

SOUL THEFT

In the mythic imagination of Indo Europeans it is the great battle. In India it is the battle between the Devas and the Asuras. In Greece it is the battle between the Gods and the Giants. In Nordic countries it is the battle between the Aesir and the Vanir. In Ireland it is the battle between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians.

An old book says this about the Tuatha Dé Danann:

Bátar Tuatha Dé Danonn i n-indsib túascertachaib an domuin, aig foglaim fesa ocus fithnasachta ocus druidechtaí ocus amaidechtaí ocus amainsechta, combtar fortilde for súthib cerd ngenntlichtae.

Living as they then were in the northern islands of the world, the Tuatha Dé Danann spent their time acquiring visionary insight and foresight and hindsight, acquiring the occult knowledge and the occult arts of the wizard, the druid, the witch, these, together with all the magical arts, until, masters in everything concerning them, they had no equals in the world.

Little wonder then that it was in a great magical cloud that they came to Ireland, landing in the mountains of Conmaicne Re in Connacht. In truth they were a race of gods but, for all the occult arts at their command, it was their particular delight to be of one mind with the wind and the rain. Great warrior though he was, Ogma knew that a spear that went through him wouldn't open him out half as much to the otherworld as the call of a curlew calling in a bog would open him out to this world. And Dian Cecht, their leech, he had the look of an upland thorn bush that has long ago yielded to the endless, night and day persuasions of the prevailing wind and is now no more than a current, than the memory of a current, in it.

In the end you could walk through the land and not know they were in it. Their features hanging like seaweed when the tide is out, their tongues the colour and shape of cormorant's tongues, the clamour of ocean in their talk, Fomorians came ashore.

Forests cut down, rivers re-routed, towers everywhere, it was soon clear that it must come to a fight.

It did. In Magh Tuired.

Never before or since did the Battle Hag screech as she screeched that night, her mouth bleeding in excited anticipation of the greatest battle that would ever be fought in Ireland. So long and loud and piercing was her third screech, it cut gaps in the mountains, it sent the incoming tides back out and as far away as West Munster a man was talking that night to his wife but he didn't finish what he had to say because, sliced down the middle, the two halves of him and of what he was saying fell either side of her.

It was that kind of battle.

As much because of what their wizards did as what their warriors did, victory was with the Tuatha Dé Danann, or so it seemed.

When the outcome was still in doubt Mathgen, their chief wizard, went chanting forward and so burning a thirst did he cause not just in the mouths but in the minds of the fighting Fomorian warriors that, whatever the cost, victory or defeat not counting now, they must

find water, but find it they didn't because, changing his chant, Mathgen dried up the rivers and streams and lakes and wells of Ireland and there they were, deliriously crossing bogs and climbing mountains, the sound of far away, illusory waterfalls calling them out over precipices to their death.

What the Tuatha Dé Danann didn't yet know was that the chief wizard of the Fomorians could make himself invisible and it was he, altogether more clever than Mathgen, who single-handedly turned what they had already begun to think of as their greatest victory into their greatest defeat, and this he did by going right to the heart of Tuatha Dé Danann country, into a fortress there, and stealing their great harp called Harmonizes Us To All Things.

Next day at the very beginning of their victory celebrations, the Tuatha Dé discovered and suffered their loss.

Putting it to his lips, the chief piper could find no music in his pipe.

Putting it to his lips, the chief trumpeter could find no music in his trumpet.

Putting his bow to it, the chief fiddler could find no music in his fiddle.

Tapping it with his drumstick, the chief drummer could find neither rhythm nor music in his drum.

Opening her mouth, the chief singer could find no music in her voice.

And the curlew didn't call in the bog.

And the blackbird in the willows didn't sing.

Asleep that night on the nine hazel wattles of vision, Mathgen saw what had happened. Macguarch, the chief of Fomorian wizards, had stolen the harp and in stealing that he had stolen the music of Ireland.

That very day, their tongues the colour and shape of cormorant's tongues, the Tuatha Dé were the new Fomorians.

Only Ogma, he being who he was, didn't capitulate to the country-wide epidemic of forgetfulness and brutishness.

Curious about him in the old days, Coirpre the poet had put it to him. Which is it? he asked. Is it integrity of being or integrity of decision and principle that makes you the kind of man that you are?

Nothing so frail as either, Ogma replied.

Then what is it? Coirpre asked.

There is something more to me than my life, Ogma said.

And that something more? Coirpre asked. What is it? Is it in mountains and stars?

Without it there would be no mountains and stars, Ogma replied.

So, your life deriving from it, would it also without anguish enable you to surrender your life, to lay down your life?

It is only when you surrender your life that you most plentifully derive your life from it, Ogma answered.

And that's how it happened. From the day that Coirpre took serious notice of him as a man apart, Ogma was the first and the only philosophical question that bothered and intrigued the Tuatha Dé Danann.

On the third morning after the theft, Ogma walked west through the songless land, all the way west to the coast. Finding a rowing boat that was big enough to be a sail boat, he put to sea. He came to the towered land. Telling no one his business, just being the man he

was, a man apart, he walked, no one daring to challenge him, through all outer and inner defences. Armed doorkeepers making way for him, he entered the fortress at the heart of the country, he took the harp and, as with everyone's permission, he walked back to the shore and, its stolen music coming with him, he came home to Ireland.

Now it was the turn of Fomorians. Now for the first time in their history they were philosophically bothered. More intrigued than bothered.

In the end, after much concentrated, deep thinking, a thing they weren't used to, they concluded that it was a fair exchange, the harp for the question. It wasn't a question they had to ask. All they had to do was close their eyes and they would see it walking among them.

How did you do it? Coirpre asked. How without lifting a sword did you bring the music of Ireland back to Ireland? If you hadn't brought it back, I wouldn't be asking you this question because mine would be a cormorant's mind, mine would be a cormorant's tongue, and you I'd think of as a man like all others, like myself.

As we discovered too late, Ogma said, it was by being able to be invisible the Macguarch stole our music. It was by being able to be visible, all the way out from the ground of my being and their being, that I was able to walk past them bringing it home. Also, I didn't project any obstacles out of myself. No part of my mind that I'm not at ease with, that isn't at ease with me, I didn't project those monsters and dragons that so often contest the hero's way.

So it was that, after all their wars, Fomorians and Tuatha Dé were united by a common question, Ogma.

And now again, harmonized to all things, the Tuatha Dé were of one mind with the wind and the rain. Now again, you could walk through the land and not know they are in it.

Yet we, a rougher people who came later to Ireland, out alone in lonely places we will sometimes hear their music. Airs we have heard and, merging our souls with them, we have put our own words to them, calling them The Cuilfhionn, Caisheal Mumhan, Slán Le Maigh, Port Na bPucáí, Eibhlín a Rún, Róisín Dubh and Danny Boy.

It is why our tongues aren't cormorant's tongues. It is why, whatever our history, we can still hear a curlew calling in a bog.