EARLY IRISH MYTHS AND SAGAS

Translated with an introduction and notes by Jeffrey Ganez

Penguin Books
The Wooing of Étain

Introduction

Apart from being a remarkable tale, 'The Wooing of Étain' has a remarkable history. Although it is preserved in Lebor na hUidre, the beginning of the first section and the ending of the third are missing, and only the short second section is complete. This situation persisted until this century, when a complete version of the story was discovered lying innocently among a part of the Yellow Book of Lecan housed in Cheltenham; and in 1937 the complete text of 'The Wooing of Étain' finally appeared in print.

The three sections are virtually independent tales. The first comprises a set of variations upon the regeneration theme of the rival lovers; thus, in the opening episode, Bóand goes from her husband Eicmar to the Dagdae and then back to Eicmar. Oengus's efforts to win Étain away from her father represent a variant of the type found in the Welsh 'How Culhwch Won Olwen', while his concealing her from Míder suggests that the two gods were originally rivals. In the second section, Echú and Ailill are the rival claimants, Ailill's love-sickness recalling that of Gilvæthwy in 'Math Son of Mathonwy'; Étain goes from Echú to Ailill and back to Echú. In the final section, it is Míder and Echú who contest Étain, and the tasks assigned Míder recall those imposed upon the Dagdae in the first section and those
imposed upon Culhwch; Etain goes from Echu to Mider, back to Echu (in the person of her daughter), back to Mider and, in some traditions, back to Echu—the uncertain conclusion underlines the seasonal motif.

'The Wooing of Etain' is also a kind of legal primer. The first section, wherein Óengus gains possession of Brug na Bóinde (at Samuin, naturally), demonstrates that the Irish had a poetic sense of law. Frank O'Connor says that 'The trick—borrowing the use of New Grange for a day and a night and then claiming successfully that this means for all time—has some esoteric meaning which I cannot grasp'; but there is nothing esoteric here. Óengus's argument that 'it is in days and nights that the world passes' explains everything. Mider uses the same trick in the third section, for, in claiming that Echu has 'sold' Etain, he is clearly arguing that 'My arms round Etain and a kiss from her' entitle him to permanent possession of her, that it is in embraces and kisses that love is spent. (Actually, since the last fidchell game is played for an open stake, Mider could simply have asked for Etain outright; but perhaps then Echu would not have kept the bargain.) Since Echu does not accept this argument—he claims that he has not sold Etain—Mider is forced to trick him a second time; thinking that he has picked out Etain from among the fifty women, Echu pledges himself content, but actually he has chosen his own (and Etain's) daughter. Mider's name, appropriately, seems to derive from a Celtic root meaning 'to judge'.

The Wooing of Etain

There was over Eriu a famous king from the Túatha Dé Danann, and Echu Ollathir was his name. Another name for him was the Dagdae, for it was he who performed miracles and saw to the weather and the harvest, and that is why he was called the Good God. Elcmar of Brug na Bóinde had a wife whose name was Éitbne, though she was also called Bóand. The Dagdae wanted to sleep with Bóand, and she would have allowed him, but she feared Elcmar and the extent of his power. The Dagdae sent Elcmar away, then, on a journey to Bress son of Elatha at Mag nlnis; and as Elcmar was leaving, the Dagdae cast great spells upon him, so that he would not return quickly, so that he would not perceive the darkness of night, so that he would feel neither hunger nor thirst. The Dagdae charged Elcmar with great commissions, so that nine months passed like a single day, for Elcmar had said that he would return before nightfall. The Dagdae slept with Elcmar's wife, then, and she bore him a son, who was named Óengus; and by the time of Elcmar's return, she had so recovered that he had no inkling of her having slept with the Dagdae.

The Dagdae took his son to be fostered in the house of Mider at Brí Léith in Thethbae, and Óengus was reared there for nine years. Mider had a playing field at Brí Léith, and three fifties of the young boys of Eriu were there together with three fifties of the young girls. And Óengus was their leader, because of Mider's love for him and because of his
handsomeness and the nobility of his people. He was also called the Macc Oc, for his mother had said ‘Young the son who is conceived at dawn and born before dusk.’

Now Oengus fell out with Triath son of Febal (or Gobor) of the Fir Bolg – Triath was also a fostering of Mider and was the other leader at play. Oengus had no mind to speak with Triath, and he said ‘It angers me that the son of a slave should talk to me’, for he believed that Mider was his father and that he was heir to the kingship of Brí Léith, and he did not know of his relationship to the Dagdae. But Triath answered ‘It angers me no less that a foundling who knows neither his mother nor his father should talk to me.’ Oengus went off to Mider, distressed and in tears at having been shamed by Triath. ‘What is this?’ asked Mider. ‘Triath has mocked me and thrown it in my face that I have neither father nor mother.’ ‘False,’ replied Mider. ‘Who are they, then, my father and my mother?’ ‘Echu Ollathir is your father, and Eithne, the wife of Elcmar of Brui Na Bóinde, is your mother. I have reared you without Elcmar’s knowledge so it would not pain him that you were conceived behind his back.’ ‘Come with me, then,’ said Oengus, ‘that my father may acknowledge me and that I may no longer be hidden away and reviled by the Fir Bolg.’

Mider set out with his fostering to speak with Echu, thus, and they came to Uisnech Mide at the centre of Éiriú, for that is where Echu dwelt, with Ériu extending equally far in every direction, north and south, east and west. They found Echu in the assembly, and Mider called him aside to speak with the boy. ‘What would he like, this youth who has never been here before?’ asked Echu. ‘He would like his father to acknowledge him and give him land,’ answered Mider, ‘for it is not right that your son be without land when you are king of Ériú.’ ‘A welcome to him,’ said Echu, ‘for he is my son. But the land I have chosen for him is still occupied.’ ‘What land is that?’ asked Mider. ‘Brui Na Bóinde, to the north,’ said Echu. ‘Who is there?’ asked Mider. ‘Elcmar is the man who is there,’ said Echu, ‘and I have no wish to disturb him further.’

‘What advice, then, can you give the boy?’ asked Mider. Echu answered ‘This: he is to go into the Brui at Samuin, and he is to go armed, for that is a day of peace and friendship among the men of Ériú, and no one will be at odds with his fellow. Elcmar will be at Cnoice Side in the Brui with no weapon but a fork of white hazel in his hand; he will be wearing a cloak with a gold brooch in it, and he will be watching three fifties of youths at play on the playing field. Oengus is to go to Elcmar and threaten to kill him, but he should not do so provided he obtains his request. That request is that Oengus be king in the Brui for a day and a night, but Oengus must not return the land to Elcmar until the latter agrees to abide by my judgement. Oengus is to argue that the land is his by right in return for his having spared Elcmar – that he requested the kingship of day and night and that it is in days and nights that the world passes.’

Mider set out for his land, then, and his fostering with him, and on the following Samuin, Oengus armed himself and went into the Brui and threatened Elcmar; and the latter promised him a kingship of day and night in his land. Oengus remained there as king of the land during that day and that night, and Elcmar’s people did his will. The next day, Elcmar came to reclaim his land from the Macc Oc, and at that, a great argument arose, for the Macc Oc said that he would not yield the land until Elcmar had put the question to the Dagdae before the men of Ériú. They appealed to the Dagdae, then, and he adjudged the rights of each man according to their agreement. ‘By right, the land now belongs to this youth,’ Elcmar concluded. ‘Indeed,
Early Irish Myths and Sagas

it does," said the Dagdae. 'He hewed at you menacingly on a day of peace and friendship, and since your life was dearer to you than your land, you surrendered the land in return for being spared. Even so, I will give you land that is no worse than the Brug.' 'What land is that?' asked Elcmar. 'Cleitech, and the three lands about it, and the boys from the Brug playing before you every day, and the fruit of the Bóand for your enjoyment.' 'Fair enough - let it be thus,' said Elcmar, and he set out for Cleitech and built a fort there, and the Macc Oc remained in the Brug.

One year after that, Mider went to the Brug to visit his foster-son, and he found the Macc Oc on the mound of the Brug, it being Samuin, with two groups of boys playing before him and Elcmar watching from the mound of Cleitech to the south. A quarrel broke out among the boys in the Brug, and Mider said 'Do not trouble yourself - otherwise Elcmar may come to the plain. I will go and make peace among them.' Mider went, then, but it was not easy for him to part them; moreover, a sprig of holly was hurled at him, and it put out one of his eyes. Mider returned to the Macc Oc, his eye in his hand, and said 'Would that I had never come to seek news of you, for I have been shamed: with this blemish, I can neither see the land I have come to nor return to the land I have left.' 'Not at all,' answered the Macc Oc, 'for I will go to Dían Cécht, and he will come and heal you. Your own land will be yours again, and this land will be yours also, and your eye will be healed, without shame or blemish.'

The Macc Oc went to Dían Cécht and asked him to come and save his foster-father, who had been injured in the Brug on Samuin; and Dían Cécht came and tended to Mider until the latter was well. Mider said, then, 'Since I have been healed, it would please me to leave now.' 'Well that,' said the Macc Oc, 'But stay for a year and see my warriors and my people and my household and my land.' 'I will not stay,' answered Mider, 'unless I have a reward.' 'What sort of reward?' asked the Macc Oc. 'Not difficult that,' answered Mider. 'A chariot worth seven cumals and clothing appropriate to my rank and the fairest woman in Ériu.' 'I have the chariot and the clothing,' said the Macc Oc, whereupon Mider said 'I know of the woman whose beauty surpasses that of every other woman in Ériu.' 'Where is she?' asked the Macc Oc. 'She is of the Ulaid,' answered Mider, 'daughter of Aïllli, king of the north-eastern part of Ériu; Etáin Echradh is her name, and she is the fairest and gentlest and most beautiful woman in Ériu.'

The Macc Oc went to seek Étaín, then, at the house of Aïllli in Mag níinis, where he was welcomed and where he spent three nights. He announced himself and told of his race and his people and said that he had come to ask for Étaín. 'I will not give her to you,' said Aïllli, 'for there is no profit in it. The nobility of your family and the extent of your power and your father's is so great that, if you were to shame my daughter, I would have no recourse.' 'Not at all,' replied the Macc Oc, 'for I will buy her from you here and now.' 'You will have that,' answered Aïllli. 'Tell me what you want,' said the Macc Oc. 'Not difficult that,' replied Aïllli. 'Twelve lands of mine that are nothing but desert and forest are to be cleared so that cattle may graze on them and men dwell there at all times, so that they may be suitable for games and assemblies and meetings and fortifications.' 'That will be done for you,' said the Macc Oc. He went home, then, and complained of his predicament to the Dagdae; the latter, however, cleared twelve plains in Aïllli's land in a single night: Mag Macae, Mag Lenne, Mag nícha, Mag Tochair, Mag ndula, Mag Toicht, Mag I, Mag Line, Mag Muirthemni.

The task having been accomplished, the Macc Oc returned
to Ailill and demanded Etaín. 'You will not have her,' said Ailill, 'until you divert from the land twelve great rivers that are in streams and bogs and moors: the fruits of the sea will be brought to all peoples and families, thus, and the land will be drained.' The Macc Oc went to the Dádai and again bewailed his predicament, and the Dádai in a single night caused the twelve great rivers to run towards the sea, where they had never before been seen. These were the rivers: Findi, Modornn, Slenae, Nass, Amnas, Oichén, Or, Bandai, Samuir, Lóchae.

This task also having been accomplished, the Macc Oc again went to Ailill and demanded Etaín. 'You will not have her until you buy her,' said Ailill, 'for after you take her away I will have no further good of her, only what you give me now.' 'What do you want, then?' asked the Macc Oc. 'I want her weight in gold and silver, for that is my share of her price. Everything that you have done so far has profited only her family and her people.' 'You will have that,' said the Macc Oc. The woman was brought to the centre of Ailill's house, and her weight in gold and silver was handed over. That wealth was left with Ailill, and the Macc Oc took Etaín home with him.

Mider welcomed the two of them. He slept with Etaín that night, and the following day his clothing and his chariot were given him, and he thanked his foster-son. He stayed a year in the Brúi with Cennogus, and then he returned to Bró Léith and his own land, and he took Etaín with him. As he was leaving, the Macc Oc said 'Look after the woman you are taking with you, for there awaits you a woman of dreadful sorcery, a woman with all the knowledge and skill and power of her people. She has, moreover, my guarantee of safety against the Túatha Dé Danann.' This woman was Fúamnach wife of Mider, from the family of Béothach son of Iardanél; she was wise and clever, and she was versed in the knowledge and power of the Túatha Dé Danann, for the druid Bresal had reared her before her engagement to Mider.

Fúamnach welcomed her husband, and she spoke much of friendship to them. 'Come, Mider,' she said, 'that you may see your house and your lands, that the king's daughter may see your wealth.' Mider went round all his lands with Fúamnach, and she showed his holdings to him and to Etaín. He took Etaín back to Fúamnach, then. Fúamnach preceded Etaín into the house where she slept, and she said to her 'The seat of a good woman have you occupied.' With that, Etaín sat in the chair in the centre of the house, whereupon Fúamnach struck her with a wand of scarlet rowan and turned her into a pool of water. Fúamnach went to her foster-father Bresal, then, and Mider left the house to the water that had been made of Etaín. After that, Mider was without a woman.

The heat of the fire and the air and the seething of the ground combined to turn the pool of water that was in the centre of the house into a worm, and they then turned the worm into a scarlet fly. This fly was the size of the head of the handsomest man in the land, and the sound of its voice and the beating of its wings were sweeter than pipes and harps and horns. Its eyes shone like precious stones in the dark, and its colour and fragrance could sate hunger and quench thirst in any man; moreover, a sprinkling of the drops it shed from its wings could cure every sickness and affliction and disease. This fly accompanied Mider as he travelled through his land, and listening to it and gazing upon it nourished hosts in their meetings and assemblies. Mider knew that the fly was Etaín, and while it was with him he did not take another wife, for the sight of it nourished him. He would fall asleep to its buzzing, and it would awaken him when anyone approached who did not love him.
Eventually, Fúamnach came to visit Mider, and, to guarantee her safety, three of the Túatha Dé Danann came with her: Lug and the Dagdaen and Ogmae. Mider upbraided Fúamnach and said that but for the guarantee of those who had come with her she would not have been permitted to leave; Fúamnach answered that she did not regret what she had done, that she preferred being good to herself to being good to anyone else, and that, wherever she went in Ériu, she would bring nothing but evil to Étain, wherever and in whatever shape the latter might be. Fúamnach had brought from the druid Bresal Étarlám great spells and incantations with which to banish Étain from Mider, for she knew that the scarlet fly that was entertaining Mider was Étain: as long as he could watch the scarlet fly, Mider loved no woman, and he did not enjoy food or drink or music unless he could see it and listen to its music and its buzzing.

With her druidry, then, Fúamnach conjured up a lashing wind that blew Étain out of Bri Léith, so that for seven years there was not a hill or a teetop or a cliff or a summit on which the fly might alight, only the rocks of the ocean and the waves; and it floated through the air until at last it alighted on the garment of the Macc Oc on the mound of the Brúig. The Macc Oc said ‘Welcome, Étain, troubled wanderer, you have endured great hardships through the power of Fúamnach. Not yet have you found happiness, your side secure in alliance with Mider. As for me, he has found me capable of action with hosts, the slaughter of a multitude, the clearing of wildernesses, the world’s abundance for Ailill’s daughter. An idle task, for your wretched ruin has followed. Welcome!’ The Macc Oc welcomed the girl — that is, the scarlet fly. He took it against his breast in the fold of his cloak, and he brought it then to his house and his bower, the latter with its airy windows for coming and going and the scarlet veil he put round it. The Macc Oc carried that bower wherever he went, and he fell asleep by it every night, lifting the fly’s spirit until its colour and cheer returned. The bower was filled with strange, fragrant herbs, and Étain prospered with the scent and the colour of those healthful and precious herbs.

Fúamnach heard of the love and honour that the fly was shown by the Macc Oc, and she said to Mider ‘Have your foster-son summoned, that I may make peace between the two of you, and I, meanwhile, will go in search of Étain.’ A messenger from Mider arrived at the Macc Oc’s house, then, and the Macc Oc went to speak with him; Fúamnach, however, circled into the Brúig from another direction and unleashed the same wind against Étain, so that the latter was driven out of the bower on the same wandering as before, seven years throughout Ériu. The lashing of the wind drove the fly on in wretchedness and weakness until it alighted on the roof of a house in Ulaid where people were drinking; there, it fell into a golden vessel that was in the hand of the wife of Étar, a warrior from Indber Cichmane in the province of Conchubur. Étar’s wife swallowed Étain along with the drink in the vessel; Étain was conceived in the woman’s womb and was born as her daughter. One thousand and twelve years from her first begetting by Ailill until her last by Étar.

Thereafter Étain was brought up by Étar at Indber Cichmane, and fifty chieftains’ daughters were reared along with her, and they were fed and clothed for the purpose of attending Étain at all times. One day, when all the girls were bathing at the mouth of the river, they saw a rider coming towards them from the plain. His horse was broad and brown, prancing, with curly mane and curly tail, He wore a green cloak of the Sídé, and a tunic with red embroidery, and the cloak was fastened with a gold brooch that reached to either shoulder. A silver shield with a rim
of gold was slung over his shoulder, and it had a silver strap with a gold buckle. In his hand he carried a five-pronged spear with a band of gold running from butt to socket. Fair yellow hair covered his forehead, but a band of gold restrained it so that it did not cover his face. The rider stopped a while on the river bank to look at Ètain, and all the girls fell in love with him. Then he recited this poem:

Ètain is here today  
at Sid Ban Find west of Ailbe;  
among little boys she is,  
on the border of Indber Cïchmane.

It is she who healed the king’s eye  
from the well of Loch Dá Líce;  
it is she who was swallowed in the drink  
in the vessel of the wife of Étar.

Because of her the king will chase  
the birds of Tethbæe;  
because of her he will drown his two horses  
in the waters of Loch Dá Airbrech.

Over her there will be much fighting  
against Echu of Mide;  
Side mounds will be destroyed,  
and many thousands will do battle.

It is she who will be celebrated everywhere;  
it is she the king is seeking.  
Once she was called Bé Filind.  
Now she is our Étain.

The young warrior rode away, then, and they knew neither whence he had come nor where he had gone.

The Macc Òc went to speak with Mider, but he did not find Fúamnach there. Mider said to him ‘Fúamnach has lied to us, and if she hears that Étain is in Ériu, she will go to do her harm.’ ‘Étain has been at my house in the Bruið for a while now,’ said the Macc Òc, ‘in the form in which she was blown away from you, and it may be that Fúamnach has gone there.’ The Macc Òc returned to his house and found the crystal bower without Étain in it. He followed Fúamnach’s trail until he overtook her at Óenach Bodbñal, at the house of the druid Bresal Étarlám, and there he attacked her and struck off her head and took it back with him to Bruið na Bóinde.

Echu Airem became king of Ériu, and the five provinces of the country submitted to him, and the king of each province: Conchubur son of Ness, Mess Gepra, Tigernach Térbandach, Cú Ruif and Ailill son of Máta Muríc. Echu’s forts were Dún Frémaind in Mide and Dún Frémaind in Tethbæ; of all the forts in Ériu, Dún Frémaind in Tethbæ was the one he loved most.

The year after he became king, Echu ordered the men of Ériu to hold the feis of Temuir, so that their taxes and assessments for the next five years might be reckoned. The men of Ériu replied that they would not hold the feis of Temuir for a king with no queen, for indeed Echu had had no queen when he became king. Echu then sent messengers to every province of Ériu to seek the fairest woman in the land; and he said that he would have no wife but a woman whom none of the men of Ériu had known before him. Such a woman was found at Indber Cïchmane – Étain daughter of Étar – and Echu took her, for she was his equal in beauty and form and race, in magnificence and youth and high repute.

The three sons of Find son of Findlug were queen’s sons: Echu Feidlech, Echu Airem and Ailill Angubæ. Ailill Angubæ
Early Irish Myths and Sagas

fell in love with Étain at the fels of Temuir, after she had slept with Echu Airem – he would gaze upon her constantly, and such gazing is a sign of love. Ailill reproached himself for what he was doing, but he could not desist: his desire was stronger than his will. He fell ill, then, for he would not dishonour himself by speaking with Étain. When he sensed that he was dying, he had Echu’s doctor Fachtna brought to him, and Fachtna said ‘You have one of two deadly pangs that no doctor can cure: the pang of love and the pang of jealousy.’ Ailill said nothing, for he was ashamed.

Ailill was left at Dún Frémaind in Tethbæ to die, then, while Echu made a circuit of Ériu; and Étain was left with him to perform the funeral rites: digging his grave, weeping over his body, slaying his cattle. Every day, she went to the house where he lay sick to talk to him, and he grew better, for when she was in the house he could look at her. Étain observed this and meditated on it, and the next day, when they were together, she asked Ailill what had made him ill. ‘My love for you,’ he answered. ‘A shame you did not tell me sooner,’ she said, ‘for had I known, you would long since have been well.’ ‘I can be well at once if you so desire,’ said Ailill. ‘Indeed, I do,’ Étain answered.

Every day, then, Étain went to wash Ailill’s head and cut his meat and pour water over his hands, and after thrice nine days he was well. He said to her, then, ‘My healing yet wants one thing – when will I have that?’ ‘You will have it tomorrow,’ she replied, ‘but the sovereign must not be shamed in his own dwelling. Meet me tomorrow on the hill above the house.’ Ailill remained awake all night, but at the hour of the meeting he fell asleep, and he did not wake until the third hour of the following day, Étain went to the hill, and the man she saw there waiting for her was like Ailill in appearance; he lamented the weakness his ailment had brought about, and the words he spoke were the words Ailill would have used. Ailill himself woke at the third hour, and he was giving vent to his sorrow when Étain returned to the house. ‘Why so sad?’ she asked. ‘Because I made an appointment with you and was not there to meet you,’ Ailill replied. ‘Sleep overcame me, and I just now woke. It is clear that I am not yet well.’ ‘No matter,’ said Étain, ‘for tomorrow is another day.’

Ailill remained awake that night in front of a huge fire, with water nearby for splashing over his face. At the appointed hour, Étain went to meet him, and again she saw the man who was like Ailill; she returned home and found Ailill weeping. Three times Étain went to the hill, and three times Ailill failed to meet her; always, the man who looked like Ailill met her. ‘It is not you I am to meet,’ she said. ‘I come not to hurt or sin against the man I am to meet; I come rather to heal one who is worthy to be king of Ériu.’ ‘It would be more fitting for you to come to me,’ replied the man, ‘for when you were Étain Echraide daughter of Ailill, I was your husband; I paid a great bride price for you by creating the plains and rivers of Ériu and by giving your weight in gold and silver to your father.’ ‘What is your name?’ Étain asked. ‘Mider of Brí Léith.’ ‘And what is it that parted us?’ ‘The sorcery of Fháinnach and the spells of Bresal Etarlám.’ Mider said to Étain, then, ‘Will you come with me?’ ‘I will not,’ she answered. ‘I will not exchange the king of Ériu for a man whose race and family I know nothing of.’ ‘It is I who made Ailill fall in love with you, so that his flesh and his blood fell from him; and it is I who quelled his desire to sleep with you, lest you be dishonoured. Will you come to my land with me if Echu bids you?’ ‘I will,’ said Étain.

She returned home, then, and Ailill said to her, ‘Good our meeting here, for I have been healed, and you have not
been dishonoured.' 'Wonderful that,' said Etafn. After that, Echu returned from his circuit; he rejoiced to find his brother alive, and he thanked Etafn for what she had done in his absence.

One beautiful summer day, Echu Airem king of Temuir rose and climbed on to the rampart of Temuir to look out over Mag mBreg, and he saw the plain vibrant with colour and bloom of every hue. And when he looked round the rampart, he saw a strange young warrior. The man wore a scarlet tunic; golden yellow hair fell to his shoulders, and his eyes were sparkling grey. In one hand he carried a five-pointed spear; in the other he held a shield studded with a white boss and gold gems. Echu was silent, for he did not remember the stranger's being in Temuir the previous evening, and at this hour the doors had not yet been opened.

The stranger approached Echu, and Echu said 'Welcome, young warrior whom I do not know.' 'It is for that I have come,' said the warrior. 'I do not recognize you,' said Echu. 'But I know you,' said the warrior. 'What is your name?' asked Echu. 'Not a famous one: Mider of Brl Léith.' 'What has brought you here?' Echu asked. 'The wish to play fidchell with you,' Mider replied. 'Indeed, I am good at fidchell,' answered Echu. 'Let us see,' said Mider. 'The queen is asleep,' said Echu, 'and the fidchell set is with her in the house.' 'No worse the fidchell set I have with me,' said Mider. True that: the board was of silver and the men were of gold, a precious stone glittered in each corner of the board, and the bag for the men was woven in rounds of bronze.

Mider set up the pieces, then, and he said to Echu 'Let us play.' 'I will not play unless there is a stake,' Echu replied. 'What do you want to play for?' asked Mider. 'All the same to me,' answered Echu. 'If you win,' said Mider, 'I will give you fifty dark grey horses with dappled, blood-red heads, sharp-eared, broad-chested, wide-nostrilled, slender-footed, strong, keen, tall, swift, steady and yokable, and fifty enamelled bridles to go with them. You will have them at the third hour tomorrow.' Echu made the same wager; they played, and Mider lost his stake. He departed, then, taking his fidchell set with him.

The following day, at dawn, Echu rose and went out on to the rampart of Temuir, and he saw his opponent coming towards him. He did not know where Mider had gone the previous day or whence he came from now, but he saw the fifty dark grey horses with their enamelled bridles, 'Honorable this,' he said. 'What was promised is due,' answered Mider, and he went on 'Will we play fidchell?' 'Indeed,' said Echu, 'but there must be a stake.' 'I will give you fifty fiery boars,' said Mider, 'curly-haired, dappled, light grey underneath and dark grey above, with horses' hooves on them, and a blackthorn vat that can hold them all. Besides that, fifty gold-hilted swords. Moreover, fifty white red-eared cows and fifty white red-eared calves, and a bronze spencal on each calf. Moreover, fifty grey red-headed wethers, three-headed, three-horned. Moreover, fifty ivory-hilted blades. Moreover, fifty bright-speckled cloaks. But each fifty on its own day.'

Thereafter Echu's foster-father questioned him, asking how he had obtained such riches, and Echu answered 'It happened thus.' 'Indeed. You must take care,' replied his foster-father, 'for it is a man of great power who has come to you. Set him difficult tasks, my son.' When Mider came to him, then, Echu imposed these famous great labours: clearing Mide of stones, laying rushes over Tethbae, laying a causeway over Món Lámige, foresting Bréfné. 'You ask too much of me,' said Mider. 'Indeed, I do not,' replied
Early Irish Myths and Sagas

Echú. 'I have a request, then,' said Mider. 'Let neither man nor woman under your rule walk outside before sunrise tomorrow.' You will have that,' said Echú.

No person had ever walked out on the bog, but, after that, Echú commanded his steward to go out and see how the causeway was laid down. The steward went out into the bog, and it seemed that every man in the world was assembling there from sunrise to sunset. The men made a mound of their clothes, and that is where Mider sat. The trees of the forest, with their trunks and their roots, went into the foundation of the causeway, while Mider stood and encouraged the workers on every side. You would have thought that every man in the world was there making noise. After that, clay and gravel and stones were spread over the bog. Until that night, it had been customary for the men of Éiríu to yoke oxen across the forehead, but that night it was seen that the people of the Síde placed the yoke across the shoulders. Echú thereafter did the same, and that is why he was called Echú Airem, for he was the first of the men of Éiríu to place a yoke on the necks of oxen. And these are the words that the host spoke as they were building the causeway: 'Place it here, place it there, excellent oxen, in the hours after sundown, very onerous is the demand, no one knows whose the gain, whose the loss in building the causeway over Móin Lámhrige.' If the host had not been spied upon, there would have been no better road in the entire world; but, for that reason, the causeway was not made perfect.

Thereafter, the steward returned to Echú and described the great undertaking he had seen, and he said that in the entire world there was not the like of such power. As they were speaking, they saw Mider coming towards them, severely dressed and with an angry expression on his face. Echú was afraid, but he greeted Mider, and the latter replied 'It is for that I have come. It was harsh and senseless of you to impose such great difficulties and hardships upon me. I would have performed yet another task that would have pleased you, but I was angry with you.' 'I will not return anger for anger—rather, I will set your mind at ease,' said Echú. 'I will accept that,' said Mider. 'Will we play fidchell now?' 'What will the wager be?' asked Echú. 'Whatever stake the winner names,' said Mider. That day it was Mider who won. 'You have taken my stake,' said Echú. 'I could have done so earlier if I had wished,' replied Mider. 'What will you have from me?' asked Echú. 'My arms round Étaín and a kiss from her,' said Mider. Echú fell silent at that; finally, he said 'Return a month from today, and you will have that.'

The previous year, Mider had come to woo Étaín, but he had not been successful. The name by which he had called her then was Bé Find, and this is how he had spoken to her:

Bé Find, will you come with me
to a wondrous land where there is music?
Hair is like the blooming primrose there;
smooth bodies are the colour of snow.

There, there is neither mine nor yours;
bright are teeth, dark are brows.
A delight to the eye the number of our hosts,
the colour of foxglove every cheek.

The colour of the plain-pink every neck,
a delight to the eye blackbirds’ eggs;
though fair to the eye Mag Fáil,
it is a desert next to Mag Már.

Intoxicating the ale of Inis Fáil;
more intoxicating by far that of Tír Már.
A wonderful land that I describe;
youth does not precede age.
Early Irish Myths and Sagas

Warm, sweet streams throughout the land,
your choice of mead and wine.
A distinguished people, without blemish,
conceived without sin or crime.

We see everyone everywhere,
and no one sees us:
the darkness of Adam's sin
prevents our being discerned.

Woman, if you come to my bright people,
you will have a crown of gold for your head;
honey, wine, fresh milk to drink
you will have with me there, Bé Find.

Etáin had replied 'If you obtain me from my husband, I will go with you, but if you do not, I will stay.' After that, Mider went to Echu to play fidchell, and at first he lost in order that he might have reason to quarrel. That is why he fulfilled Echu's great demands, and that is why he afterwards proposed an undetermined stake.

Mider thus agreed to return after a month. Echu arranged for the best warriors and warbands in Írriu to assemble at Temuir, each band encircling the next, with Temuir in the middle and the king and queen in the centre of their house and the doors locked, for they knew it was a man of great power who would come. That night, Etáin was serving the chieftains, for serving drink was a special talent of hers. As they were talking, they saw Mider coming towards them in the centre of the house; he had always been beautiful, but that night he was more beautiful still. The hosts who saw him were astonished, and they fell silent, but Echu bade him welcome. 'It is that I have come for,' Mider said, 'that and what was promised me, for it is due. What was promised you was given.' 'I have not thought about it,' said Echu. 'Etáin herself promised me she would leave you,' said Mider, and at that, Etáin blushed. 'Do not blush, Etáin,' said Mider, 'for you have done no wrong. I have spent a year wooing you with the most beautiful gifts and treasures in Írriu, and I have not taken you without Echu's permission. If I have won you, I have done no evil.' 'I have said,' Etáin replied, 'that I will not go with you unless Echu sells me. For my part, you may take me if Echu sells me.' 'Indeed, I will not sell you,' said Echu, 'but he may put his arms round you here in the centre of the house.' 'That I will do,' said Mider. He shifted his weapons to his left hand and put his right hand round Etáin, and he bore her up through the skylight of the house. Ashamed, the hosts rose up round the king, and they saw two swans flying round Temuir and making for Sid ar Femiaun.

Echu assembled the best men of Írriu, then, and went to Sid ar Femiaun, that is, Sid Ban Find; and the men of Írriu advised him to unearth every sid in the land until the woman were found. They dug into Sid Ban Find until someone came out and told them that the woman was not there. The king of the Side of Írriu is the man who came to you. He is in his royal fort with the woman; go there.' Echu and his people went north and began to dig up Mider's sid; they were at it for a year and three months, and whatever they dug up one day would be filled back in the next. Two white ravens came forth from the sid, followed by two hounds, Scleth and Samair. After that, the men returned south to Sid Ban Find and again began to dig it up. Someone came out and said 'What do you have against us, Echu? We did not take your wife. No wrong has been done you. You dare not say anything harmful to a king.' 'I will not leave you,' said Echu, 'until you tell me how I may retrieve my wife.' 'Take with you blind dogs and cats, and leave them. That is what you must do each day.'

They returned north and did that. As they were rearing down Sid Breg Léith, they saw Mider coming towards them,
Early Irish Myths and Sagas

and he said "What do you have against me? You have not played fair with me, and you have imposed great hardships upon me. You sold your wife to me - do not injure me, then." 'She will not remain with you,' said Echu. 'She will not, then,' replied Midir. 'Go home - by the truth of the one and the other, your wife will return to you by the third hour tomorrow. If that satisfies you, injure me no further.'

'I accept that,' said Echu. Midir secured his promise and departed.

At the third hour of the following day, they saw fifty women, all of the same appearance as Etaín and all dressed alike. At that, the hosts fell silent. A grey hag came before them and said to Echu 'It is time for us to return home. Choose your wife now, or tell one of these women to remain with you.' 'How will you resolve your doubt?' Echu asked his men. 'We have no idea how,' they answered. 'But I have,' said Echu. 'My wife is the best at serving in Ériu, and that is how I will know her.' Twenty-five of the women were sent to one side of the house, then, and twenty-five to the other side, and a vessel full of liquid was placed between them. The women came from one side and from the other, and still Echu could not find Etaín. It came down to the last two women: the first began to pour, and Echu said 'This is Etaín, but she is not herself.' He and his men held a council, and they decided 'This is Etaín though it is not her serving.' The other women left, then. The men of Ériu were greatly pleased with what Echu had done, and with the mighty accomplishments of the oxen and the rescue of the woman from the people of the Sidé.

One fine day, Echu rose, and he was talking to his wife in the centre of the house when they saw Midir coming towards them. 'Well, Echu,' Midir said. 'Well,' said Echu. 'It is not fair play I have had from you,' said Midir, 'considering the hardships you imposed upon me and the troops you brought against me and all that you demanded of me. There is nothing you have not exacted from me.' 'I did not sell you my wife,' said Echu. 'Will you clear your conscience against me?' asked Midir. 'Not unless you offer a pledge of your own,' replied Echu. 'Are you content, then?' asked Midir. 'I am,' Echu replied. 'So am I,' said Midir. 'Your wife was pregnant when I took her from you, and she bore a daughter, and it is that daughter who is with you now. Your wife is with me, and you have let her go a second time.' With these words, Midir departed.

Echu did not dare unearth Midir's sod again, for he had pledged himself content. He was distressed that his wife had escaped and that he had slept with his own daughter; his daughter, moreover, became pregnant and bore a daughter. 'O gods,' he said, 'never will I look upon the daughter of my daughter.' Two members of his household took the girl, then, to throw her into a pit with wild beasts. They stopped at the house of Findhlám, a herdsman of Temuir; this house was at Sílab Púait, in the middle of a wilderness. There was no one in the house; the men ate there, and they threw the girl to the bitch and its pups that were in the house’s kennel, and they left. When the herdsman and his wife returned and saw the fair-haired child in the kennel, they were astonished. They took her from the kennel and reared her, though they knew not whence she had come, and she prospered, for she was the daughter of a king and a queen. She was the best of women at embroidery: her eyes saw nothing that her hands could not embroider. She was reared by Findhlám and his wife until, one day, Eterscélae’s people saw her and told their king. Eterscélae took her away by force and made her his wife, and thus she became the mother of Conare son of Eterscélae.