

Táin Bó Cúalnge (The Cattle-Raid of Cooley), Recension I (Author: [unknown])
(translated by Cecile O'Rahilly)

[The *Táin*, as it is usually called, begins with the "pillow talk" between Ailill and Medb, king and queen of Connacht. In comparing their possessions, they learn that Ailill's wealth exceeds Medb's by the possession of one famous bull. Learning that Ulster possesses a bull of equal worth, Medb determines to steal it by military force.

The men of Ulster, as the conflict begins, are struck with their "debility," a *geas*, a curse or taboo that condemns them to suffer nine days of labor pains at moments of their greatest peril. Their sole defender is the young warrior Cú Chulainn, who, with his father, is not not subject to the *geas*. Impressed by his prowess, Ailill and Medb question the Ulster exile, Fergus, about his background.--aar]

The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn

‘What manner of man,’ asked Ailill [king of Connacht], ‘is this Hound whom we have heard of among the Ulstermen? What age is that famous youth?’ ‘I can tell you that,’ said Fergus [exiled Ulsterman]. ‘In his fifth year he went to the boys in Emain Macha to play. In his sixth year he went to learn feats of arms to Scáthach and went to woo Emer. In his seventh year he took up arms. At the present time he is seventeen years old.’

‘Is he the most formidable among the Ulstermen?’ asked Medb [queen of Connacht]. ‘More so than any one of them,’ answered Fergus. ‘You will not encounter a warrior harder to deal with, nor a spear-point sharper or keener or quicker, nor a hero fiercer, nor a raven more voracious, nor one of his age to equal a third of his valour, nor a lion more savage, nor a shelter in battle nor a sledge-hammer for smiting, nor a protector in fighting, nor doom of hosts, nor one better able to check a great army. You will not find there any man his equal in age like unto Cú Chulainn in growth, in dress, in fearsomeness, in speech, in splendour, in voice and appearance, in power and harshness, in feats, in valour, in striking power, in rage and in anger, in victory and in doom-dealing and in violence, in stalking, in sureness of aim and in game-killing, in swiftness and boldness and rage, with the feat of nine men on every spear-point.’

‘I reckon little of that,’ said Medb. ‘He has but one body; he suffers wounding; he is not beyond capture. Moreover he is only the age of a grown girl and as yet his manly deeds have not developed.’ ‘Nay,’ said Fergus. ‘It were no wonder that he should perform a goodly exploit today, for even when he was younger, his deeds were those of a man.’

The Boyhood Deeds

‘He was reared,’ said Fergus, ‘by his father and mother at the Airgthech in Mag Muirthemne. He was told the famous tales of the youths in Emain. For,’ said Fergus, ‘thrice fifty youths are usually there engaged in play. This is how Conchobor spends his time of sovereignty: one third of the day spent watching the youths, another third playing

fidchell [a board game], another third drinking ale till he falls asleep therefrom. Though we have been exiled by him, (I still maintain that) there is not in Ireland a warrior more wonderful,' said Fergus.

'Cú Chulainn asked his mother to let him go to join the boys. 'You shall not go,' said his mother, 'till you be escorted by some of the Ulster warriors.' 'I think it too long to wait for that,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Point out to me in what direction is Emain.' 'To the north there,' said his mother, 'and the journey is hard. Slíab Fúait lies between you and Emain.' 'I shall make an attempt at it at all events,' said Cú Chulainn. He went off then with his wooden shield and his toy javelin, his hurley and his ball. He kept throwing the javelin in front of him and catching it by the point before its end touched the ground.'

'Then he went to the boys without binding them over to protect him. For no one used to come to them in their playing-field till his protection was guaranteed, but Cú Chulainn was not aware of the fact that this was tabu for them. 'The boy insults us,' said Follomon mac Conchobair. 'Yet we know he is of the Ulstermen. Attack him.' They threw their thrice fifty javelins at him, and they all stuck in his toy shield. Then they threw all their balls at him and he caught them, every single ball, against his breast. Then they threw their thrice fifty hurling-clubs at him. He warded them off so that they did not touch him, and he took a load of them on his back.'

'Thereupon he became distorted [the *riastarthe* or warrior-frenzy]. His hair stood on end so that it seemed as if each separate hair on his head had been hammered into it. You would have thought that there was a spark of fire on each single hair. He closed one eye so that it was no wider than the eye of a needle; he opened the other until it was as large as the mouth of a mead-goblet. He laid bare from his jaw to his ear and opened his mouth rib-wide(?) so that his internal organs were visible. The champion's light rose above his head.'

'Then he attacked the boys. He knocked down fifty of them before they reached the gate of Emain. Nine of them came past me and Conchobar where we were playing chess. Cú Chulainn leapt over the chess-board in pursuit of the nine. Conchobar seized him by the forearm. 'The boys are not well treated,' said Conchobar. 'It was right for me (to treat them so), master Conchobar,' said he. 'I came to play with them from my home, from my father and mother, and they were not kind to me.' 'What is your name?' said Conchobar. 'I am Sétanta the son of Súaltaim and of Deichtire, your sister. It was not to be expected that I should be tormented there.' 'Why were the boys not bound over to protect you?' asked Conchobar. 'I did not know of (the need of) that,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Undertake to protect me against them.' 'I agree,' said Conchobar. But then he turned again and attacked the boys throughout the house. 'What have you got against them now?' asked Conchobar. 'Let me be bound over to protect them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Undertake it then,' said Conchobar. 'I agree,' said Cú Chulainn. So they all went into the playing field. And those boys who had been knocked down there rose to their feet, helped by their fostermothers and their foster-fathers.'

‘At one time,’ said Fergus, ‘when Cú Chulainn was a boy, he never slept in Emain. ‘Tell me,’ said Conchobar to him, ‘Why do you not sleep?’ ‘I do not sleep unless my head and my feet are equally high.’ So a pillar-stone was placed by Conchobar at his head and another at his feet, and a special couch was made for him between them. On another occasion a certain man went to wake him and with his fist Cú Chulainn struck him on the forehead, driving the front of his forehead on to his brain, while with his arm he knocked down the pillar-stone. ‘Surely,’ said Ailill, ‘that was the fist of a warrior and the arm of a strong man!’” ‘From that time on,’ said Fergus, ‘they never dared to wake him (but left him) till he woke of his own accord.’

The Death of the Boys

‘Another time he was playing ball in the playing-field east of Emain, he alone on one side against the thrice fifty boys. He kept defeating them in every game in that way all the time. Eventually the boy began to belabour them with his fists and fifty of them died. Whereupon he fled and hid under the pillow of Conchobar's couch. The Ulstermen rose up around him but I and Conchobar stood up to defend him. The boy rose to his feet under the couch and on to the floor of the house he threw from him the couch together with the thirty warriors who were in it.’

‘Then the Ulstermen sat around him in the house and we arranged matters and made peace between the boys and him,’ said Fergus.

The Fight between Eógan mac Durthacht and Conchobar

‘There was strife between the Ulstermen and Eógan mac Durthacht. The Ulstermen went to battle while Cú Chulainn was left behind asleep. The Ulstermen were defeated. Conchobar and Cúscraid Menn Macha and many others besides were left on the field. Their groans awoke Cú Chulainn. Then he stretched himself so that the two flag-stones which were about him were smashed. Bricriu yonder witnessed this happening,’ said Fergus. ‘Then he arose. I met him in front of the fort as I came in severely wounded. ‘Hey! Welcome! master Fergus,’ said he. ‘Where is Conchobar?’ ‘I do not know,’ said I.

[...]

The killing of the Smith's Hound by Cú Chulainn and the reason why he is called Cú Chulainn

‘Indeed we know that boy,’ said Conall Cernach, ‘and we know him all the better in that he is a fosterling of ours. Not long after the deed which Fergus has just related, he performed another exploit.’

‘When Culann the smith prepared a feast for Conchobar, he asked Conchobar not to bring a great crowd with him for the feast he had made was not provided by his possession of land or estate but was gained by the work of his hands and his tongs. Then Conchobar set off together with fifty chariot-warriors, the noblest and most illustrious of the heroes.’ ‘Conchobar visited the playing-field then. It was always his custom to pay the boys a fleeting visit to ask a greeting of them. There he saw Cú Chulainn playing ball against

thrice fifty boys, and defeating them. When they were engaged in driving the ball into the hole, he would fill the hole with his balls and the boys would not be able to ward him off. When it was they who were throwing at the hole, he by himself would ward them off so that not even a single ball would go into it. When they were wrestling, he alone would throw the thrice fifty boys, yet not all of them together could surround him to throw him. When they were engaged in the game of stripping one another, he would strip them all stark-naked but they could not even take his brooch from his mantle. Conchobor marvelled at this. He asked if the boy's deeds would correspond (to his present ones) when he attained the age of manhood. They all said that they would. Conchobor said to Cú Chulainn 'Come with me to the feast to which we are going since you are a guest.' 'I have not yet had my fill of play, master Conchobor,' said the boy. 'I shall follow you.'

When they had all come to the feast, Culann asked Conchobor: 'Do you expect anyone to follow you?' 'No,' said Conchobor. He did not remember the arrangement with his fosterling to come after him. 'I have a blood hound,' [i.e. a hound brought from overseas, i.e. the whelp of a mastiff.] said Culann. 'There are three chains on him and three men holding each chain. He was brought from Spain. Let him be loosed to guard our cattle and our stock and let the fort be shut.' At that point the boy arrived. The dog made for him. He still kept on with the play; he would throw his ball and then throw his hurley after it so that it struck the ball, neither stroke being greater than the other. And he threw his toy spear after them and caught it before it fell. And though the dog was approaching him, it interfered not with his play. Conchobor and his household were so dismayed by this that they could not move. They thought they would not reach him alive though the fort was open. Now when the hound came towards the boy, he cast aside his ball and his hurley, and he tackled the dog with both hands, that is, he put one hand on the apple of the hound's throat and the other at the back of his head, and dashed him against the pillar-stone that was beside him so that all the hound's limbs sprang apart. According to another version, however, he threw his ball into the hound's mouth and it drove his entrails out through him.'

'The Ulstermen rose up to fetch the boy, some leaping over the wall of the court, others going out by the gate. They placed him in Conchobor's arms. A great alarm was raised by them at the thought that the son of the king's sister had almost been killed. At that point Culann entered the house.'

'Welcome, little lad, for your mother's sake. But as for myself, would that I had not prepared a feast! My livelihood is now a livelihood wasted, my husbandry a husbandry lost without my hound. The servant who has been taken from me, that is, my hound, maintained life and honour for me. He was defence and protection for my goods and my cattle. He guarded all my beasts for me in field and in house.'

'That is no great matter,' said the boy. 'A whelp of the same litter will be reared by me for you, and until such time as that hound grows and is fit for action, I myself shall be a hound to protect your cattle and to protect yourself. And I shall protect all Mag Murthemne; neither flock nor herd shall be taken thence from me without my knowing it.' 'Your name shall be Cú Chulainn (the Hound of Culann) then,' said Catbhad. 'I am

glad that it should be my name,' said Cú Chulainn. It were no cause of wonder that one who had done this when he was seven, should have performed a valiant deed now that he is seventeen years old,' said Conall Cernach.

The Death of Nechta Scéne's Three Sons

'He did still another exploit,' said Fiachu mac Fir Fhebe. 'Cathbad the druid was with his son Conchobar mac Nessa. There were with him a hundred active men learning the druid's art—that was the number that Cathbad used to instruct. One of his pupils asked him for what that day would be of good omen. Cathbad said that if a warrior took up arms on that day, his name for deeds of valour would be known throughout Ireland and his fame would last for ever. Cú Chulainn heard this. He went to Conchobar to ask for arms. Conchobar asked: 'Who prophesied good fortune for you?' 'Master Cathbad,' said Cú Chulainn. 'We know him indeed,' said Conchobar. He gave him a spear and a shield. Cú Chulainn brandished them in the middle of the hall so that not one was left unbroken of the fifteen spare sets of weapons which were kept in Conchobar's household to replace broken weapons or to provide for the taking up of arms by someone. Finally Conchobar's own arms were given to him. They withstood him, and he brandished them and blessed the king whose arms they were, saying: 'Happy the people and race over whom reigns the owner of these arms''

'Then Cathbad came to them and asked: 'Is the boy taking up arms?' 'Yes,' said Conchobar. 'That is not lucky for the son of his mother,' said he. 'Why, was it not you who instructed him?' 'It was not I indeed,' said Cathbad. 'What use is it for you to deceive me so, you sprite?' said Conchobar to Cú Chulainn. 'O king of the Fíán, it is no deceit,' said Cú Chulainn. 'He prophesied good fortune for his pupils this morning and I heard him from where I was on the south side of Emain, and then I came to you.' 'It is indeed a day of good omen,' said Cathbad. 'It is certain that he who takes up arms today will be famous and renowned, but he will, however, be short-lived.' 'A mighty thing!' said Cú Chulainn. 'Provided I be famous, I am content to be only one day on earth.'"

'On another day a certain man asked the druids for what that day was a good omen. 'The name of one who goes (for the first time) into a chariot on this day,' said Cathbad, 'will be famed throughout Ireland for ever.' Then Cú Chulainn heard this, and he came to Conchobar and said to him: 'Master Conchobar, give me a chariot.' Conchobar gave him a chariot. Cú Chulainn put his hand between the two shafts and the chariot broke. In the same way he smashed twelve chariots. So finally Conchobar's chariot was given to him and it withstood the test. Thereafter he went into the chariot with Conchobar's charioteer. The charioteer, whose name was Ibor, turned the chariot under him. 'Come out of the chariot now,' said the charioteer. 'These are fine horses.' 'I am fine too, lad,' said Cú Chulainn. 'Just go on around Emain and you shall be rewarded for it.'"

[...]

'Then they went to it, and when they had reached the mountain, Cú Chulainn asked 'What white cairn is that over there on the mountain-top?' 'Finncham,' said the

charioteer. 'What plain is that yonder?' asked Cú Chulainn. 'Mag mBreg,' said the charioteer.'

'So he told him the name of every chief fort between Temair and Cennannas. He named, moreover, their meadowlands and their fords, their renowned places and their dwellings, their forts and their fortified heights. He showed him too the fort of the three sons of Nechta Scéne...to wit, Fóill, Fannall and Túachell. 'Is it they who say,' asked Cú Chulainn, 'that there are not more Ulstermen alive than they have killed of them?' 'It is they indeed,' said the charioteer. 'Let us go to meet them,' said Cú Chulainn. 'It is dangerous for us,' said the charioteer.'

'Indeed it is not to avoid danger that we go,' said Cú Chulainn. Then they set off, and they unyoked their horses at the confluence of a bog and a river, on the south above the fort of the sons of Nechta Scéne. And Cú Chulainn cast the withe that was on the pillar-stone as far as his arm could throw it out into the river and let it float downstream. This violated a tabu [a *geas*] which bound the sons of Nechta Scéne who noticed what had been done and came towards them. But Cú Chulainn, after letting the withe drift with the current, fell asleep at the pillar-stone, having said to the charioteer: 'Do not wake me for a few, but wake me for several.'

'However the charioteer was now sore afraid, and he harnessed the chariot and he tugged at the rugs and skin-coverings that were under Cú Chulainn, though he did not dare to waken him because Cú Chulainn had previously told him not to waken him for a few.' 'Then came the sons of Nechta Scéne. 'Who is here?' said one of them. 'A little lad who has come on an expedition in a chariot today,' answered the charioteer. 'May his first taking up of arms not bring him prosperity or success. He must not stay in our land and the horses must not graze here any longer,' said the warrior. 'Their reins are ready in my hand,' said the charioteer. 'You had no reason to show yourself unfriendly to him, and anyway,' said Ibor to the warrior, 'the lad is asleep.' 'I am no lad indeed,' said Cú Chulainn, 'but the lad who is here has come to seek battle with a man.' 'That pleases me well,' said the warrior. 'It will please you well now in yonder ford,' said Cú Chulainn. 'This is fitting for you,' said the charioteer. 'Beware of the man who comes against you. Fóill (Sly) is his name. If you reach him not with the first thrust, you will never reach him.' 'I swear by the god by whom my people swear, he shall not play that trick again on Ulstermen if once the broad spear of my master Conchobar reach him from my hand. It will mean an outlaw's hand, that is, death, for him.' Then Cú Chulainn cast the spear at Fóill so that his back broke therefrom and he carried off his spoils and his severed head then.'

'Beware of the next man,' said the charioteer. 'Fannall (Swallow) is his name. He skims over water as lightly as a swan or a swallow.' 'I swear that he will not play that stick on Ulstermen again,' said Cú Chulainn. 'You have seen how I travel across the pool in Emain.' Then they met in the ford. Cú Chulainn killed that man and carried off his spoils and his head.'

“Beware of the next man who comes to you,” said the charioteer. “Túachell (Cunning) is his name, and it is no misnomer for no weapons wound him.” “Here is the *deil chlis* [a special spear] for him to confound him so that it may riddle him like a sieve,” said Cú Chulainn. Then he cast the spear at him and knocked him down. He went towards him and cut off his head. He carried off his head and his spoils to his own charioteer. Then he heard the cry of their mother, Nechta Scéne, bewailing them. He carried off the spoils and brought the three heads with him in his chariot and said “I will not part from these tokens of my triumph until I reach Emain.” Thereupon they set forth with their trophies. Cú Chulainn said to the charioteer: “You promised us a good drive, and we need it now because of the fight and because of the pursuit behind us.”

“They drove on then to Slíab Fúait. So swift was the run they made across Brega after his urging of the charioteer that the chariot-horses used to outstrip the wind and birds in flight, and Cú Chulainn used to catch the stone he had thrown from his sling before it reached the ground.”

“On reaching Slíab Fuait they found a herd of deer before them. “What are those nimble cattle over there?” asked Cú Chulainn. “Wild deer,” said the charioteer. “Which would the Ulstermen deem best, that I should take them to them alive or dead?” “It is more wonderful (to take them) alive” said the charioteer. “Not every one can do so, but there is not one of them who cannot take them dead. But you cannot carry off any one of them alive,” added the charioteer. “Indeed I can,” said Cú Chulainn. “Ply the goad on the horses and drive them to the bog.” The charioteer did so, and the horses stuck fast in the bog. Cú Chulainn sprang out of the chariot and caught the deer that was nearest to him and the finest of the herd. He lashed the horses through the bog and subdued the deer immediately and tied it up between the two poles of the chariot.”

“Again they saw before them a flock of swans. “Which would the Ulstermen deem best,” asked Cú Chulainn, “that I should carry them alive to them or carry them dead?” “The bravest and most active carry them off alive,” said the charioteer. Cú Chulainn then threw a small stone at the birds and brought down eight of them. Again he threw a big stone and struck twelve of them. All this was done by his ‘return-stroke’. “Collect the birds for me,” said Cú Chulainn to his charioteer. “If I go to get them, the wild deer will spring on you.” “It is not easy for me to go there,” said the charioteer. “The horses have become wild so that I cannot go past them. Nor can I go past the iron wheels of the chariot because of their sharpness, and I cannot go past the deer for his antlers have filled all the space between the two poles of the chariot.” “Step from his antlers then,” said Cú Chulainn. “I swear by the god by whom the Ulstermen swear, that I shall so nod at him and so glare at him that he will not move his head towards you and will not dare to stir.” That was done then. Cú Chulainn fastened the reins and the charioteer collected the birds. Then Cú Chulainn tied the birds to the strings and cords of the chariot. In this wise he went to Emain Macha with a wild deer behind his chariot, a flock of swans fluttering over it and three severed heads in his chariot.”

‘They reached Emain then. ‘A chariot-warrior is driving towards you!’ cried the watchman in Emain Macha. ‘He will shed the blood of every man in the fort unless heed be taken and naked women go out to meet him.’”

‘Then he turned the left side of his chariot towards Emain which was tabu for it. And Cú Chulainn said. ‘I swear by the god by whom Ulstermen swear that, unless some man is found to fight with me, I shall shed the blood of everyone in the fort.’ ‘Send forth naked women to meet him!’ ordered Conchobor. Then the women-folk of Emain came forth to meet him led by Mugain, or by Férach, according to other versions [gloss] the wife of Conchobor mac Nessa, and they bared their breasts to him. ‘These are the warriors who will encounter you today,’ said Mugain.”

‘He hid his face. Then the warriors of Emain seized him and cast him into a tub of cold water. That tub burst about him. The second tub into which he was plunged boiled hands high therefrom. The third tub into which he went after that he warmed so that its heat and its cold were properly adjusted for him. Then he came out and the queen, Mugain, put on him a blue mantle with a silver brooch therein, and a hooded tunic, and he sat at Conchobor's knee which was his resting-place always after that.’

‘One who did that in his seventh year,’ said Fiachu mac Fir Pebe [a warrior of Connacht], ‘it were no wonder that he should triumph over odds and overcome in fair fight now that his seventeen years are complete today.’

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