

The Cattle Raid of Cooley

TÁIN BÓ CHUAILNE



This is the great, beloved, epic from the Ulster Cycle where the characters, creatures and events of so many other myths come crashing together with humor, pathos and heroism. It is as intricate and as intertangled as Irish knotwork. It is full of bull.

Daire of Cooley's Brown Bull, named Donn, and the White Horned Bull of Connaught, named Findbennach, were magical creatures whose mythic contention has flowed through many ages, adventures and forms. They had been swineherders, named Grunt and Bristle, for their kings. They had been friends, and rivals as to who was the better at magic and shape shifting. Friendly practical joking left both their pig herds skinny, and they lost their jobs, and thus the feud began. They became hawks, and filled the Sky with noisily bickering for two years. Then they became sea creatures, one a whale the other a seahorse, and fought in the Sea for two years. After that they shifted into human champions, then transformed into phallic worms who impregnate charmed cows of the immortal Sidhe folk, to be born as the prized, magical and magnificent bulls of our tale.

One fateful night Queen Madb of Connaught, in bed with her husband, Ailill, had a sit-com like argument over who was on top, wealth-wise. It was close, but he was ahead by a bull, which is ironic because the White Bull had been born to one of Queen Madb's cows, but did not want to belong to a woman. Madb decides to borrow the Brown Bull, to best Ailill. (Unlike American marriages, in Ireland then men could head the house.)

The Queen offers Daire *a little leg* to borrow the Brown Bull. He gets so excited that he starts jumping up and down and he bursts his bed, feathers fly, and by the time all settles down he finds out that she was going to take the bull by force, if she could not get him fairly. Being Irish, Daire of Caulgne (Cooley) decides he would rather fight than fool around, so war begins between Connaught and Ulster.

War with Ulster seemed safer than when American President Reagan invaded Granada. The fighting men of Ulster are under a curse. Macha is one of triad of war and death goddesses, with the Morrígan and Babd. From another myth, for an injustice done her, she has cursed the fighting men of Ulster, for 3 times 3 generations, to be disabled by the pain of a pregnant woman in labor at all the worst possible times. Besides, Madb's magician, Calatín, had predicted that she would come back from the war with the bull. Calatín and his twenty-seven sons (3 times 3) did not. This is a separate myth, with a recurring theme from Irish tales, that magic, prophesy, and such can be a seeming boon that is really a bane.

Kid Cú Chulainn, just 17, is immune to the curse because, unknown to him then, he is the son of the god Lugh. Madb's army gets well into Ulster unchallenged because, instead of guarding the border as he should be, Cú Chulainn is off with a lass, doing what lads of 17 do. But once he gets to it, the Kid puts up a defense that is, well, epic. There are a couple dozen, or so, stories within the Táin of Cú Chulainn's various exploits and encounters.

He harasses the Connaught army mercilessly from afar with his sling, and at river fords and such challenges their champions to single combat, each of which he wins. Cú Chulainn is doing a heroic job against the invaders, but they advance anyway. Queen Madb offers to have sex with him and make him rich if he switches sides, but he turns her down. They reach sort of a truce that allows her army to advance while he kills off her best men, one at a time. She really wanted that bull!

The Morrígan, in the guise of a beautiful maiden, tries to seduce the Kid, and he refuses her too. Rebuffed, she stalks him. Waters are the fateful forks in the streams of life and narrative in Irish mythology and the Morrígan attacks Cú Chulainn at a ford in a river, first as an eel who trips him, then as a wolf who drives cattle at him, and third as a heifer who leads a stampede. Each time he wounds her, and the dark goddess vows and eventually gets revenge.

The youths of Ulster, who are also unaffected by Macha's curse, decide to go to the aid of their friend Cú Chulainn. Three times fifty of them march off. This is 1/3 the youths of Ulster. King Ailill, seeing the boys from afar, mistakes them for fighting men, so he attacks in earnest. Alas, all are lost at lia Fáil, the Stone of Destiny.

In one contest Cú Chulainn is gravely wounded. The many talented god of healing, Lugh Long Arm, appears and puts Cú Chulainn to sleep for 3 days, magically mending his injuries. He movingly reveals himself to Cú Chulainn as his true father. Upon awakening Cú Chulainn has been transformed into a horrifying but fearless monster who avenges the boys twice 3 fold times.

Queen Madb, in desperation, violates the sacred tradition of single combat, and sends several men at Cú Chulainn at the same time, sealing her memory as an unprincipled villainess. Cú Chulainn fights his foster father, Fergus, but yields to him on the condition that when next they meet it will be Fergus that must yield. In one sad encounter the hero fights his foster brother and best childhood friend, Ferdiad, who had switched sides. For 3 days they battle before duty brings Cú Chulainn to slay the brother he so loves.

Alas, Cú Chulainn and Fergus do meet again, at the head of a great battle, and faithful to his word Fergus yields. Thus Ulster finally defeats the invading army of Connaught, but Madb gets home with Donn, the Brown Bull of Cooley, and fifty heifers too.

But this, you will recall, is the tale of a feud between two swineherds who are now bulls. Back in Connaught Donn kills the White Bull Findbennach (Whitehorn), tearing him to bits and flinging the pieces to the far corners of Ireland. Returning to Ulster, Donn vents his rage there too. So ends the tales of the Cattle Raid of Cooley, Táin Bó Cúailnge.

Although these tales are orally very much older, the earliest known written versions are *Lebor na hUidre* (the "Book of the Dun Cow"), from the 11th Century AD, and the *Book of Leinster*, from the 12th Century AD, both in Old Irish; and *The Yellow Book of Lecan*, from the 14th Century AD, in Middle Irish. Táin was translated into English in AD 1904 by Winifred Faraday, AD 1914 by Joseph Dunn, and AD 1969 by Thomas Kinsella, among others. In AD 2006 Colmán Ó Raghallaigh and Barry Reynolds did the first graphic novel version, in Irish Gaelic.

There is a fascinating and beautifully done website that gives the Irish transcription side-by-side with Joseph Dunn's translation. It is at <http://adminstaff.vassar.edu/sttaylor/Cooley/>.

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