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CúChulainn for the Modern Man: Influences of Celtic Myth in the Easter Rising of 1916

by Alice Grissom

IRELAND: A land at once both romantic and pragmatic, mythical and modern. With a legendary history reaching back to 500 BCE, a sizable part of Irish national identity stems from Celtic roots and mythology. In the Irish national identity, Celtic legend and factual revolutionary history come hand in hand, and at some points one seems to bleed into the other. In particular, the mythical figure of Cú Chulainn and his story of battle and sacrifice has inspired cultural and political Irish revolutionaries. The appearance of Cú Chulainn and the larger body of Celtic mythology in the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth century, the writings of revolutionary leaders such as Patrick Pearse and Joseph Mary Plunkett, and the commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising suggests a cultural continuity that intertwines the Celtic past with the republican spirit of the present through ever-present themes of blood sacrifice and doomed heroes.

To argue that this theme of cultural continuity exists in the Easter Rising of 1916 and its aftereffects, this essay will use works from various periods to demonstrate the veracity of its claim and the longevity of the Irish mythos. In addition to an introductory article on Cú Chulainn,¹ the mythologic overview will be supported by George Townshend's "Irish Mythology," in which he analyzes the three main mythic cycles of Ireland (the Children of Danu cycle, the cycle of Cú Chulainn and his

contemporaries, and the Fenian cycle) and inks out similarities and differences between them.²

The Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the promotion of cultural nationalism and the enabling of political nationalism on the island. To describe the scope and content of the Irish Literary Revival, this essay turns to the informative "The Irish Literary Revival" by Cornelius Weygandt,³ W.B. Yeats' anecdotal essay, "The Literary Movement in Ireland,"⁴ and *The 1916 Irish Rebellion*⁵ to contrast the myriad reactions to, and methods of involvement in, the Irish Literary Revival. Additional writings will provide insight into the minds of prominent figures in both the Irish Literary Revival and the 1916 uprising. Examination of an article on Pearse, "Patrick Pearse – the Evolution of a Republican"⁶ will accompany Pearse's artistic

1 David Bellingham, *An Introduction to Celtic Mythology* (London: Grange Books, 1998) 6-12.

2 George Townshend, "Irish Mythology," *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1 Oct. 1915, pp. 458–467. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27532846?ref=search-gateway:c4f34c04abd753321e86f29dfa420a81

3 Cornelius Weygandt, "The Irish Literary Revival." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1 Oct. 1904, pp. 420–431. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27530648?ref=search-gateway:b15707111d368329f5aed404c60c87e9.

4 W.B. Yeats, "The Literary Movement in Ireland," *The North American Review*, vol. 169, no. 517, 1 Dec. 1899: 855–867. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/25104919?ref=search-gateway:f066d400bdbffdad77bc71a5f7a38c2f.

5 Bríona Nic Dhiarmada, *The 1916 Irish Rebellion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 18-33.

6 F.X. Martin, "Patrick Pearse – The Evolution of a Revolutionary," *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916* (Ithaca,



Cu Chulainn statue ensconced at the GPO in Dublin, courtesy of the Irish Times.

and literary contributions, as will a short excerpt from *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*.⁷ The works and the accompanying texts will illuminate the thematic strain of “blood sacrifice” within the minds of the revolutionaries and the influence of Cú Chulainn on said revolutionaries. Finally, Robert Tracy’s “A Statue’s There to Mark the Place’: Cú Chulainn in the GPO” explores the connection between Cú Chulainn and the 1916 rebellion in the public mind and the effect of this connection on the preservation of Irish themes of mythic greatness and blood sacrifice.⁸

Part god, part mortal, Cú Chulainn’s origin story rivals those of the Greek heroes. Born of the god Lug to

he learned the rest of the prophecy: although the warrior who took up arms would achieve lasting fame, he would die young.¹¹Cú Chulainn’s heralded status as an Irish hero stems from a battle he waged at the young age of seventeen, where he single-handedly defended Ulster from an invading army. “This war the romancers have handed down to us as the chief among all the stories of the cycle, and it was by his feats in this contest that Cú Chulainn won his deathless fame,” writes Townshend.¹²As Cú Chulainn typified the warrior successfully protecting his land against overwhelming odds, Irish republicans, facing extremely unfavorable odds themselves, found the tale of Cú Chulainn particularly appealing.(It is somewhat ironic, readers may note, that Cú Chulainn became

NY: Cornell UP, 1967), 151-63.

7 Roy Foster, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 278-279.

8 Robert Tracy, “A Statue’s There to Mark the Place’: Cú Chulainn in the GPO,” *Field Day Review*, vol. 4, 2008: 202–215. www.jstor.org/stable/25469731.

9 Bellingham, *An Introduction to Celtic Mythology*, 7.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Townshend, “Irish Mythology,” 466.

the inspiration for the forces of republican Ireland in addition to groups from his own Ulster.) “The [cycle] of ... Cuchulain [is] animated by this spirit of heroic loyalty” which reverberated with the new Irish nationalists, who saw themselves as heroes in the ideals of Cú Chulainn and would rather face death, imprisonment, or any other punishment than abandon their cause.¹³ Cú Chulainn’s tragic yet honorable death in battle – he binds himself to an upright stone so that he may die courageously facing his enemies on his feet¹⁴ – resonated with Ireland’s idealistic republican groups in the early twentieth century. He spills his blood to thwart Maeb’s revenge on his people, and though he dies in the process, he does so bravely and heroically – a process the leaders of 1916 eventually emulated in their stoic goodbyes.

Centuries after monks incredulously transcribed the last of the Cú Chulainn myths, the wave of Romantic writing that had spread throughout America and Britain in the mid-nineteenth century reached Ireland, where, in conjunction with a revived interest in the dying Gaelic language, it sparked a national movement known as the Irish Literary Revival that sought a uniquely Irish national literature. Spearheaded by organizations such as the Gaelic League (taught and promoted the use of Gaelic in speech and writing), the Gaelic Athletic Association (promoted traditional Irish sports and activities, such as hurling), and the political group Sinn Féin, the Irish Literary Revival promoted a culturally cohesive national Irish identity, and spurred a generation of Irishmen and women to explore their heritage, relearn their language, and reclaim the land on which they stood.¹⁵ Many of the writings of the time exhibit characteristic “reshapings of old legend into poetry and drama,” often using compre-

hensive myth-based texts, such as O’Grady’s *History of Ireland*, as a blueprint.¹⁶ Although the Irish Literary Revival did not have a wide impact on the global scale, it nevertheless contributed valuable works in “[h]igh poetry and noble drama with national spirit” to the greater body of English literature.¹⁷ Of the contributors to the English canon, perhaps none is more remembered than the Irish William Butler Yeats, widely considered the greatest English poet of the twentieth century.

“ AS CÚ CHULAINN TYPIFIED THE WARRIOR SUCCESSFULLY PROTECTING HIS LAND AGAINST OVERWHELMING ODDS, IRISH REPUBLICANS, FACING EXTREMELY UNFAVORABLE ODDS THEMSELVES, FOUND THE TALE OF CÚ CHULAINN PARTICULARLY APPEALING.

Throughout Yeats’ incredible literary career, the wealth of which emerged through masterful poetry and drama, traditional Celtic and Irish myth truly galvanized him. Works from his early years of writing show elements of national mythology, such as “The Wanderings of Oisín,” which retold and embellished segments from the Fenian cycle.¹⁸ In addition to mythical influence, Yeats found influence in the political events and republicanism of the time. In fact, Yeats’ works evidence the correlation between the burgeoning revolutionary fervor and the renewed fascination with Irish mythology during the Irish Literary Revival. Thanks to poems like “Septem-

13 Ibid.

14 Bellingham, *An Introduction to Celtic Mythology*, 7.

15 Nic Dhiarmada, *The 1916 Irish Rebellion*, 18.

16 Cornelius Weygandt, “The Irish Literary Revival,” 421.

17 Ibid.

18 W.B. Yeats, *The Wanderings of Oisín, and other poems* (London: Paul, Trench & Co., 1889).

ber 1913,” which spurs readers to action with the memorable refrain of “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,/It’s with O’Leary in the grave”¹⁹ and the incitingly patriotic, fiercely nationalistic play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which in turn inspired many a young man to take up arms on behalf of the cause for Irish freedom.²⁰ Therefore, Yeats, a prominent figure for both the republican movement and the Irish Literary Revival, provides a fitting voice to encapsulate the significance of the Irish Literary Revival on Irishmen and women themselves:

But now we are growing interested in our own countries, and discovering that the common people in all countries that have not given themselves up to the improvements and devices of good citizens, which we call civilization, still half understand the sanctity of their hills and valleys; and at the same time a change of thought is making us half ready to believe ... that the forms of nature may be temporal shadows of reality.²¹

Evidently, this motion of becoming interested in one’s own country could so significantly create a populace receptive to the heightened passions and aggravations that characterized Ireland shortly after 1916. The effect Yeats observed did not go unnoticed by the leaders of the 1916 uprising, who hoped to harness public fervor in their revolution.

Of the many leaders of Irish republicanism in 1916, none show a greater reverence for the necessity of blood sacrifice than Patrick Pearse, Commander-in-Chief

of the IRB and main voice of the rebellion. Before reaching total radicalization, however, Pearse operated an Irish language boarding school, St. Enda’s, which eventually became a “hotbed of revolutionary nationalism” under the increasingly nationalist teachings of Pearse and his colleagues (several of whom, including Willie Pearse and Thomas MacDonough, would be executed for their involvement in the Easter Rising).²² Traditional Celtic myths comprised an “important part of the curriculum,”²³ and both the dramatic plays frequently performed by the students and a mural on the walls of the school itself heavily featured Cú Chulainn.²⁴ Cú Chulainn had long served as inspiration for Pearse, who as a young boy had sworn to follow in Cú Chulainn’s footsteps in the fight for Irish independence.²⁵ Pearse obsessed over the cult of Celtic heroes and fully believed that Ireland’s freedom would require blood sacrifice, as he expresses in his writings: “bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as a final horror has lost its manhood” and “[t]he old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of battlefields.”²⁶ To Pearse, blood must be spilled for Ireland to rightfully gain freedom, and as “there developed in Pearse’s mind a vision of the overthrow of injustice by the sacrificial death of virtue,” he became more than willing to relinquish his life and let his blood be shed so that a free Ireland might grow from it.²⁷

Many of Pearse’s associates, including Thomas MacDonaugh, James Connolly, Joseph Mary Plunkett,

22 Nic Dhiarmada, *The 1916 Irish Rebellion*, 25-26.

23 Ibid., 25.

24 Tracy, “A Statue’s There to Mark the Place’: Cú Chulainn in the GPO,” 206.

25 Ibid., 205.

26 Martin, “Patrick Pearse -- The Evolution of a Revolutionary,” 160.

27 Ibid., 161.

19 W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

20 W.B. Yeats, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, In John P. Harrington, ed., *Modern Irish Drama* (New York: Norton, 1991) 3-11.

21 W.B. Yeats, “The Literary Movement in Ireland,” 855.



Patrick Pearse, courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica.

and Sean MacDermott also adhered to the belief that Ireland could only be “rejuvenated by a blood sacrifice.”²⁸ The reticent Joseph Mary Plunkett prolifically wrote republican-themed poetry, notably the poem “The Little Black Rose Shall be Red At Last,” in which Plunkett allegorically compares the blood sacrifice necessary to cause the “dark rose” of Ireland to “redden into bloom” as a free state.²⁹ Figures from both Celtic and Christian mythology served as inspiration for the men of 1916, who “belie[ved] they were reenacting the sacrifice of Cú Chulainn,”³⁰ and accounts of the deaths of both Cú Chulainn and Christ

28 Ibid., 160.

29 R. Bryan Willits, “Joseph Mary Plunkett.” *Irish America* (February/March 2016): 40.

30 Foster, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland*, 278.

reinforced the power of blood sacrifice in the minds of the predominately Catholic participants.³¹

The fatalistic nature of the Cú Chulainn cycle also exerted an allure over the minds of the leaders of 1916. After taking up arms under the prophecy of an early death, Cú Chulainn knew that one day, his actions would cause an untimely death. However, he did not exhibit cowardice or apprehension, and maintained a strict heroic code of conduct that did ultimately lead to his demise. Even in the face of certain death and defeat, Cú Chulainn neither gave up nor surrendered. Pearse and his contemporaries, committed to a doomed rebellion by the failure of Casement’s arms deal, would have identified as group of modern-day Cú Chulainns facing sure execution for doing what they knew was right. Much like Cú Chulainn in his final battle, the revolutionaries knew of their slim odds for success, but even given the sheer impossibility of a victory due to the miscommunicated orders they persisted. For the Irishmen, the precedent they hoped their action would set, and the particular sort of nationalistic martyrdom they dreamed of would be its own award. They believed they would achieve fame through martyrdom— Pearse “[elevated] death to the status of a first principle.”³² Their willingness to exchange life for renown directly parallels Cú Chulainn’s acceptance of arms that beget lasting fame but a short life.

Eamon de Valera’s 1935 commemoration of the 1916 rising cemented both the lasting fame of Cú Chulainn and of the 1916 revolutionary leaders. As the G.P.O. where the events of 1916 had taken place had finally undergone full repairs and renovations in 1929, talk began of placing inside the GPO a memorial to the event.³³ These

31 Martin, “Patrick Pearse -- The Evolution of a Revolutionary,” 161.

32 Ibid., 162.

33 Tracy, “A Statue’s There to Mark the Place’: Cú Chulainn in

POBLACHT NA H EIREANN.
THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT
OF THE
IRISH REPUBLIC
TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN: In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on behalf of the Provisional Government,

THOMAS J. CLARKE,
 SEAN Mac DIARMADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,
 P. H. PEARSE, EAMONN CEANNÓ,
 JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

The Easter Proclamation of 1916, courtesy of PBS.

discussions culminated in the 1935 unveiling of the statue *The Death of Cú Chulainn* by Oliver Sheppard within the G.P.O., accompanied with plaques denoting the occurrences of Easter 1916 and replicating the Proclamation of the Irish Republic.³⁴ The ceremony of the unveiling afforded controversial nationalist leader de Valera an opportunity to “remind his countrymen of the events of 1916, [and] to stress the republican ideal for which Pearse and his followers had fought,” thereby furthering the revolutionary narrative in the mind of the public.³⁵ Although the selection of the statue sparked much debate, includ-

the GPO,” 206.

34 Ibid., 206.

35 Ibid., 204.

ing partisan arguments on the part of de Valera’s political opponents, the Irish government eventually agreed on Oliver Sheppard’s *The Death of Cú Chulainn*, initially created in 1911.³⁶ Not only had Sheppard’s work been approved of by Pearse,³⁷ but Oliver Sheppard had been a schoolmate of Willie Pearse and a friend of Yeats (one of whose final poems, “The Statue,” references *The Death of CuChulainn* in no unclear terms).³⁸ Just as Cú Chulainn embarked on a final battle to “become a heroic exemplar,”³⁹ so Pearse and his contemporaries staged the Rising to, in some degree, become martyrs, making this remembrance of Cú Chulainn’s sad fate an “appropriate memorial to Pearse and the other leaders of the Easter Rising, but especially to Pearse, who had refused to postpone the Rising despite the near certainty of failure.”⁴⁰ In this way, the memorialization and legacy of the 1916 Easter Rising upholds the tradition of mythical influence on Irish political ideals.

From the first bards to the great poets of the Irish Literary revival, Irish and Celtic mythology has held a prominent position in the minds of Ireland’s artistic and literary elite. When the conditions arose, a combination of literary resurgence and political republican activism brought to the forefront of the popular mind legends of Cú Chulainn and tales of ancient times, which manifested in the increasingly militant and violent political movements of the early twentieth century as themes of blood sacrifice and nationalistic martyrdom.

36 Ibid., 207.

37 Ibid., 208.

38 Ibid., 215.

39 Ibid., 205.

40 Ibid.