AN ANTHOLOGY OF IRISH LITERATURE

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

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The Story of Deirdre

The men of Ulster were drinking in the house of Feidhlimidh, son of Dall, Conchobhar’s story-teller. Now Feidhlimidh’s wife was waiting on the company, standing before them, and she was pregnant. Drinking-horns and servings of food went round, and the men raised a howl of drunkenness. When they were about to go to bed, the woman came to her couch. As she crossed the middle of the house the baby shrieked in her womb, so that it was heard throughout the courtyard. Everyone inside jumped up at each other at that screech, so that they were face to face in the house. Then Senchae son of Ailill restrained them. “Do not move,” said he, “let the woman be brought to us so that the cause of this noise may be discovered.” The woman was brought to them then . . . Then she ran to Cathbadh, because he was a seer; . . . and Cathbhadh said:

“Under the cradle of your womb
cried a woman of curling yellow golden hair,
with slow grey-pupilled eyes.
Like the foxglove are her purple cheeks,
to the colour of snow we compare
the spotless treasure of her teeth.
Bright are her lips, of vermillion red.
A woman for whom there will be many slaughters among the chariot-warriors of Ulster.” . . .

Then Cathbhadh put his hand on the woman’s belly, so that the baby stormed under his hand. “Truly,” said he, “it is a girl there, and Deirdriu shall be her name, and evil will come of her.” The girl was born after that. . . .

“Let the girl be killed,” said the warriors. “Not so,” said Conchobhar, “the girl shall be taken by me to-morrow,” said Conchobhar, “and shall be brought up under my own control, and shall be the woman who will be in my company.” And the Ulstermen did not dare correct him in this.

It was done, then. She was brought up by Conchobhar until she was the most wonderfully beautiful girl in Ireland. In a court apart she was reared, so that none of the Ulstermen might see her until the time when she should sleep with Conchobhar; and there was no one who might be allowed into that court but her foster-father and her foster-mother, and also Leborchom, for she could not be excluded because she was a satirist.

Now once upon a time the girl’s foster-father was skinning a trespassing calf in the snow outside, in the winter, to cook it for her. She saw a raven drinking the blood on the snow. Then she said to Leborchom, “I should dearly love any man with those three colours, with hair like the raven and cheek like the blood and body like the snow.” “Dignity and good luck be yours,” said Leborchom, “it is not far from you. He is in the house beside you, Noisi the son of Uisliu.” “I shall not be well, truly,” said she, “until I see him.” . . .

Now when he, this same Noisi, was alone outside, she stole away out to him as if to pass him by, and he did not recognise her. “Pretty is the heifer which passes by us,” said he. “The heifers are bound to be well-grown,” said she, “where there are no bulls.” “You have the bull of the province, the king of Ulster,” said he. “I would choose between you two,” said she, “and I would take a young little bull like you.” “Not so,” said he, “because of Cathbhadh’s prophecy.” “Is it to reject me that you say that?” said she. “It is indeed,” said he. At that she leaped at him and seized his ears on his head. “Two ears of shame and derision are these,” she said, “unless you carry me off with you.” “Away from me, woman,” said he. “That will happen to you,” she said. At this his bass call went up from him. When the Ulstermen beyond heard the call, every one of them fell upon the other. The sons of Uisliu came out to restrain their brother. “What is the matter with you?” they said, “do not let the Ulstermen kill each other because of your fault.” Then he told them what had been done to him. “Evil will come of it,” said the warriors. “Though it should, you
shall not be in disgrace as long as we are alive. We will go with her into another land. There is not a king in Ireland who will not make us welcome.” This was their conclusion. They went off that night, with a hundred and fifty warriors of theirs and a hundred and fifty women and a hundred and fifty hounds and a hundred and fifty servants, and Deirdre along with the others with them.

They were in sanctuary for a long while throughout Ireland, so that their destruction was often attempted by the kings of Ireland through the plots and wiles of Conchobhar, round from Assaroe southwest to Howth again to the northeast. However the Ulstermen hounded them across to the land of Scotland, and they settled down in the wilds there. When the hunting of the mountain failed them they turned to taking the cattle of the men of Scotland for themselves. These went to destroy them in a single day, whereupon they went to the king of Scotland, and he admitted them into his household, and they took service with him; and they set up their huts on the green. Because of the girl the huts were made, so that no one with them should see her, for fear they would be killed for her sake.

Once upon a time then, the steward went early in the morning so that he went round their house. He saw the couple asleep. He went thereupon and woke the king. “I have not found a woman worthy of you until to-day,” said he; “there is a woman worthy of the King of the Western World with Noisi son of Uisliu. Let Noisi be killed immediately, and let the woman sleep with you,” said the steward. “No,” said the king, “but you do go to woo her for me secretly every day.” That was done. But what the steward used to say to her by day, she would tell her husband straightway the same night. Since nothing was got from her, the sons of Uisliu were ordered to go into risks and fights and difficulties, so that they might be killed. Nevertheless they were so brave in every slaughter that it was impossible to do anything to them in these attacks.

After taking counsel about it against her, the men of Scotland were mustered to kill her. She told Noisi. “Go away,” said she, “for if you have not gone away by to-night you will be killed to-morrow.” They went away that night, so that they were on an island of the sea. This was told to the Ulstermen. “It is sad, Conchobhar,” said the Ulstermen, “that the sons of Uisliu should fall in a hostile land through the fault of a bad woman. It would be better to escort them and feed them, and not to kill them, and for them to come to their land, rather than to fall before their enemies.” “Let them come, then,” said Conchobhar, “and let sureties go for them.” That was brought to them. “It is welcome to us,” they said; “we shall go, and let Fergus and Dubhthach and Cormac son of Conchobhar come as sureties for us.” These went and escorted them from the sea.

Now, through the counsel of Conchobhar people rivalled each other to invite Fergus to ale-feasts, for the sons of Uisliu declared that they would not eat food in Ireland except the food of Conchobhar first. Then Fiachu son of Fergus went with them, and Fergus and Dubhthach stayed behind, and the sons of Uisliu came until they were on the green at Emhain. Then too Eoghan son of Durthacht, the king of Conmhaigh, came to make peace with Conchobhar, for he had been at war with him for a long time. It was he who was entrusted with killing the sons of Uisliu, with the soldiers of Conchobhar around him so that they might not come at him.

The sons of Uisliu were standing in the middle of the green, and the women were sitting on the rampart of Emhain. Then Eoghan went against them with his troop over the green, but the son of Fergus came so that he was beside Noisi. Eoghan welcomed them with a thrusting blow of a great spear into Noisi, so that his back broke within him. At that the son of Fergus threw himself and put his arms round Noisi and bore him under, so that he cast himself down on him. And so it is

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1 Conchobhar's strategy was to separate the Sons of Uisliu from Fergus, their surety, who was under taboo not to refuse an invitation to an ale-feast. Conchobhar also knew that the Sons of Uisliu, on the other hand, were obligated to refuse such an invitation since they had sworn, for their own protection, to partake only of his food according to the rule of hospitality.
that Noisi was struck from above, right through the son of Ferghus. They were killed then all over the green, so that none escaped but those who went by point of spear and edge of sword; and she was brought across to Conchobhar so that she was beside him, and her hands were bound behind her back.

Then this was told to Ferghus and Dubhthach and Cormac. They came and did great deeds straightway; that is to say, Dubhthach killed Maine son of Conchobhar, and Fiachna son of Feidhelm, daughter of Conchobhar, was slain by a single thrust, and Ferghus killed Traighethrén son of Traighelethan and his brother; and this was an outrage to Conchobhar. And a battle was fought between them after that on the same day, so that three hundred Ulstermen fell between them; and Dubhthach killed the girls of Ulster before morning and Ferghus burned Emhain. Then they went to Ailill and Medbh, because they knew that couple would be able to support them; but it was no love-nest for the Ulstermen. Three thousand was the number of the exiles. Till the end of sixteen years, weeping and trembling never ceased in Ulster at their hands, but there was weeping and trembling at their hands every single night.

She was a year with Conchobhar, and during that time she did not smile, and did not take her fill of food or sleep, and did not raise her head from her knee ... “What do you see that you most hate?” said Conchobhar. “Yourself, surely,” said she, “and Eoghán son of Durthacht.” “Then you shall be a year with Eoghan,” said Conchobhar. He brought her then beside Eoghan. They went the next day to the assembly of Macha. She was behind Eoghan in a chariot. She had vowed that she would not see her two husbands together on earth. “Well, Deirdriu,” said Conchobhar, “it is the eye of a ewe between two rams that you make between me and Eoghan.” There was a great boulder of stone before her. She dashed her head on the stone so that she made fragments of her head, so that she died.

8TH OR 9TH CENTURY.
Translator Kenneth Jackson.

The Colloquy of the Old Men

WHEN THE Battle of Comar, the Battle of Gabra, and the Battle of Ollarba had been fought, and after the fían were for the most part extinguished, the residue of them had dispersed in small bands and in companies throughout all Ireland, until at the time which concerns us there remained of them two good warriors only: Oisin son of Finn, and Cailte son of Cruarchu son of Ronán (whose lusty vigor and power of spear-throwing were now dwindled down), and so many fighting men as with themselves made twice nine. These twice nine came out of the flowery-soiled and well-wooded borders of Sliabh Fuait and into the Lughbrata Bana, at the present day called Lugmad, where at the falling of the evening clouds that night they were melancholy, dispirited.

Cailte said to Oisin then, “Good now, Oisin, before the day’s end what path shall we take in quest of entertainment for the night?”

Oisin answered, “I know not, seeing that of the ancients of the fían, and of Finn’s former people but three survive: I and thyself, Cailte, with Cama, the female-chief and female-custodian who, from the time he was a boy until the day he died, kept Finn mac Cumail safe.”

Cailte said, “We are entitled to this night’s lodging and provision from her; for it is not possible to rehearse nor to show the quantity which Finn, captain of the fían, bestowed on her of precious things and of treasures, including the third best thing of price that Finn ever acquired, namely, the Angha-

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1 See Introduction, p. xix.

2 A band of semi-nomadic guerrilla fighters, particularly that commanded by Finn. The modern English word Fenian, meaning follower of Finn, derives not from Finn’s name but from fían (plu. fianna). See “The Fianna,” p. 95.