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National self image: Celtic mythology in primary education in Ireland, 1924-2001

dr. Frehan, P.G.

Publication date
2011

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Citation for published version (APA):

dr. Frehan, P. G. (2011). *National self image: Celtic mythology in primary education in Ireland, 1924-2001*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. Eigen Beheer.

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Chapter 6. Mythology In The Textbooks 1924 – 2001

Child of the Gael

*Old tales, old songs, were made for thee,
Sweet Gaelic child; and thou shalt see
How brave thy race, its birth, its youth,
Its love of honour, goodness, truth,*

*And thou, grown strong, grown rich and wise,
Shalt till the soil, bid cities rise,
The bond is loosed; the poor are free;
The world's great future rests with thee.⁷⁸⁰*

Introduction

What is the body of literature classified as ‘Celtic mythology’? What are the themes and who are the characters that populate this literature? What are the primary sources and where are they to be found? This chapter will present an overview of the sources from which the Celtic mythology corpus for this study has been derived. It will provide a description of the mythological cycles into which the body of this literature is divided and will describe a number of characters and themes from the mythological tales that are included in the targeted school textbooks during the period under investigation.

Celtic Mythology: Sources and Cycles

*Some peoples, such as the Romans, think of their myths historically;
the Irish think of their history mythologically.⁷⁸¹*

Sources of Celtic Mythology

The sources for all Irish Celtic mythology available today, and thus for those extracts featured in the Literary Readers used in the National Schools, come primarily from manuscripts that date from 12th Century Ireland.⁷⁸² The most important sources are *Leabhar na hUidre (The Book of the Dun Cow)* held in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, *Leabhar Laignech (The Book of Leinster)* held in the libraries of Trinity College and the Franciscan Library Killiney, Co. Dublin and the Rawlinson Manuscript B 502 (also referred to as the Book of Glendalough), a manuscript held in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University.⁷⁸³

Leabhar na hUidre is the oldest surviving manuscript written entirely in Irish.⁷⁸⁴ It was compiled at Clonmacnoise under the supervision of *Máel Muire Mac Célchair* in cooperation with some other unnamed scribes around the year 1050. It gets its name from a 6th century sacred relic

⁷⁸⁰ Anonymous. Ancient Celtic Poem. *The Saint Columba Readers*, Junior Book (Dublin, 1927).

⁷⁸¹ M-L. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (London, 1949), p.2.

⁷⁸² The Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) at University College Cork (<http://celt.ucc.ie/index.html>) is a very useful online corpus for an overview of many of these manuscripts

⁷⁸³ P.B. Ellis, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (London, 1993), p.3.

⁷⁸⁴ T. O'Neill, *The Irish Hand. Scribes and their Manuscripts from the Earliest Times to the Seventeenth Century with an Exemplar of Irish Scripts* (Portlaoise, 1984), p. 26.

of Clonmacnoise, the hide of the dun cow that apparently belonged to St. Ciarán, the founder of the monastery.⁷⁸⁵ It contains many mythological stories including a selection of the Ulster sagas, among them the oldest version of the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (the Cattle Raid of Cooley), “the oldest vernacular epic in Europe”⁷⁸⁶ along with other mythical, religious, and historical material.

Leabhar Laignech, also referred to as *Leabhar na Núachongbala*, is the other major source for the Irish mythological tales, containing many entries related to the Ulster Cycle sagas especially. It was compiled between 1152 and 1161 by at least four main scribes, the most prominent being *Aed Ua Crimthainn*, a leading 12th century Irish scholar and head of the monastery in Terryglass Co Tipperary.⁷⁸⁷

The Rawlinson Manuscript B 502 is a composite of two manuscripts thought to have been put together sometime in the seventeenth century.⁷⁸⁸ The first part of this manuscript is believed to have been compiled in Clonmacnoise around the middle of the 12th century. The second part is claimed to be the lost Book of Glendalough (*Leabhar Glinne da Locha*).⁷⁸⁹ This manuscript contains a selection of Leinster sagas and heroic tales as well as a selection of poetical, legal and genealogical material.⁷⁹⁰

Some of the other important manuscript sources for Celtic mythology from later centuries include the following, compiled in the 14th or 15th centuries:

The Yellow Book of Lecan (Leabhar Buidhe Lecain). This is a composite of at least sixteen parts and arranged in the seventeenth century. It was transcribed over a long time-period (1391-1592) in various counties throughout the country – Sligo, Galway, Tipperary and Cork. It contains many ancient sagas including the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* and legends of *Fionn Mac Cumhail*, as well as a large selection of legends of the Irish saints.⁷⁹¹

The Book of Uí Mhaine (Leabhar Uí Mhaine). This work was compiled around the same time as the Yellow Book of Lecan and was written for *Muircheartach Ua Ceallaigh*, bishop of Clonfert 1378-1394 and Archbishop of Tuam 1394-1407. It was written entirely in Irish and contains such information as stories on early Irish history and pseudo-history, religious and secular poetry and lists of saints.⁷⁹²

The Book of Ballymote (Leabhar Bhaile an Mhota). Part of this book at least was written at the end of the 14th century. As with many of the manuscripts of this era it was written over a period of time and in different locations. The contents of the book consist of Gaelic historical, legendary and genealogical material, with much of the contents very similar to that in *Leabhar na hUidre*. Additionally, it contains valuable Brehon Law texts as well as translations of some Greek classical material.⁷⁹³

Christian monks compiled a large percentage of the manuscripts, especially the early ones. These men of God were perhaps torn between the desire to record the native culture, the culture of their ancestors, as it was handed down or given to them and their religious hostility to the non-Christian ideas and beliefs contained within the material being recorded.

To briefly summarise and trace the source path for the mythology stories that were included in the school textbooks one must begin with the abovementioned manuscripts spanning a time period from the 11th century (*Leabhar na hUidre*) to the late 16th century (*The Yellow Book of Lecan*). Then, in the middle of the 17th century Geoffrey Keating⁷⁹⁴ wrote *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁸⁵ Royal Irish Academy, <http://www.ria.ie/library+catalogue/leabharnahuidre.html>.

⁷⁸⁶ T. O’ Neill, op. cit., (Portlaoise, 1984), p. 26.

⁷⁸⁷ P.B. Ellis. op cit., (London, 1993), p.4 and T. O’ Neill, op. cit., (Portlaoise, 1984), p. 30.

⁷⁸⁸ T. O’ Neill, op. cit., (Portlaoise, 1984), p. 28

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., p. 34

⁷⁹² Ibid., p. 36

⁷⁹³ Ibid., p. 38.

⁷⁹⁴ Please refer to Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion.

covering the historical period from the creation to the coming of the Normans and including a prominent element of Irish myth and legend, drawing on the manuscripts for source material. The following two centuries witnessed a diversity of published material owing their sources to the manuscripts. For example, Charlotte Brooke translated and published many of the ancient tales that included such characters as *Cú Chulainn* in works like her *Reliques of Irish Poetry* in 1789. Additionally, Theophilus O' Flanagan also translated and published many of the original Irish stories, among them *Deirdri or, the Lamentable Fate of the Sons of Usnach* in 1808. Such works were a most important source for writers throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, most notably Thomas Moore, Standish O'Grady, Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, Eleanor Hull and Patrick Pearse. In the material sourced for this investigation, apart from Yeats, excerpts from the writings of all of these writers works found their way to be included in the National School textbooks from 1924 onwards.

Mythological Cycles

The Irish Celtic mythological literature is divided into four cycles presented below in the chronological order it appears in the source manuscripts.

1. The Mythological Cycle
2. The Ultonian Cycle
3. The Ossianic Cycle
4. The Cycle of the Kings.

1. The Mythological Cycle.

Also referred to as the Cycle of Invasions, it describes the principle peoples who invaded and inhabited the island of Ireland from the earliest times. These are Cessair and her followers, The Formorians, The Partholonians, The Nemedians, The *Firbolgs*, The *Tuatha Dé Danann*, and The Milesians. This historical-mythological cycle especially details the exploits of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the people of the Goddess Danann or Danu. It must be noted that it is the Milesians, the Sons of Mil, who represent the Celtic people and from whom the later ruling families of Ireland are supposedly descended. The main source for this cycle is from the Book of Invasions (*Leabhar Gabhála*), which is to be found in a number of the above-mentioned ancient manuscripts, the most important being the *Leabhar Laignech*. According to information posted on the website of the Royal Irish Academy,

The Book of Invasions (*Leabhar Gabhála*) is an origin legend for the people living on the island of Ireland. The narrative traces the history of Ireland back to Noah and Cessair, daughter of Noah, who is said to have arrived forty days before the Flood. It then tells the story of the arrival of other settlers: Parthalon, Nemed, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Dé Danann and finally the Milesians. The story formed a standard element of the history of Ireland (*seanchas*) as recorded by medieval scholars.⁷⁹⁶

2. The Ultonian Cycle.

⁷⁹⁵ *Foras Feasa* was translated into English and published in London as early as 1723 and was again translated in 1857 by John O'Mahony and again in 1902-1914 by Comyn and Dinneen (refer to Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion).

⁷⁹⁶ Royal Irish Academy, <http://www.ria.ie/library+catalogue/gabhala.html>; it continues: "This version of the *Leabhar Gabhála* (23 M 70) was compiled for Brian Ruadh Meguidir (Maguire), Baron of Inniskillen. It was written in Irish, in 1631, at the Franciscan convent of Lisgoole beside Lough Erne, in County Fermanagh. This new recension was a collaborative project, and involved the revision of an earlier version of the Book of Invasions ultimately derived from that in *Leabhar na hUidhre* (Book of the Dun Cow)."

Also referred to as the Ulster Cycle, this cycle is considered the great heroic cycle of Irish mythology. It relates the deeds of the Ulster king Conchobhar Mac Neasa, the Red Branch Knights and particularly those deeds of its chief hero, *Cú Chulainn*. Most of the material and actions covered take place in the provinces of Ulster and Connaught. The central story in the cycle is the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (the Cattle Raid of Cooley). The Ulster Cycle introduces such historically impressive and influential characters as King *Conchobhar mac Neasa*, *Cú Chulainn*, *Fear Diadh* (Ferdia), Queen *Meadhbh*, *Feargus mac Róich*, *Lugh* and *Deirdre* and the Sons of *Usna*.⁷⁹⁷ Overlapping of characters from the Mythological Cycle is common, especially in the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, where many of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* feature.

3. The Ossianic Cycle.

Also referred to as the Fianna Cycle, it predominantly deals with the exploits of *Fionn Mac Cumhail* and the *Fianna*. A large percentage of the stories revolve around the *Fianna* warriors and their heroic deeds and activities that mainly take place in the provinces of Leinster and Munster. The stories tell of the deeds of *Fionn*, his roving bands known as the *Fianna*; his son *Oisín* (Ossian), *Oisín's* son *Oscar* and numerous other heroes. It also connects to elements of the Mythological Cycle as it incorporates stories associated with *Tír na nÓg* (the Land of Eternal Youth), as well as that of the early Christian period in Ireland. This cycle is important because it bridges these two eras, Pre-Christian and Christian, where it allows *Oisín's* sojourn in *Tír na nÓg* with the Princess Niamh of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* to last for three hundred years (although it seemed only a short while to *Oisín*); on *Oisín's* return to Ireland from *Tír na nÓg* he meets the Christian monk Patrick (later to become the patron saint of Ireland, St. Patrick) and conducts extensive discussions with him. These documented discussions were widespread and were especially very popular from the late Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, well over six centuries. Ó hÓgain states that “(F)rom the 13th to the 18th centuries, new verses were continuously being composed and put into the mouths of Patrick and *Oisín* as they argued the pros and cons of the warrior life of old and the monastic life of the saints.”⁷⁹⁸

This cycle is known as the Ossianic Cycle because most of the poems contained in it are attributed to having been composed by *Oisín*.

4. The Cycles of the Kings.

This cycle, also referred to as the Historical Cycle, describes the genealogies and adventures of the kings of Ireland, some mythical, from 3rd century BC up to 8th century AD. It includes such kings as *Conn* (of the Hundred Battles) and *Cormac Mac Art* and deals with the institution and founding of the great and lesser kings of Ireland.⁷⁹⁹

The Myths in the Textbooks

... boys are ‘potential heroes, and are essentially hero-worshippers’
and identify with the man of action⁸⁰⁰

The Literary Readers contain a cross-section of mythological text, with a fair representation from each of the three cycles, Mythological, Utonian and Ossianic. Most of the main characters and themes from these three cycles feature in the textbooks predominantly in prose format with the other common presentation format being poetry. While the majority of the myths are situated in pre-

⁷⁹⁷ D. Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend & Romance. An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (London, 1990), pp. 413-417.

⁷⁹⁸ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 351.

⁷⁹⁹ T. Kinsella, *The Tain* (Oxford, 1970), p.ix, and <http://irelandnow.com/mythology.html>.

⁸⁰⁰ B. Coldrey, op.cit., (Dublin, 1988), p. 124.

Christian times, a number belong to the Christian era where such characters as *Oisín* and the Children of Lir come into contact with Christian holy men, such as Saint Patrick, due to the spanning of their stories over ‘hundreds of years’ in consequence of the magic involved in their tales.

Thematic Units: Characters, Stories and Themes within the Cycles

The mythological characters, stories and themes presented below are those found in the textbook contents compiled for this thesis. They are presented here to give the reader an overview and understanding of each prior to Chapter 8 in which the analysis will be conducted on each of the text compilations associated with each theme and character. Note, a number of versions exist in relation to the origin and characteristics of all of the mythological themes and characters listed below. Accordingly, the most common version is presented for the sake of general understanding of these characters and to allow the reader a platform from which to understand the central elements and attributes of each of the themes and characters.

The table below summarizes the mythological cycles and the main source manuscript literature for the mythological thematic units (characters, stories, themes and places) presented here. There is quite an element of source overlap with many of the entries; however, a distinction is provided regarding whether the theme is central to that cycle or a peripheral concern.

Mythological Cycle	Thematic Unit	Main MS Source
Mythological		
Central Themes	<i>Tuatha de Danann</i>	Book of Leinster
	<i>The Children of Lir</i>	Book of Leinster
Peripheral Themes	<i>Táin Bó Cuailgne</i>	Book of Dun Cow / Book of Leinster / Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>Cú Chulainn</i>	Book of Dun Cow / Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>Fionn Mac Cumhall</i>	Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>Oisín</i>	Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>The Salmon of Knowledge</i>	
	<i>Tír na nÓg</i>	
	<i>Diarmuid and Gráinne</i>	Book of Leinster
Ultonian		
Central Themes	<i>Táin Bó Cuailgne</i>	Book of Dun Cow / Book of Leinster / Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>Cú Chulainn</i>	Book of Dun Cow / Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>Deirdre & the Sons of Uisneach</i>	Book of Leinster
	<i>Tuatha de Danann</i>	Book of Leinster
	<i>Eamhain Mhacha</i>	
Peripheral Themes	<i>Tír na nÓg</i>	
Ossianic		
Central Themes	<i>Fionn Mac Cumhall</i>	Yellow Book of Lecan

	<i>Oisín</i>	Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>The Salmon of Knowledge</i>	
	<i>Na Fianna</i>	
	<i>Cormac Mac Airt</i>	
	<i>Diarmuid and Gráinne</i>	Book of Leinster
	<i>Tír na nÓg</i>	
	<i>Tuatha de Danann</i>	Book of Leinster
Kings		
General Themes	<i>Fionn Mac Cumhall</i>	Yellow Book of Lecan
	<i>Na Fianna</i>	
	<i>Cormac Mac Airt</i>	
	<i>Diarmuid and Gráinne</i>	Book of Leinster
Others		
Voyages	<i>Maelduin</i>	Book of Dun Cow

Table 1. Thematic Groupings from the Mythological Cycles.

1. The Mythological Cycle.

The Mythological Cycle describes the principle peoples who invaded and inhabited the island of Ireland from the earliest times. The main source for this cycle is from the Book of Invasions (*Leabhar Gabhála*), which is to be found in a number of the above-mentioned ancient manuscripts, the most important being the *Leabhar Laignech* (the Book of Leinster). The central themes in the Mythological Cycle are:

1.1. Tuatha Dé Danann

The *Tuatha Dé Danann* are the people of the Goddess Danann or Danu, “the principle otherworld race in Irish literary myth,”⁸⁰¹ who inhabited Ireland before the arrival of the Milesians. It is generally accepted that these were the gods and goddesses of pre-Christian Ireland who were demoted to heroes and heroines by the Christian monks and scribes who recorded the stories. They are described as magical, beautiful people, possessed with skills in music and the arts. They are always spoken about within a context of great magical powers and wonders, while simultaneously possessing all the virtues and vices common to the human race. According to the mythologies, they came from a northern country under the leadership of *Nuada*, taking with them four powerful talismans:

... the Lia Fail (Stone of Destiny) which cried out at Tara when touched by the rightful king, the great spear of Lugh which guaranteed victory to its wielder, the sword of Nuadhu from which no opponent escaped, and the cauldron of the Daghdha from which no company departed unsatisfied.⁸⁰²

On arrival in Ireland they defeated the Formorians and the *Fir Bolg* but were later themselves overcome by the Milesians with whom they then divided the island of Ireland. The Milesians were to retain the land over ground while the *Tuatha Dé Danann* were to live under the ground, in the invisible realm, in the mounds and hills so common in the landscape of rural Ireland. The *Tuatha Dé Danann* are thus also referred to as *Na Aes Sídhe* - the people of the hills - and more commonly

⁸⁰¹ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit. (London, 1990), p. 407.

⁸⁰² Ibid., p. 408 and M-L. Sjoestedt. op. cit., (London, 1949), pp. 7-8.

referred to as just *na Sídhe*.⁸⁰³ *Sídh* is the Gaelic word for a mound or a hill. Many of these hills are regarded as the dwelling places of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. According to legend, each of the *Dé Danann* princes were allocated a *sídh* by the *Daghdha* and those names are still used today as the names of the hills. For example, *Bodh Dearg* received *Sídh Bodh*, just to the south of Portumna in Co. Galway, *Fionnbharr* received *Sídh Meadha*, now called Knockma, five miles west of Tuam and *Aonghus* was given *Brug na Boinne*, castle of the Boyne (in Co. Meath).⁸⁰⁴

The influence of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* on the Celtic and Irish⁸⁰⁵ mind was very strong. Standish O’Grady observes:

So firm was the hold which the ethnic gods of Ireland had taken upon the imagination and spiritual sensibilities of our ancestors that even the monks and christianized bards never thought of denying them. They doubtless forbade the people to worship them, but to root out the belief in their existence was so impossible that they could not even dispossess their own minds of the conviction that the gods were real supernatural beings.⁸⁰⁶

Some important characters of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* include:

i. the <i>Daghdha</i> (father of all the gods),	vi. <i>Lir</i> (father to the Children of Lir),
ii. <i>Anu</i> (also known as Dana, mother of all the gods),	vii. <i>Aonghus</i> (the love god and son of the <i>Daghdha</i>),
iii. <i>Nuada</i> (their king),	viii. <i>Boann</i> (the water goddess and mother of <i>Aonghus</i>),
iv. <i>Lugh</i> (father of Cú Chulainn),	ix. <i>Brigid</i> (a goddess of fertility, healing and poetry and daughter of the <i>Daghdha</i> and mother of the Sons of Tuireann)
v. <i>Bodh Dearg</i> (son of the <i>Daghdha</i> and his successor),	x. <i>Niamh</i> (lover of <i>Oisín</i> whom she took to <i>Tír na nÓg</i> with her for three hundred years)

Table 2. Important characters of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*.

1.2. The Children of Lir

The Children of Lir is considered one of the Sorrows of Irish Story-Telling.⁸⁰⁷ The children were two sets of twins born to *Aobh*, foster-daughter of *Bodh Dearg*, and wife of *Lir*, a chieftain of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* (as was *Bodh Dearg*). The children’s names were *Fionnula*, *Aedh*, *Conn* and *Fiachra* (one daughter and three sons). Unfortunately *Aobh* died while giving birth to the second set of twins and after a period of deep mourning, *Lir* took *Aobh’s* sister *Aoife* as his second companion and wife. *Aoife* gradually grew deeply jealous of the love *Lir* had for his children and she eventually, using magical spells, turned the four children into swans but allowed them retain their human voices. The spell forced the children to spend a total of nine hundred years in the shape of swans: three hundred years on Lake Derravaragh in Co. Westmeath, three hundred years on the Sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland and finally three hundred years off the western coast by *Inis Gluair* (Erris) in Co. Mayo. The spell would be broken when the bells of the new religion would

⁸⁰³ The Banshee of popular legend - *an Bean Sídhe* - is literally the Woman of the Hill and perhaps the most well known of the *Sídhe* in contemporary Irish life, in most cases carrying a negative connotation with her name, one that is associated with death.

⁸⁰⁴ W.Y.Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (Gerrards Cross, 1977), pp. 292-293.

⁸⁰⁵ Celtic and Irish. These terms are used here to define the peoples who inhabited the island from pre-Christian times to the 12th century, the period in which the majority of the main manuscripts were compiled.

⁸⁰⁶ O’Grady, as quoted in W.Y.Evans Wentz, op. cit, (Gerrards Cross, 1977), p. 283.

⁸⁰⁷ The Three Sorrows of Irish Story-Telling are: 1. The Sons of Tuireann, 2. The Children of Lir, 3. Deirdre and the Sons of Usnach. 1 & 2 come from the Mythological Cycle while 3 is from the Ultonian Cycle.

sound and a noblewoman from the south take in marriage a nobleman from the north. In their final years of the spell along the western coast they befriended a Christian monk named *Mochaomhóg* (also given as *Kemoc* in some versions) who treated them with kindness and compassion. On their return to human form, extremely old and close to death, the monk baptised them. When they died he buried them together.⁸⁰⁸

The peripheral themes in the Mythological Cycle are:

Táin Bó Cuailgne

Cú Chulainn

Fionn Mac Cumhall

Oisín

The Salmon of Knowledge

Tír na nÓg

Diarmuid and Gráinne

These are determined to be peripheral themes as elements within their theme are connected to a theme or character from the *Tuatha de Danann*. Please refer below for more detailed information.

2. The Ultonian Cycle.

The Ultonian Cycle or Ulster Cycle is considered the great heroic cycle of Irish mythology. The central story in the cycle is the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (the Cattle Raid of Cooley). Overlapping of characters from the Mythological Cycle is common, especially in the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, where many of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* feature. The main sources for this cycle are from the Book of Dun Cow, the Book of Leinster and the Yellow Book of Lecan. The central themes in the Ultonian Cycle are:

2.1. Táin Bó Cuailgne

The *Táin Bó Cuailgne*,⁸⁰⁹ the Cattle Raid of Cooley, is the most famous epic in Irish mythology. According to Eleanor Hull the epic is preserved in fifteen manuscripts in total, ranging from the 11th to the 19th century with the main outline of events mirrored upon the contents of the Book of Leinster (*Leabhar Laignech*).⁸¹⁰ Hull describes the divisions of the *Táin* as follows:

(a) Prologue. (b) Gathering of the hosts of Erin, and preliminary movements of the forces of Meave (Secs. 1-15.). (c) Episode of Cuchullin's Boy-deeds (Secs. 16-29.). (d) Combats and progress of the host, ending in the Brislech mór of Magh Muirthemne (Secs 30-72.). (e) Final conflicts, the Awakening of Ulster, the Gathering on the Hill of Slane, with the Final Battle of Gáirech and Ilgáirech and the Deaths of the Finnbennach and the Donn of Cuailgne (Secs. 73-130.).⁸¹¹

The narrative centres around the pride and scheming of Queen *Meadhbh* of Connaught in her efforts to secure the Brown Bull of Cooley in order to have her wealth equal to that of her husband's *Ailill*. In doing so she goes to war against Ulster. She enlists the help of such famous personages as *Fearghus mac Roich* and *Fear Diadh* (Ferdia) and successfully plots to destroy the hero *Cú Chulainn*.⁸¹² When the army of *Meadhbh* tries to invade Ulster to take the bull all the Ulster warriors except *Cú Chulainn* are unable to respond due to a curse put on them by the goddess of war,

⁸⁰⁸ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 272, P.B. Ellis, op cit, (London, 1993), pp. 26-27, R. Coghlan, *Pocket Dictionary of Irish Myths & Legends* (Belfast, 1985), pp. 45-46.

⁸⁰⁹ For a thorough and acknowledged translation please read T. Kinsella, *The Tain* (Oxford, 1970).

⁸¹⁰ E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, (New York, 1972), p. 110.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

⁸¹² D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit, (London, 1990), p. 294.

Macha.⁸¹³ *Cú Chulainn* is not afflicted with this curse as he is only part human, his father being *Lugh*, of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. He defends Ulster against the army of *Meadhbh* often through single combat, the most tragic combat recorded being against his best friend *Fear Diadh* whom he also kills. *Cú Chulainn* is eventually overcome, defeated and killed by *Meadhbh's* treachery and sorcery while *Meadhbh* fails in her bid to secure the Brown Bull. It is broadly acknowledged that the *Táin* “is the longest, most elaborate and powerful of all the Irish myths”⁸¹⁴ and is comparable to Homer’s *Iliad*. Another important characteristic in the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* is the topographical element it contains. Kinsella writes:

The topographical element is important for a full appreciation of the *Táin*. Much of the action consists of the movement of the Connacht armies across Ireland and back and forth ... over present-day County Louth. We can be certain about the identification of some of the *Táin* place-names and certain also that others are unidentifiable, having been replaced by English names over the years. ... The *Táin's* sense of place is on the whole much more realistic than its sense of place-names and their origin, and it is possible to follow the route of the *Táin* in all its essentials.⁸¹⁵

2.2. *Cú Chulainn*

The stories related to *Cú Chulainn*, also known as the Hound of Ulster, come mainly from the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. He is undoubtedly the greatest of all Irish heroes and is described as “a brave and honourable warrior.”⁸¹⁶ Originally named Setanta, his name was changed to *Cú Chulainn*, meaning the hound of Cullan,⁸¹⁷ after he killed Cullan’s hound. His parents were the god *Lugh* and *Deichtire*, daughter of the druid *Cathbad* and sister to King *Conchobhar mac Neasa*. *Cú Chulainn* was thus nephew to the king of Ulster and also had a connection with the otherworld realm through his father *Lugh*. After joining the king’s retinue in *Eamhain Mhacha*,⁸¹⁸ *Cú Chulainn* took up arms on a day designated to be an auspicious one, one which would result in him being a great hero but would also result in him having a short life. *Cú Chulainn's* exploits are daring, heroic and numerous and he is chiefly famous for his single-handed defence of Ulster during the war instigated by Queen *Meadhbh* and the army of Connaught against Ulster in her pursuit of the Brown Bull of Cooley. Although armed with magical weapons and receiving the assistance of otherworld characters such as *Lugh*, through the revenge and sorcery of Queen *Meadhbh* and the wrath of the goddess of death, the Morrigan, which he provoked by rejecting her love, he is tricked and killed during this war between Connaught and Ulster (in the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*).⁸¹⁹ *Cú Chulainn's* character, heroic exploits and imagery has permeated Irish society in modern times, being used in educational circles and in the political arena to name but two examples. According to O hOgain,

The heroic personality of Cu Chulainn [has] exerted a strong influence on the literature and on the popular imagination in the past hundred years, through the work of writers such as Standish James O’Grady, Lady Augusta Gregory, W.B. Yeats, P. H. Pearse, Austin Clarke and Thomas Kinsella.⁸²⁰

2.3. Deirdre & the Sons of *Uisneach*

⁸¹³ T.W. Rolleston, *The Illustrated Guide to Celtic Mythology* (London, 1993), p. 10.

⁸¹⁴ P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p. 205.

⁸¹⁵ T. Kinsella, op cit., (Oxford, 1970), p. xiv.

⁸¹⁶ *A Short History of Ireland. Part 1* (Dublin, 1959), p.4.

⁸¹⁷ *Cú* meaning ‘hound’ in Irish.

⁸¹⁸ Navan Fort, Co. Armagh.

⁸¹⁹ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), pp.131-139, P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), pp. 70-71, R. Coghlan, op.cit., (Belfast, 1985), pp. 22-23. Also see T. Kinsella, *The Tain* (Oxford, 1970).

⁸²⁰ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 139.

This myth is documented in the Ultonian cycle and is considered the Third Sorrow of Irish Storytelling. *Deirdre* was a lady of great beauty, the most beautiful woman in Ireland in her day, but is known as ‘*Deirdre of the Sorrows*’ due to the death and ruin caused by her beauty. Although arranged to marry the aging king of Ulster, *Conchobhar mac Neasa*, *Deirdre* instead compels one of the sons of *Uisneach*, *Naoise*⁸²¹ to elope with her and they run away, first to numerous hideouts around Ireland and finally to Scotland out of reach of the king. *Naoise* is joined in this elopement by his two brothers, thus the myth title *Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach*. After a number of years in Scotland *Conchobhar* sends messengers to them telling them he forgives them and invites them to return to Ulster. On their return he tricks them, has the three brothers killed and forces *Deirdre* to marry him. After one year of marriage *Conchobhar* gives *Deirdre* to the man who killed *Naoise* because she is such an unwilling wife to him. However, she kills herself before this can take place. She is then buried close to where *Naoise* is buried and two trees grow from their graves and intertwine so that even in death they cannot be parted.⁸²²

2.4. Tuatha Dé Danann
See Section 1.1. above.

2.5. Eamhain Mhacha

Eamhain Mhacha was the capital of Ulster and thus the seat of the Kings of Ulster in the mythological texts. Most of the great mythological heroes such as *Cú Chulainn*, *Fergus Mac Roth* and Queen *Meadhbh* are associated with it. *Eamhain Mhacha*, commonly known in English as Navan Fort, was supposedly situated close to present day Armagh. There are a number of versions as to how its name came about. One version on how *Eamhain Mhacha* derives its name is from the myth of *Macha*, the wife of *Crunchu*. On being forced to race against the king’s horses while close to childbirth, she wins the race but dies while giving birth to twins, the ‘Twins of Macha,’ in Irish *Eamhain Mhacha*. Before she dies she puts a curse on the men of Ulster proclaiming that for nine times nine generations they will be inflicted with the sickness of childbirth in the times when Ulster is in greatest need of them or in greatest danger.⁸²³

A peripheral theme in the Ultonian Cycle is:
Tír na nÓg

3. The Ossianic Cycle.

Also referred to as the Fianna Cycle, this cycle predominantly deals with the exploits of *Fionn Mac Cumhail* and the *Fianna* where a large percentage of the stories revolve around the *Fianna* warriors and their heroic deeds and activities. The Ossianic Cycle is important because it bridges the Pre-Christian pseudo-historical with the Christian historical times in Ireland’s past. It also connects to elements of the Mythological Cycle as it incorporates stories associated with *Tír na nÓg* within its compilation. The main sources for this cycle are from the Book of Leinster and the Yellow Book of Lecan. The central themes in the Ossianic Cycle are:

3.1. Fionn Mac Cumhall

Another celebrated hero in Irish mythological literature, *Fionn Mac Cumhall* is portrayed as a great warrior-seer whom, like most of the other Irish heroes in the mythologies, had a partly *Tuatha Dé Danann* ancestry.⁸²⁴ Originally named *Demna*, he is later named *Fionn*⁸²⁵ due to the whiteness of his

⁸²¹ The Sons of Uisneach are *Naoise* and his two brothers *Ardán* and *Aindle*.

⁸²² P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p. 79 & D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), pp. 155-156.

⁸²³ M-L. Sjoestedt. op. cit., (London, 1949), p. 27.

⁸²⁴ His mother *Murna* was grand-daughter of *Nuada* of the Silver-Hand, king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. T.W. Rolleston. *Myths & Legends of the Celtic Race* (London, 1985), p. 255.

⁸²⁵ *Fionn* means ‘fair-haired’ in Irish.

skin and his golden hair. After a turbulent childhood (his father is killed and he is reared by two women in the Slieve Bloom mountains), he studied under the tutelage of the druid Finnegas by the banks of the Boyne River. Here he eats the Salmon of Knowledge that imparts to him great wisdom and knowledge. He then went to the court of King *Cormac mac Art*, joins the *Fianna* and becomes their “most renowned chieftain.”⁸²⁶ The literature describes *Fionn* being involved in many adventures involving fighting, sorcery, hunting and tales related to his many liaisons with women, the most noted being with the goddess *Sadhbh* who gives birth to their son *Oisín*.⁸²⁷ However, there is no complete narrative of *Fionn*'s death to be found in all the Ossianic literature, rather “Finn seems to have melted into the magic mist which enwraps so many of his deeds in life.”⁸²⁸ One tradition maintains that *Fionn* and some of his companions never died but instead lie in an enchanted cave waiting for the time to reappear and aid Ireland in her hour of need.⁸²⁹

3.2. Oisín

Oisín is the son of *Fionn Mac Cumhall* and the goddess *Sadhbh*, daughter of *Bodb Dearg* who is a king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* (thus again providing a link for the hero with the mystical past). The story relates that a malicious wizard turned *Fionn*'s wife into a deer and she ran off into the forest where *Fionn* tried in vain to find her. While in that shape in the forest *Sadhbh* gave birth to a human boy whom *Fionn* finds one day several years later while out hunting. *Fionn* realises that this boy is in fact his son whom he then names *Oisín*, meaning ‘little fawn’.⁸³⁰ *Oisín* has many exploits with *Fionn* and the *Fianna* but he is most noted for falling in love with *Niamh* and going away with her to *Tír na nÓg*, the magical Land of Eternal Youth, for what he believes to be a short time but in reality turns out to be three hundred years. After some time there he longs to see his father and companions again. Asking leave of *Niamh* (who warns him not to set foot on the land of Ireland from his horse lest the magic spell be broken) he returns to Ireland to find a completely changed country, one that is on the verge of becoming Christian where his father and all the *Fianna* are long dead. After a mishap in which he falls from his horse that breaks the magic spell, he rapidly ages and becomes a feeble old man. The literature tells how he meets St. Patrick who cares for him till his death. In the intervening time, *Oisín* relates to Patrick the heroic tales of the *Fianna*. As mentioned above, these dialogues between *Oisín* and Patrick develop to become a popular genre during the post-mediaeval era as O hÓgain outlines:

The idea of Patrick thus meeting ancient Irish heroes and converting them posthumously to Christianity had been current for some time, and an earlier story had Cú Chulainn return from the dead and accept the new teachings. When it became attached to *Oisín* and to his memories of the *Fianna*, however, the idea gradually developed into dialogues of unprecedented drama and humour.⁸³¹

3.3. The Salmon of Knowledge

One version of The Salmon of Knowledge states that the salmon is actually *Fintan*, the husband of *Caesair* who was the first inhabitant of Ireland. In order to survive the Flood he changes himself into a salmon and eventually ended up in a pool by the banks of the river Boyne. Here he ate the nuts of knowledge that fell from the overhanging hazel trees. It was said that whoever caught and ate of the flesh of the salmon would be granted great wisdom and knowledge. One person trying to catch this salmon was *Finnegeas* the druid. He was joined by the young *Fionn Mac Cumhall* who

⁸²⁶ *A Short History of Ireland. Part 1*, op. cit., (Dublin, 1959), p. 6.

⁸²⁷ P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p.99.

⁸²⁸ T.W. Rolleston, op. cit., (London, 1985), p. 308.

⁸²⁹ P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p.99 & T.W. Rolleston, op. cit., (London, 1985), p. 308.

⁸³⁰ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 350.

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 351

came to be trained by *Finnegeas*. After trying for many years, *Finnegeas* finally caught the salmon and gave him to Fionn to prepare for him to eat. While preparing the fish however, *Fionn* burned his thumb on the skin of the salmon and put his thumb in his mouth to sooth the burn, thus ingesting the fish and securing the knowledge the fish held. From that time forward, Fionn could gain great knowledge, even look into the future, by putting his thumb in his mouth.⁸³²

3.4. Na Fianna

The *Fianna* were a group of warriors whose primary purpose was to guard the high-king of Ireland. They were:

great warriors who were at the height of their power during the reign of Cormac Mac Airt. Their chief function was to repel invaders. They also punished those guilty of robbery or violence. They were both a defence force and a police force.⁸³³

O hOgain writes that King *Cormac* appointed one hundred and fifty chiefs of the *Fianna* with *Fionn Mac Cumhall* as the captain.⁸³⁴ In order to be accepted as a member of the *Fianna* it is explained that a warrior ...

must be a poet and also a supreme athlete. One test was for the applicant to stand in a hole in the ground and ward off a spear-cast from each of nine warriors, another was to race through the forest pursued by many warriors without upsetting his hair or cracking a twig under his foot, yet another was at high speed to jump over a branch as high as his forehead and bend under another as low as his knee, and he must also be able to draw a thorn from his foot without slackening speed.⁸³⁵

The majority of the tales of the *Fianna* documented occur after *Fionn Mac Cumhall* becomes the leader of the group. Numerous tales are told of their exploits relating to *Fionn* himself, *Oisín*, *Oscar*, *Diarmuid* and *Caoilte*. O'hOgain explains that "[T]he pre-eminence of a half-dozen or so heroes was a recurrent feature of the *Fianna* lore."⁸³⁶ Two of the greatest Irish tales, *Toraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghrainne* (*The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne*) and *Oisín in Tir na nOg* (*Oisín in the Land of Eternal Youth*) revolve around tales of the *Fianna*.

3.5. King Cormac Mac Airt

A supposed mythical high-king of Ireland, *Cormac Mac Airt* is portrayed as the Solomon of the Irish known for his wise decisions and councils.⁸³⁷ *Cormac*, a patron of the *Fianna* during the period *Fionn Mac Cumhall* was their leader, is said to have lived during the 3rd century.⁸³⁸ A National School history book from the 1950s describes *Cormac* thus:

Cormac Mac Airt was a very great king. The country prospered during his reign. He put an end to most of the fighting between chieftains and sub-kings. He established many schools and made and enforced very good laws. ... Peace reigned and the country prospered while Cormac was king.⁸³⁹

⁸³² D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 216, & P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p. 98.

⁸³³ *A Short History of Ireland. Part 1*, op. cit., (Dublin, 1959), p.6.

⁸³⁴ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 204.

⁸³⁵ Ibid. & T.W. Rolleston, op. cit., (London, 1985), pp. 264-265.

⁸³⁶ D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), p. 204.

⁸³⁷ Ibid., pp. 120-123.

⁸³⁸ P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), pp. 66-67 & R. Coghlan, op cit., (Belfast, 1985), p. 21.

⁸³⁹ *A Short History of Ireland. Part 1*, op. cit., (Dublin, 1959), p.4.

Cormac Mac Airt was the father of *Gráinne*, she who, although betrothed to *Fionn Mac Cumhall*, instead eloped with another member of the *Fianna*, *Diarmuid*.⁸⁴⁰ Although reputedly to have lived before the coming of Christianity to Ireland, it is also written that on his death, *Cormac* wanted to be buried in a Christian place and not at *Brugh na Bóinne*⁸⁴¹ where all other non-Christian kings were buried. Even though his followers tried to bury him at *Brugh na Bóinne* they failed due to a freak flood appearing on the river and stopping them from carrying his remains across. With *Cormac*, writers and historians again thread a fine line between pseudo-history and history, as the quote from the schoolbook above attests. Additionally, furthering this subject Byrne writes:

The mass of legend and myth which surrounds *Cormac mac Airt* signifies that his descendants the *Connachta* and *Ui Neill* looked back to him as the founder of the high-kingship they claimed for *Tara*. He is the only figure among their ancestry whose career one is tempted to regard as historical.⁸⁴²

The subject of the blending of myth / pseudo-history and ‘true’ history, particularly in the School Literary Readers is returned to in Chapter 9 below.

3.6. *Diarmuid* and *Gráinne*

Diarmuid Ua Duibhne was the most handsome warrior of the *Fianna* and *Gráinne* was the daughter of *Cormac Mac Airt*, king of *Ulster*. *Gráinne* consented to marry *Fionn Mac Cumhall* after the death of his wife but at the party prior to the wedding she saw and fell in love with *Diarmuid* and persuaded him to elope with her. They are then pursued throughout Ireland by *Fionn* and the *Fianna* for sixteen years. Then, through the intervention of *Aonghus*,⁸⁴³ the foster-father of *Diarmuid*, *Fionn* stops the chase and allows them return to *Diarmuid*’s home in *Kerry* to live where they settle and have children. *Fionn* and *Cormac Mac Airt* also grant them land in *Connaught* and *Leinster*. Nevertheless, *Fionn* still plans for revenge on *Diarmuid* and finally, through *Fionn*’s manipulation, *Diarmuid* is mortally wounded by a magic wild boar on the slopes of *Ben Bulbin* in *Co. Sligo*. *Fionn* is the only person who can save his life but he refuses to do so and *Diarmuid* dies.⁸⁴⁴ Even into modern times there are many locations throughout Ireland, particularly dolmens, that are known as the ‘Bed of *Diarmuid* and *Gráinne*’ because they are said to have slept there during their time on the run from *Fionn* and the *Fianna*.

3.7. *Tír na nÓg*

Tír na nÓg, the Land of Eternal Youth, features prominently in the mythological tales of the Celtic people. It is the realm inhabited by the *Tuatha Dé Danann* in which a person can stay forever young. Attempting to explain this place *Sjoestedt* states:

In this Land of Youth ... rich in fruits and flowers, men and women, eternally young and divinely beautiful, dwell in places sparkling in precious stones and metals, intoxicated with mead from an inexhaustible vat, lulled by the music of many birds or by the melody of an apple-branch with flowers of crystal whose sound soothes grief and brings peaceful slumber.⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴⁰ The myth known as “*The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne*” describes this series of events.

⁸⁴¹ Newgrange on the River Boyne.

⁸⁴² F.J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1987), p. 66.

⁸⁴³ The love god and one of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*.

⁸⁴⁴ P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p. 81 & D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), pp. 161-163.

⁸⁴⁵ M-L. Sjoestedt, op. cit., (London, 1949), p. 48.

One notable sojourn in *Tír na nÓg* was by *Oisín* who travelled there with *Niamh* on her magical horse. *Niamh*, known as *Niamh of the Golden Hair*, was the daughter of the king of *Tír na nÓg*, *Manannán mac Lir*. *Oisín* stayed in *Tír na nÓg* for what he believed was a short time but in fact was three hundred years in human time. When he returned to Ireland all his family and the *Fianna* had been already long dead. However, this allowed him to return to an Ireland then coming under the influence of the new religion, Christianity. This brought him into contact with the Christian monk, Patrick. This contact resulted in another set of stories being developed, imbuing the myth with Christian teachings and beliefs.

3.8. Tuatha de Danann

See Section 1.1. above.

4. The Cycles of the Kings.

This cycle, also referred to as the Historical Cycle, describes the genealogies and adventures of the kings of Ireland, some mythical, from 3rd century BC up to 8th century AD. It includes such kings as *Conn* (of the Hundred Battles) and *Cormac Mac Art*. The main (mythological) sources for this cycle are from the Book of Leinster and the Yellow Book of Lecan. Some of the themes in the Cycles of the Kings include King *Cormac Mac Airt*, *Fionn Mac Cumhall*, *Na Fianna* and *Diarmuid* and *Gráinne* and are also integral elements within the other Cycles.

5. Tales of Voyages

5.1. Maelduin

The Voyage of *Maelduin*, the Irish *Odyssey*, is the oldest voyage tale so far identified in the Celtic mythological corpus and comes mainly from the Book of the Dun Cow. *Maelduin* was the posthumous son of a chief of the Eoghanachta of the Aran Islands who was killed by raiders. After *Maelduin* learns of how his father was killed he sets out to avenge him, taking advice from a druid on when to build his boat and how many companions to take on his quest. However, on reaching the island where his father's killers are he and his companions are suddenly engulfed in a storm and carried out to sea. So begins their incredible multifarious voyage into the unknown in which they encounter many fantastical and imaginative beings and situations. The Voyage of *Maelduin*, the Irish *Odyssey*, is the oldest voyage tale so far identified in the Celtic mythological corpus and comes mainly from the Book of the Dun Cow *Leabhar na hUidre*. It is considered by many to have been the inspiration for the later Christian epic *Navigato Brendani*.⁸⁴⁶

Early Christian Characters within the Celtic Myths

Many of the early Christian characters, both male and female, noted for being active in the Irish mission to bring Christianity to the Celtic peoples of the island of Ireland were also incorporated within the mythological literature.

Although they do not directly figure in the corpus under investigation, some of these Christian personages do appear in the texts analysed. This is really not so surprising because the majority of the mythological texts were transcribed by the Christian monks, not by lay members of the community. Saint Patrick, arguably the most influential Christian missionary monk in Ireland in the 5th century and now the national saint of Ireland, is associated with *Oisín* after his return from *Tír na nÓg* where *Oisín's* retelling of the activities and heroics of the *Fianna* to Patrick developed into an important body of literature used by the Christians to highlight essential differences between the old beliefs and Christianity. Another example is that of the monk *Kemoc*, who is portrayed as

⁸⁴⁶ P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), pp. 152-153, D. Ó hÓgáin, op. cit., (London, 1990), pp. 290-291, S. Eddy and C. Hamilton, *Celtic Myths* (London, 2001), p. 96, R. Coghlan, op cit., (Belfast, 1985), pp. 48-49 & T.W. Rolleston, op.cit., (London, 1993), p. 91.

befriending the Children of Lir. He is responsible for baptizing them into the ‘new religion’ Christianity, in the final stages of their lives and burying them in a Christian grave. Yet another Christian figure, *Bridgit*, is especially interesting as she can be identified as being venerated by the pre-Christian Celts and being identified as a personification of the mother goddess as well as later becoming recognised as the dominant and most popular female Irish Christian saint from the early period of Christianisation of the island.

The inclusion of these Christian characters in some of the more popular myths illustrate the Christian influence the scribes who transcribed the myths from the oral tradition to the written script attempted to impose upon one of the most profound elements of the Celtic culture, the tradition of storytelling and the passing on of the ethno-historical lore of the group. This was the one element of communal life that was shared and continued from generation to generation and the inclusion of the Christian characters and messages in the stories no doubt helped to establish the greater power of the new religion over the old heroes and their ways.

Illustrations in the Texts

Illustrations and particular Celtic script motifs also form part of the presentation in the mythological stories in the textbooks. Many of the book cover designs of the Literary Readers also incorporate a strong Celtic symbolism. This facet of the texts, heroic drawings and Celtic iconography, will be elaborated upon in Chapter 9.

Thematic Popularity of Themes over the Decades 1920s – 2001

The following Charts, 1 – 8, illustrate the distribution and breakdown of the mythological themes over the period under investigation, 1920s – 2001. The standout feature in all the Charts is the temporal distribution of the themes over the decades. This phenomenon will be developed in more detail in Chapter 9.

1. All individual themes 1920s - 2001

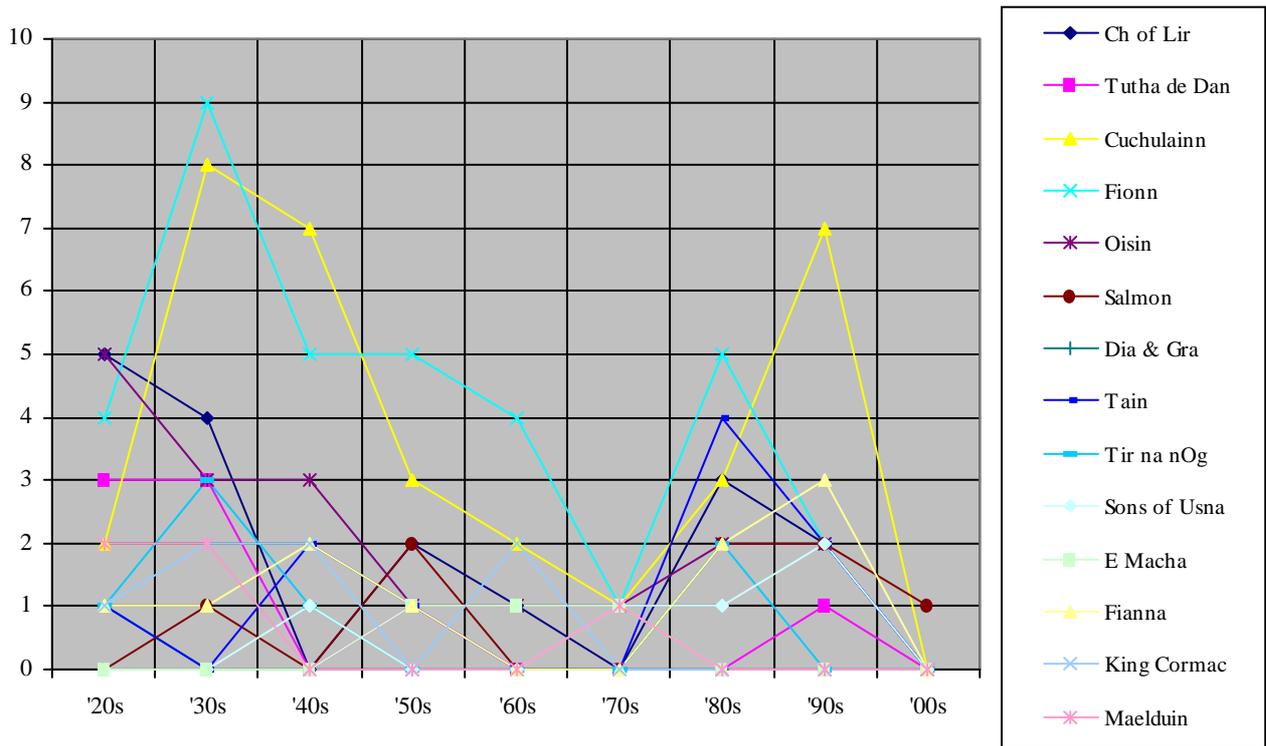


Chart 1. Frequency of Mythological themes over the decades 1920s – 2001 – all individual themes.

2. Top frequency themes 1920s – 2001.

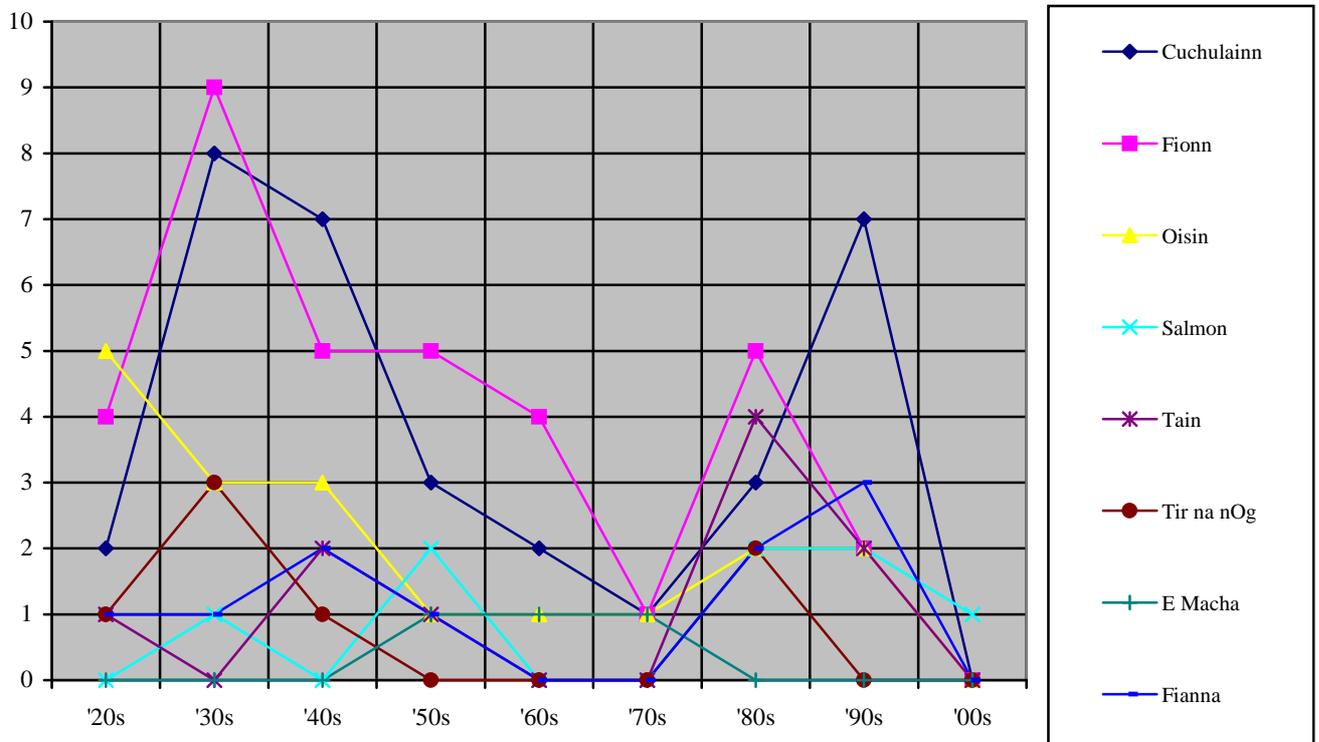


Chart 2. Frequency of Mythological themes 1920s – 2001 – top frequency themes.

3. Cuchulainn, Fionn & Oisín themes

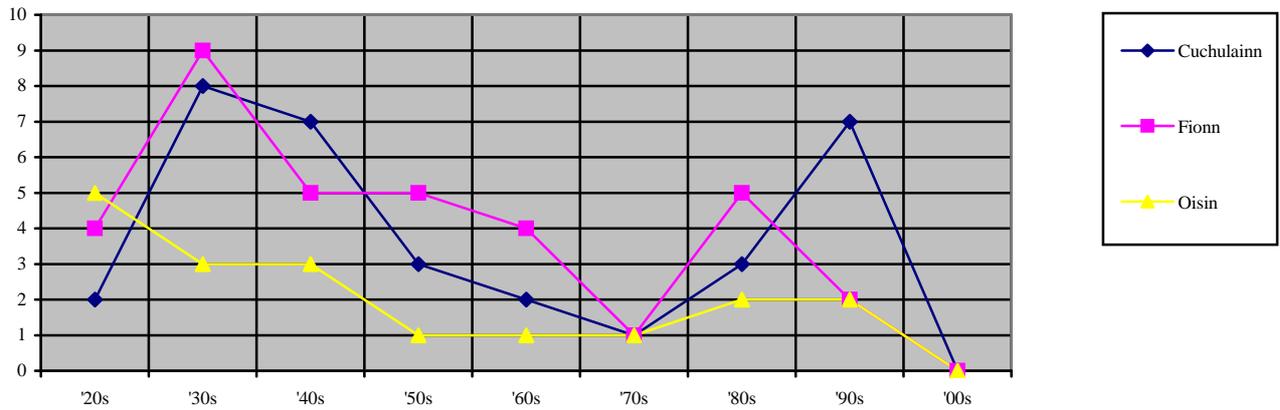


Chart 3. Frequency of Mythological themes over the decades 1920s – 2001 – Cuchulainn / Fionn / Oisín.

4. Cuchulainn related themes

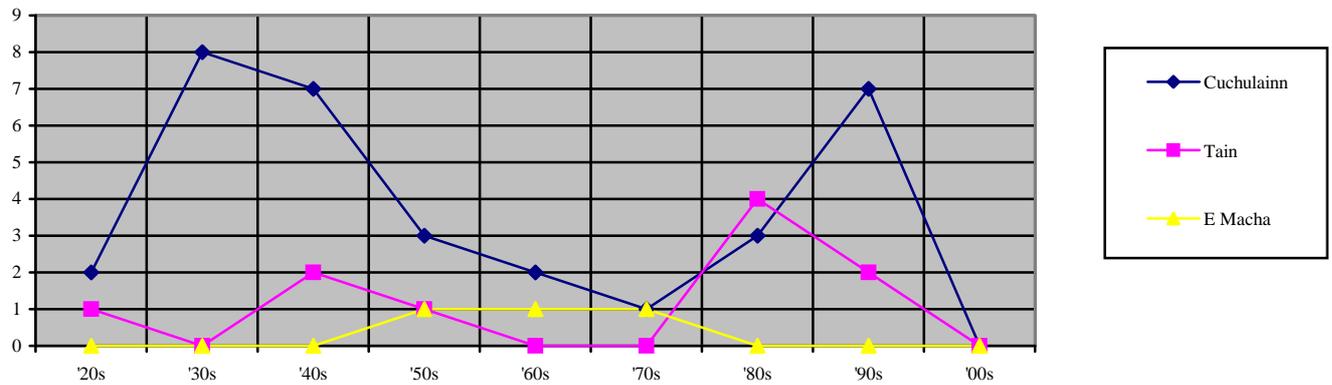


Chart 4. Frequency of Mythological themes over the decades 1920s – 2001 – Cuchulainn related themes.

5. Fionn related themes

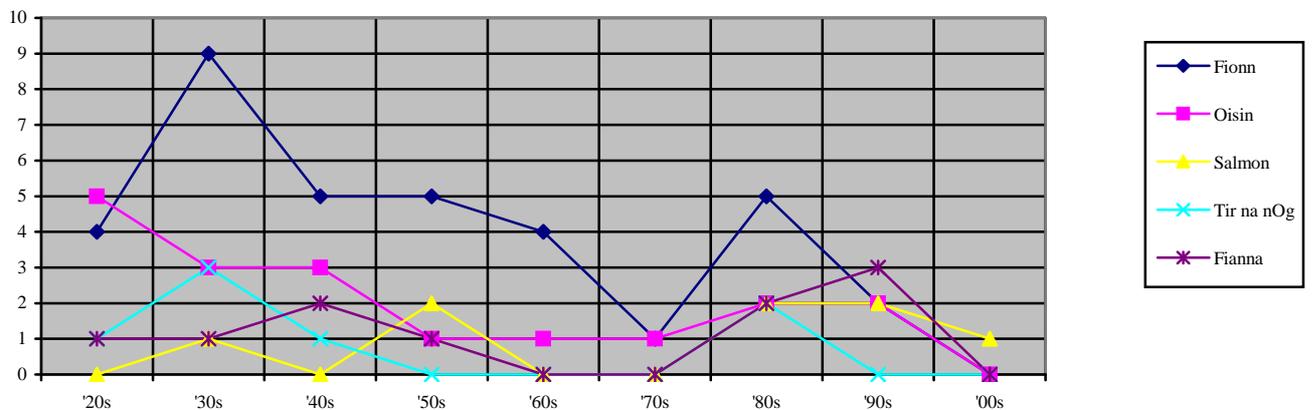


Chart 5. Frequency of Mythological themes over the decades 1920s – 2001 – Fionn related themes.

6. Oisín related themes

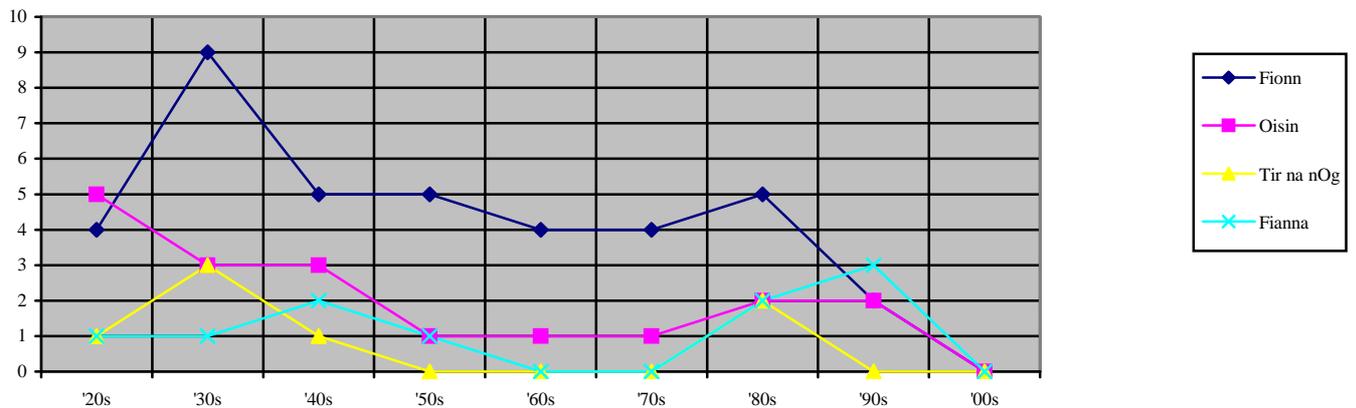


Chart 6. Frequency of Mythological themes over the decades 1920s – 2001 – Oisín related themes.

7. Combined themes for Fionn, Oisín & Cuchulainn



Chart 7. Frequency of Mythological themes 1920s – 2001 – Combined themes Cuchulainn / Fionn / Oisín.

Conclusion

The most noticeable and most striking feature evident in all the Charts is the close similarity of thematic and temporal distribution over the decades. As evident in Charts 1 through 7 above and clearly illustrated in Chart 8 below, there are two peak periods, the 1930s and 1980s/1990s, with a conspicuous trough in the 1960s and 1970s. There is quite a similar distribution of themes in the decades 1940s and 1950s while the number of mythological themes evident in the 1920s is quite considerable. This relatively high number in the 1920s is probably due to it being the initial decade the National Schools were under the auspice of the Free State Government and an apparent effort was being made to set the tone for the inclusion of such a theme in the school textbooks in the decades to follow.

All themes combined 1920s - 2001

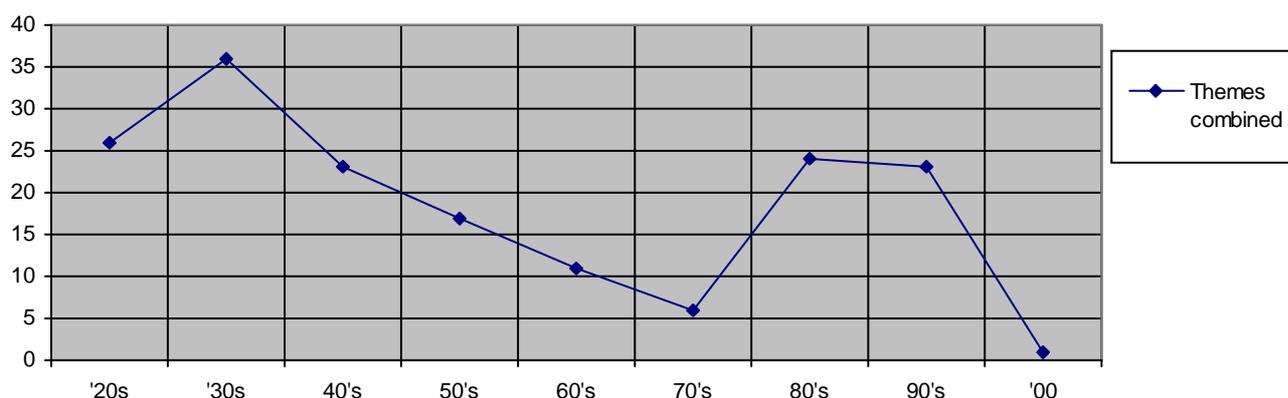


Chart 8. Frequency of Mythological themes over the decades 1920s – 2001 – all themes combined.

Furthermore, this thematic and temporal distribution of the mythological genre runs in line with the administrative attitudes and instructions that were emanating from the Department of Education during the study period. The high content of the mythological themes in the books of the 1920's and 1930's is in synchronization with the Department's communiqués in relation to inculcating a national pride in the students in the National School communities. Additionally, the high thematic content evident again in the 1980's and 1990's is in line with the Department's call for more schoolbooks to be published for the National Schools.⁸⁴⁷ This temporal distribution, particularly evident in Chart 7 above, was indeed a very significant finding in the study undertaken and will be elaborated upon in Chapter 9.

The story telling, oral transmission of important moral themes and historical events within the life of the Celtic group, was an essential element of everyday Celtic life. The early myths and legends were thus handed down orally from generation to generation within the local non-Christian communities, as written text and the use of written records was not a feature of the Celtic culture generally. The responsibility for preserving the existing tradition intact and sharing it within the community as well as invigorating and innovating new stories and verses lay with the bards and poets, referred to as members of the *áes dána*.⁸⁴⁸

Subsequently, after the establishment of Scriptoria⁸⁴⁹ in the monasteries that sprung up around the country from the fifth century onwards, these tales began to be recorded in written form. The early Christian missionaries and local Christian holy men began to record these tales and renderings in the Scriptoria, and thus saved them for future generations. However, in many cases they edited the story lines to incorporate and implant their Christian beliefs and teachings over the characters and plots of the story lines and the moral and religious beliefs that already existed within the Celtic group.⁸⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in most cases the central tenets of the stories remained intact and, although in summarised form, they entered the contemporary education literature through the path outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 above to become part of the schoolbook corpus to be read and interpreted by young National School pupils right through the 20th century. Additionally, as illustrated by the references to *Cuchulainn*, *Fionn Mac Cumhaill*, *Na Fianna*, and *Cormac Mac Airt*

⁸⁴⁷ These policies are elaborated above in Chapter 4.

⁸⁴⁸ The term *áes dána* was used to describe the learned class within the Celtic community and included such people as poets, judges, doctors of medicine, metalworkers and woodworkers. (P.B. Ellis, op cit., (London, 1993), p. 19.).

⁸⁴⁹ Generally, a Scriptorium (a place of writing) was the room in monasteries devoted to the copying of manuscripts by monastic scribes.

⁸⁵⁰ For example, *Oisín's* meeting with St. Patrick on his return from *Tír na nÓg* and the Children of Lir's encounter with the Christian monk *Kemoc* at the conclusion of their 900 year spell.

from the school textbook quoted above,⁸⁵¹ the information presented in this National School History book of 1959 illustrates how the mythology was still being introduced as pseudo-history. This was thus giving the impression of historical fact to the young readers and scholars and furthering the authentication of the mythology stories in the school environment. Just as in earlier times as the myths were handed down orally from generation to generation, so too in the contemporary educational environment the myths and their thematic values were once again transmitted transgenerationally from decade to decade through their incorporation in the National Schoolbooks.

⁸⁵¹ *A Short History of Ireland. Part 1* (Dublin, 1959).