lebor na Nuachongbála* meaning 'Book of Noghoval', now Oughaval (Co. Laois). It was named after a monastic settlement in the area and was found at Oughaval in the 14th century.

Pillow Talk

One night, Queen Maebh and her husband Ailill were lying in bed talking about all their riches. The conversation turned to an argument when Ailill claimed he was wealthier than Maebh.

“I don't think so Ailill!”, laughed Maebh. “You forget that I was the daughter of the High King of Ireland. I had as many jewels, warriors and precious things as I wanted before I met you. To this day, I am richer than you!”

“I think not Maebh, you'll have to prove it!”, answered Ailill.

Nothing would do except to gather all of their most impressive belongings in two great piles and compare them. There were great golden jewels, ornaments of silver encrusted with precious stones, the most beautifully embroidered clothes, and many fine animals. It seemed that they were equal in everything, but then Ailill brought out his great White Bull of Connacht, Fionnbheannach.

Maebh could see that Fionnbheannach was far superior to any animal she owned, and she stormed away in a huff!

In a fit of jealousy she sent for her messenger MacRoeth.

“Do you know where I can find an animal to equal the White Bull of Connacht?”, she asked him.

“As a matter of fact, I do!”, he replied. “Dáire Mac Fhiachna of Ulster owns an exceptional bull - the Brown Bull of Cooley. There is no match for him in Ireland, not even Fionnbheannach, the White Bull of Connacht.”

Maebh was delighted by what she heard. Without wasting one more moment, she sent MacRoth and some of his men with a message to Dáire.

“Ask Dáire to lend me his Brown Bull of Cooley for one year. Tell him I shall reward him well with dozens of healthy heifers, gold and anything else that he desires.”

MacRoth visits Dáire

Mac Roth and his men raced across Ireland as quickly as their legs could carry them. All day they travelled, passing through Westmeath, Meath and Louth before reaching Dáire's great hall at Cooley just as the sun was setting in the west. Dáire welcomed the worn warriors with open arms.

“Come in! Come in!”, he said. “You must be exhausted after your long journey. Have dinner with me by the fire and tell me the reason for your visit.”

MacRoth explained to Dáire why Maebh wanted to borrow his Brown Bull for one year.

“They've had an argument over which one of them is richer! She'll give you plenty of rewards in return for your troubles.”

Dáire laughed at the story and told MacRoth that he'd be more than happy to let Maebh have his Brown Bull for a year. MacRoth went off to bed a happy man. Maeve would be very pleased with him! He thought that this was the easiest job he'd ever been given, but he was in for a shock.

After MacRoth had gone to bed, Dáire overheard some of his men talking amongst themselves. They boasted how Maebh would have taken the Brown Bull by force anyway, even if Dáire hadn't agreed to lend it to her. At hearing this, Dáire was outraged. He marched straight to MacRoth in a violent temper.

“You have greatly insulted me MacRoth”, he shouted, “and in my own home too! Don't think that you or your Queen Maebh can fool me. You and your men will leave at once, and you will never have my Brown Bull!”

MacRoth was stunned by Dáire's sudden outburst. He tried to talk to him, but there was no reasoning with him. Dáire threw them out of his feasting hall, leaving MacRoth and his men no choice but to go home empty-handed.

Maebh declares war and ignores Fidlema's prophecy

“What?!” screamed Maebh when MacRoth told her all that had happened. Her rage had doubled in a flash.

“Nobody refuses a request from the Queen of Cruacháin!”, she declared. “Dáire MacFhiachna will live to regret this. We shall take the Brown Bull of Cooley whether he likes it or not!”

And so it was that Maebh declared war. She gathered a mighty army to march on Ulster so she could take the Brown Bull for herself.

Maebh's prophetess tried to warn her that she would be defeated by Ulster, but Maebh paid no attention to her. She thought of nothing but gaining revenge on Dáire for his insult.

“You're mistaken!”, she said. “The men of Ulster are all under an old curse of pain that Macha put on them. They won't pose any threat to my great warriors. We march on Ulster today!”

Now the leader of Maebh's army was an Ulsterman named Fergus Mac Roich. He was a great warrior but was reluctant to fight against his countrymen. To buy some time, he decided to take the longer route to Ulster. While he was marching Maebh's army, he sent a warning message to Cú Chulainn, Ulster's champion warrior. He alone was unaffected by the curse of Macha and prepared to defend Ulster single-handedly.

Cú Chulainn defends Ulster

After a number of days marching, Maebh's army ranks began to dwindle in numbers. Every day more men were found dead and nobody seemed able to explain it. She summoned Fergus.

“Tell me Fergus”, she said, “who is doing this to me? It is a bad omen and we cannot afford to lose any more men.”

“That is an easy question to answer”, replied Fergus. “Cú Chulainn is behind these killings. He is the greatest warrior in all of Ireland and we would do well to heed his warnings. If you like, I could talk to him on your behalf?”

Maebh let Fergus go to Cú Chulainn and waited impatiently for his return. The two warriors met at midday and Fergus listened as Cú Chulainn explained his terms.

“Tell your Queen Maeve”, he said, “that if she agrees, she may send one of her warriors to me every day and I will fight him in single combat. She and her army may continue to march towards Ulster while the fights continue.”

The terms were accepted and one by one Maebh's strongest warriors were sent to face Cú Chulainn. Every sunset seemed to bring Maebh closer to defeat as none of her men could match Cú Chulainn's skill. Her men were losing confidence quickly. Maebh had to make promises of gold and land, and even the hand of her daughter Finnabair to entice them to fight for her. Soon it was the turn of the great warrior Ferdia to face Cú Chulainn.

Now Ferdia and Cú Chulainn were foster brothers and neither of them wanted to fight. On the other hand, neither of them wanted to be dishonoured by refusing to fight! For three long days, the pair fought bitterly.

At sunset on each day, they lay down their weapons and embraced, each relieved that the other was still alive. They tended to each others wounds throughout the night while they talked of their youth.

When the sun rose on the fourth morning, they took up their arms once more. It was on this day that Cú Chulainn was forced to kill his foster brother in self-defense, though he wept in despair as he held Ferdia's limp body in his arms.

Maebh takes the Brown Bull of Cooley

Maebh was in more trouble now than she realised, for the men of Ulster were freed from Macha's curse and a swarm of warriors charged at Maebh's army. Her army was devastated, but somehow Maebh managed to escape, taking the Brown Bull of Cooley with her.

She drove the Brown Bull all the way to the Shannon and into Connacht where it let out a great roar, daring Fionnbheannach, the White Bull of Connacht, to challenge it.

Enraged, Fionnbheannach charged at the Brown Bull of Cooley and their long curled horns clashed, locking together in a furious contest of strength that would last until nightfall. The terrible sound of the bull fight echoed through the valleys as the bulls kicked and stabbed at each other all day. Finally, Fionnbheannach's strength ebbed away, and the Brown Bull seized the opportunity to deliver a final fatal ram of his horns into his heart.

The Táin Bó Cuailgne ends

Fionnbheannach, the magnificent White Bull of Connacht, was dead. Despite his severe injuries, the Brown Bull of Cooley made his way back to his home, staggering as he went. Upon reaching Cooley, the Brown Bull let out a final roar, collapsed and died on his native land.

So ends the Táin Bó Cuailgne, the Cattle Raid of Cooley.

***Narrative note: Curse of Macha**

Macha was the wife of a wealthy land owner in Ulster named Crunniuc. It was obvious that Macha was not from this world because she could run faster than any animal in Ireland. One day, when Macha was heavily pregnant, Crunniuc went to the races and left his wife at home to rest. He became very drunk and began to boast to anyone who would listen that his wife Macha could run faster than the King's horses. King Conor of Ulster heard Crunniuc and said to him, "Prove it to me, or you will be put to death." Crunniuc had to sober up quickly and tell Macha she had to race the King's horses. "But I am about to give birth", she exclaimed. "I can't run as fast as I normally could. We'll go to King Conor and explain it to him." Conor would not accept any excuses, so insulted was he by Crunniuc's remarks at the races. Macha appealed to the men of Ulster to persuade their King on her behalf, but not one man spoke out for her. Macha ran the race and easily won it, but she collapsed at the finishing line, dying, and gave birth to twins. She cursed the men of Ulster with her dying breath. "May the men of Ulster suffer from the pangs of a woman in childbirth in their hour of greatest need", she screamed. With that she died, and this was the curse that fell on the men of Ulster as Maebh's army moved in to attack.

****Narrative Note: Cú Chulainn**

Cú Chulainn was the only one of Ulster's warriors not to be affected by Macha's curse. The reasons for this were that his father was the god Lugh. He was not entirely of this world, and at just 17 he was not yet a man. Macha's curse was for "the men of Ulster".