

THROUGH THE SPIRIT OF BIRDS: THE ENDURING POWER OF IRISH
MYTH AS EXPLORED IN 'THE CHILDREN OF LIR'

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We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by Alexandra Slater entitled, **Through the Spirit of Birds: the Enduring Power of Irish Myth as Explored in 'The Children of Lir,'** be accepted as fulfilling, in part, requirements for the degree of Master of Art in Art and the Book.

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For Charlotte, Fiona, Magnus + Reid,
who sacrificed the most.

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ABSTRACT

THROUGH THE SPIRIT OF BIRDS: THE ENDURING POWER OF IRISH MYTH AS EXPLORED IN 'THE CHILDREN OF LIR'

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This paper will explore the theme of swan-human transformation in Irish myth by examining re-tellings of the well loved legend, 'The Children of Lir.' It will parallel the endurance of myth by means of reinvention and conclude that the power of storytelling has enabled Irish myth to retain its cultural reference.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*'Three good points about stories: if told, they like to be heard; if heard, they like to be taken in; and if taken in, they like to be told.'*¹ – Ciarán Carson, *Fishing for Amber*

In Ireland, a nation that is deeply rooted in the bardic tradition, the ancient tales and art of the *seanchaithe*, have shown a remarkable resilience given the milieu of turbulence from which they have emerged: the transition from oral to written word; the conversion to Christianity; the translation from Irish to English and the virtual maelstrom of political chaos which thus ensued. While the cultural context and passing of time have changed the landscape of Irish myth, dramatic epics of heroic battles and magical Gods continue to entrance a modern audience by means of reinvention; ancient tales have proven indomitable in spirit by virtue of metamorphosis, not unlike the shape shifting deities of the stories themselves. In Irish mythology, it was believed swans embodied the souls of humans and were able to access both the natural and Otherworld – a transformation which parallels the dynamic endurance of Celtic myth.

The theme of metamorphosis is strongly linked to Celtic mythology in the form of human to animal shape shifting. While the human-animal relationship is complicated, having evolved from that of more egalitarian terms to the current position of superiority, the Celts lived as part of nature and were thus more intimately connected to their environment and the animals who shared it. Irish writer and scholar, T.W. Rolleston (1857–1920), observed that ‘...it is its special characteristic that it belongs to and issues from a class whose daily life lies close to the earth, toils in the field and in the forest, who render with simple directness, in tales or charms, their impressions of natural or supernatural forces with which their own lives are environed.’² Renown Folklorist, Reverend Dr. Edward

Armstrong (1900-1978) writes in his legendary work, *The Folklore of Birds*, 'the survival of visual motifs for thousands of years indicates that there is a strong presumption that beliefs may be equally long-lived.'³ Indeed, it is evident from their recurrent representation in ancient artifacts that animals were central to Celtic religion, ritual and mythology, and played a significant role in early Celtic literature. Celtic mythology is therefore informed by a deeply visceral relationship with nature.

So interwoven were animals to Celtic society that they encompassed virtually every aspect of life: nourishment, transport, sport, assistance in warfare, sacrifice, ritual and artistic inspiration – most notably, they left their mark in the form of intricately detailed metalwork and early Celtic literature. Celtic mythology is abound with animals who communicate verbally or who manifest into human or hybrid form and back again – tales which stemmed from the oral tradition and continued to reinvent themselves in written word.

Stories have the ability to unite us universally yet define us culturally – a notion particularly relevant in Ireland where the term 'Irish Storyteller' has plainly evolved from the nation's multi-faceted command of literature. In Ireland, the art of *seanchaithe*, holds particular resonance; the Celts were a non-literate culture and having avoided Roman conquest, were able to nurture and support storytellers as esteemed members of society. Druids and later, bards, were capable of memorizing vast amounts of narrative and were valued professionals whose skill served not only as a form of entertainment, but of practical nature in passing along historical information to the next generation. Storytellers engaged their audience not only through manner of delivery, gesticulation and charm, but by the filtering of rhetoric through their own unique experiences and by responding to the cues of their listeners, creating a form of collective improvisation – such is the art of *seanchaithe*.

By nature, literature of the oral tradition leaves us without written evidence and it is therefore impossible to trace its path with certainty. Like the archaeological treasures both found and yet uncovered, and as referenced in Seamus Heaney's (1939-2013) "Bogland," 'every layer they strip / seems camped on before,'⁴ Modern Ireland lives amongst the ghosts of a violent and tumultuous past and we may hypothesise that significant pieces of their cultural puzzle have been stolen, burned or lost at sea by the hand of invaders – or, perhaps, they rest deep within the sleepy layers of a bog.

We know the Celts in part through the eyes of the Romans and Greeks, and from physical evidence they left behind ranging from ornately decorative metalwork to the contents of their middens. Many artifacts and carvings suggest ritual and beliefs, yet we may only speculate as to their true meaning. We have, however, been left with riches of written narrative recorded by monastic scholars beginning in the sixth century. While the bulk is dated much later, around the twelfth century, it is presumed to reflect the oral tales of several centuries earlier.

It's not without irony that many Pagan tales were sustained by Christianity. The transition from Pagan to Christian Ireland was a lengthy process of close to two hundred years and naturally met with resistance and possible internal conflict amongst the monks themselves who, in their efforts to record myth, also found themselves having to resolve a Pagan past with newfound Christianity. Indeed, legends such as 'The Fate of the Children of Lir,' one of the most well loved tales of Ireland, illustrate the nation's struggle to resolve a fading Pagan past with an emerging Christian society. In this tale, four children were transformed into swans by their evil stepmother and subsequently spent 900 years enchanting those around them with their grace and music before resuming their human form – only to

discover the Ireland of their childhood has been replaced by a Christianized nation and the *Tuatha Dé Danann* (Deities) driven underground for all eternity.

‘The Children of Lir’ is a part of the Mythological Cycle, one of four cycles of Irish mythology largely recorded in medieval manuscripts and concerns the aforementioned *Tuatha Dé Danann* and the battles which ensued with a series of invaders. The additional cycles include the Ulster Cycle, which relayed heroic tales of the fifth century featuring iconic warrior *Cú Chulainn*; the Fenian Tales, which most notably feature, Fionn and his warriors, the Fianna, as well as the adventures of his son, *Oisín*; and the Historical Cycle, or Cycle of Kings, featuring the adventures of Cormac.

Additionally, there are other recordings of text that do not belong to these categories, as well as a number of oral folktales that do indeed incorporate characters from the Mythological cycles, but do not relay the actual stories themselves. While monastic scholars recorded tales in written form, the oral culture continued to thrive and sustain its literature in Gaelic until the language began to diminish in the nineteenth century.

While the endurance of myth may owe itself to metamorphosis, the divinities of Irish mythology are equally adept at transformation. Archeological evidence suggests the ancient Celts were concerned with shape-shifting as early as the Iron Age. Mythological references abound; human forms transfigured fluidly to animal form, frequently in the shape of a bird – commonly the swan. Epitomizing grace and beauty, swans have long been referenced in Irish literature, most notably in W. B. Yeats’s symbolic use of swans, exemplified in “The Wild Swans at Coole.” They appear intermittently throughout Celtic tales and folklore as deities who had the ability to transform themselves and others to bird form and back either as a means of escape or as in ‘The Children of Lir,’ a form of punishment.

The ability to mediate between the natural and otherworld was navigated with ease and fluency amongst Celtic deities – and swans, with their variation of habitat and migratory habits suitably illustrate the fluid nature of Pagan spiritual belief. Waterfowl, who navigate from sea to land to sky ultimately unite with the cosmic realm. It is through this innate, intrinsic awareness of a metaphorical landscape that they achieve unity: the act of metamorphosis allows for the dissolution of boundaries.

Folklore relating to swans and their embodiment of human souls is widespread in many ancient cultures; a common motif being that of the swan maiden in which a swan transmigrates to the form of a woman after being observed shedding her feathers in a lake. The swan-woman succumbs to temptation of some sort which in turn breaks the spell and she is once again returned to swan form.

Conservationist and writer Mark Brazil (1955), notes, “As peoples and their oral traditions travelled across Asia and Europe, ancient tales of swans, of swan maidens and of swan knights were carried and inter-mingled, some spreading in mythical form far beyond the range of the swans themselves.”⁵ While it is impossible to truly discern the origins of ‘The Children of Lir,’ it likely has roots in the oral tales of Northern Europe. It is evident that in corners of the world where swans were unlikely to have populated, they have managed to manifest in folklore. Evidently, the mystical and poetic lore of swans was indeed as migratory as the subject itself.

Through the revolving process of storytelling ‘The Children of Lir’ has provided us with a multitude of re-tellings which continue to appeal to a modern audience, a journey which holds particular resonance to a country whose notorious past both helps and hinders its

cultural continuity. Modern scholar and writer, Ciara Ní Bhroin writes, 'For a nation that, in recent decades and at great cost, has privileged the individual over the community and the economy over society, mythology may be inspiration for a regenerative collective vision – neither a nostalgic harkening back to the past nor a synthetic packaging of the past for commercial gain, but a transformative, self-renewing narrative to sustain upcoming generations into the future.'⁶

There is an element to the survival of myth and legend that reflects the resolve of the Irish themselves. Like the swans of Lir who left earth to exist on sea and sky and eventually beyond, the reinvention of a tale so culturally bound to the souls of those who carried it through generations of storytelling represents a kind of resurrection; 'The Children of Lir' has assumed many incarnations yet it has managed not only to retain its core truth, but remains a cultural force burgeoning with unequivocal Irishness.

CHAPTER 2

‘OIDHEADH CHLOINNE LIR’, ‘THE FATE OF THE CHILDREN OF LIR:’ A SYNOPSIS

Oidheadh Chloinne Lir, ‘The Fate of the Children of Lir’ (hereinafter referred to as ‘The Children of Lir’) is set during a time of magic and enchantment in mythological Ireland when the semi-divine race of *Tuatha Dé Danann* ruled but were buckling under the threat of invaders, particularly the Milesians, but were also battling with the demonic race, *Fomhoire*. Modern re-tellings often dilute the Pagan roots of this tale, however, to do so is to diminish the underlying theme of the story.

The tale begins with a bid amongst five Kings for the head of *Tuatha Dé Danann* after being defeated by the Milesians. When *Bodb Dearg* prevails as the highest King, Lir storms off. It was not the end of Lir’s misfortune, however, as shortly after, his wife would take ill for three nights and subsequently die.

Wanting to keep peace, *Bodb Dearg* presented Lir with his three foster daughters and offered him his choice. Lir chose, the eldest, *Aobh*, and she bore two sets of twins: a daughter, Fionnula and a son, *Aodh* who were later followed by two sons, Fiachra and Conn. Tragically, *Aobh* dies delivering her last set of twins. Lir is once again devastated and only copes due to the overwhelming love for his children, who, by all accounts, were exceptionally charming and delightful.

In reference to the theory by scholars that the Celtic mythology recorded by the Church was an attempt to create Ireland’s own mythology, it should be noted that from Greek

mythology's 'Leda and the Swan', nymph Leda bore two sets of twins after being seduced by Zeus.⁷ It is in the very least, evidence to suggest the migration of swan legend spanned over a significant amount of geography and time.

Bodb Dearg offers Lir Aobh's sister, Aoife. At first it is a good match; Aoife is warm and loving toward her step-children, but eventually she is consumed by jealousy for the affection Lir and *Bodb Dearg* bestow upon them. Aoife took ill for an entire year and upon her recovery, plotted to kill the children.

Aoife tells the children they are going to visit *Bodhbh Dearg*, though she secretly conspires to kill them during their journey. Fionnula has an uneasy feeling about this, yet feels helpless but to oblige and thus depart with her brothers. Half way through the journey, Aoife is unable to find a willing accomplice to help her kill the children and cannot summon herself to destroy them by her own hand. She commands the chariot to break half way on their journey and sends the children to bathe in *Lough Derravaragh*. Again, Fionnula is uneasy and overcome with protectiveness for her siblings.

Aoife and Fionnula are key characters in 'The Children of Lir'. Females in Celtic Mythology⁸ are often portrayed as emblems of strength (most widely represented by iconic Queen Maeve). 'Europe's Folkloric cousins'⁹ of the swan tales would inspire The Brother's Grimm's 'Six Swans,' Matthias Winther's 'The Eleven Swans,' (1823) which in turn inspired Hans Christian Andersen's 'Wild Swans' (1838). These tales are notable for their portrayal of female heroism – not typically associated with the genre of fairytale.

Once the children are in the lake, Aoife uses a Druid's wand to turn them into swans, stating, 'From now on flocks of waterfowl will be your only family, and your crying will be

mingled with the cries of birds.’¹⁰ As the children cry, Fionnula pleads with Aoife to break the spell, but it is too late.

Fionnula protests but it is of no use. Aoife becomes filled with remorse for bringing harm to the children she once adored, but is unable to break the spell. Instead, she is able to lessen it by condemning them to nine hundred years as swans, after which they will regain their human form. She also bestows upon them the ability to not only keep their voices, but to sing such glorious music they will soothe to sleep all those who listen.

The reader will notice how this very act encapsulates the theme of the story: the children, now embodied in swan form, represent the reticency of the Pagan beliefs and impending replacement of the voice of Christianity. Despite losing their human form, the children have kept their ‘voice’ which they use to bring comfort to those who mourn them – expressing metaphorically their longing for the Pagan past.

While the ‘wild swans’ generally referred to in Irish myth were likely the migratory Whooper, and not Mute (who do not sing, yet are capable of creating plenty of noise),¹¹ it is a misnomer that swans are silent or sing only before death (hence the term, ‘swan song’). Not only does this contribute to the mystery and allure of the swan, the perceived muteness may perhaps be interpreted as a metaphor for the attempts to stifle the Irish vernacular.

The swans-children are to spend three hundred years each on *Lough Derravaragh*, the Sea of Moyle and finally, the Atlantic ocean. When a King from the North marries a Queen from the South and they hear the ringing of a bell, their enchantment will cease. Aoife rages ‘And go away out of my sight now, children of Lir...with your white faces, with your

stammering Irish.’¹²

The King from the North and the Queen from the South represent the resolution of the two faiths. The bell represents the arrival of Christianity.

Lir and his search party discover the dreadful truth and release three mournful roars of despair. *Bodb Dearg* uses a druid wand to turn Aoife into a storm in the sky for all eternity. Fionnula comforts her father by assuring him that, ‘...we have our own language, the Irish, and we have the power to sing sweet music.’ (this wording of nationalistic spirit from Lady Gregory’s translation).¹³ And indeed they do; each night, Lir and his people are sung to sleep by the magical music of the four swans and this intimate relationship continues for three hundred years until the day Fionnula senses it is time to leave for the Sea of Moyle.

Their continued exile in Moyle was miserable and they suffered great hardship due to storms and rough seas during which Fionnula sheltered her brothers as best she could, though at times they became separated and she feared them gone for good. One day, they saw a party approach the shore and asked for word of their people. The party were descendants of *Bodb Dearg* and recognized the swans as ‘legends’. Fionnula laments with a sense of bitterness and longing for a way of life that no longer existed.

The time had come for the swans to face their final three hundred years of exile on the Atlantic Ocean. They decided to fly over the home of their youth but were filled with nostalgia and heartache in the discovering the home they once knew was all but a hilly mound. This the fairy mound of the *sidhe*, (fairy folk); the Divine race were driven underground and henceforth deigned as the decidedly more peripheral ‘fairy folk’.

The reader will notice a recurring reference to the number three throughout the original tale: Lir has a total of three wives and his first wife takes ill for three nights; the search party responds with three roars upon learning of the spell; and the terms of punishment equate to three hundred years each on three bodies of water. Apart from the latter, these are generally omitted from modern re-tellings, but triplism was highly symbolic to the Pagan Celts; 'three' being the most 'sacred or magical' of all numbers.

Miranda Green writes, 'Three may have symbolized totality: in time, past, present and future may be reflected, in space, behind, before and here, or sky, earth and underworld.'¹⁴ A modern reader may understand this to represent Pagan past, Christian present and a future perhaps as a balance of the two doctrines more obviously expressed by the three terms of exile: the relative ease of *Lough Derravaragh* (the comfort of Pagan roots), the wild seas of Moyle (the harsh transition to Christianity), and finally, the middle ground of their final term on the Atlantic (where alas, there is a resigned acceptance).

The final term of their exile was not as harsh as Moyle. The swan-children took shelter on a lake on the Isle of Inish Glora where they listened longingly to faraway music. They were soon joined by other birds and this became known as *Loch na-n Ean*, Lake of Birds. Once in a while, people on the mainland would hear the distant song of the swan children and remember their story, but that was the Ireland of long ago. The *Tuatha Dé Danann* had been driven underground and Ireland was now Christian.

A bell sounded on Inish Glora. The swans were recognized by a monk who came to the island to worship. He linked them together with a silver chain and took care of them. Although the origins are unclear, the use of linking swans or geese with gold or silver chains is a motif that appears not only in other Celtic myths (particularly those regarding

Aengus) but also throughout far reaching swan maiden myths.

Finally, a Queen from the south married a King from the north and the terms of the swan-children's exile would soon come to an end. Upon hearing their enchanting music, the Queen requested the King bring the swans to their court. After a struggle, the chains broke, the bell rang and the swans resumed their human form. Alas, the spell was broken.

But the swan-children were no longer children. Their bodies were old and shriveled in human form and they soon died. They were buried, at Fionnula's request, with Conn and Fiacra on each side of her and with Aed against her breast. A stone marked their burial and poignantly their names were carved in *Ogham*, Ireland's first written language. There is some variation in the ending, depending on how the author chooses to emphasize Christianity; some versions conclude with Fionnula's request they become baptized before they die, while others are more vague. The point here is that the religious and cultural landscape of Ireland has changed and the tale captures the struggle between the country's Pagan past and Christian present.

CHAPTER 3

THE ORIGINS OF 'THE CHILDREN OF LIR'

'Folktales belong to all of us, but we do not own them. Like the air we breathe and the earth we stand on, they are ours to take care of for a short while.' - Betsy Hearne ¹⁵

Despite their aversion to the written word, the Celts left us with a mythology comprised of the most antiquated non-classical body of literature in Europe. ¹⁶ Yet so much remains a mystery. Our understanding of the ancient Celts comes primarily from two sources: through the eyes of the Romans and Greeks who recorded their observations of their mysterious and intriguing enemy; and through the masses of artifacts that continue to be uncovered – treasures of which true meaning and intent we may only speculate.

But what do we know of the Celts in their own words? We hear echoes of ancient voices in tales that were passed down by way of the oral tradition, but no concrete evidence as to their true evolution. In terms of physical documentation, our true source is a body of medieval manuscripts that were recorded as early as the sixth century by monastic scholars and represent what we understand as Celtic mythology. Yet, we must put into context that Pagan tales were filtered through the eyes of the Church – and ultimately, through the individual who recorded them. After all, even monks were given to sporadic bouts of self expression, as evident in the marginalia of ancient texts.

It was once presumed that Christian monks captured tales exclusively from oral literature, but some scholars challenge this with the suggestion that the Church was looking to mimic classical mythology. James MacKillop comments on the worldliness of the monks in his book, *Myths and Legends of the Celts*: 'Along with reading their own languages, they

also knew Latin and perhaps Greek, giving them access to worlds far beyond their own.¹⁷ Swans featured strongly in Greek mythology and it is worth noting that many years later, 'Leda and the Swan' was among one of the most revered poems by Ireland's W. B. Yeats' (1865-1939). We may only speculate as to how 'The Children of Lir' and other tales recorded in medieval manuscripts evolved, but it is plausible they were recorded with a Christian mandate and filtered through the mind of the ecclesiastical scholar whose pen was perhaps also guided by heart and heritage.

'The Children of Lir' is part of the Mythological Cycle, and is considered one of the 'Three Sorrows of Storytelling', along with the Deirdre of the Sorrows and *Oidheadh Clainne Tuirean* (Tragic Story of the Children of Tuireann).¹⁸ The tale was one of many works of prose recorded in the twelfth century manuscript *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann* (The Book of Invasions), which chronicled the mythological history of early ancient Ireland and whether or not we can discern its origins, it remains an invaluable resource of Irish literature and folklore. The tales of the Mythological Cycle are lesser known to modern audiences than those of the Ulster and Fenian Cycles, which feature heroes, Cuchulainn and Fionn MacCumhaill, who were, writes Ní Bhroin '...regarded as ideal embodiments of the Celtic spirit and mythologically associated with Ireland's destiny.'¹⁹ However, 'The Children of Lir' persists as one of the most well known tales of Ireland.

It is often presumed the tales of *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann* are very ancient, given the antiquity of the manuscript itself. In *The O'Brien Book of Irish Fairy Tales & Legends*, Irish writer Una Leavelly dates the tale as far back as two thousand years.²⁰ Armstrong, who wrote extensively on the topic of ornithology, states in his 1958 work, *The Folklore of Birds*, he believes the tale arrived in Ireland during the eighth century from Strathclyde and notes an eighth century partial stone slab from Donegal of two swans on a cross²¹ which may

allude to the tale's cultural presence during that period.

MacKillop, dates the tale to the tenth century²² though most modern scholars believe 'The Children of Lir' derives from around the fifteenth century.²³ While the actual manuscript itself dates from the eleventh or twelfth centuries, it was the nature of medieval works to be edited, a process that could weather centuries of revisions. MacKillop writes 'The story from the cycle most popular with today's readers, *Oidheardh Chlainne Lir* (The Tragic Story of the Children of Lir), contains language suggesting it was composed well after great works from other cycles, such as *Tain Bo Cuailnge*; the manuscript dates from about 1500.'

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Historian and archaeologist Miranda Green (1947), who has published several books on Celtic mythology writes, 'There is a great deal of controversy as to the value of the Insular (Irish) sources in contributing to a construction of Celtic mythology. Not only were they compiled in the medieval period and within a Christian context, but the language used often suggests that the stories were produced no earlier than the eighth century. Indeed, some of the descriptions themselves are strongly indicative of medieval Ireland.'²⁵ It appears 'The Children of Lir' has obliged the mandate of the Church and later the Revivalists; the former with a Christian agenda, the latter with the intent of strengthening national unity.

While scholars may differ as to date of origin, it is certain that like all myth, 'The Children of Lir' has evolved with time as part of a cultural process. Ní Bhroin believes it originated in the 'Netherlands or northeast France'²⁶ – the root of many swan-related legends – and hypothesizes that, 'The author of the fifteenth-century text incorporated elements of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* mythology in his tale,²⁷ Green asserts there is, 'incontrovertible

evidence that some of the Irish material contains records of a Celtic tradition that is pre-Christian.’²⁸

Swan maiden tales, widespread and prevalent in many ancient cultures, were probable ancestors of ‘The Children of Lir.’ While the story may have been revised to suit the religious agendas of the Church, it has come to represent the dichotomy of Pagan and Christian Ireland – and also endures as an emblem of the Celtic spirit.

CHAPTER 4

HUMANS AND BIRDS

‘...our tradition of animal stories still carries with it secularized echoes of magic, of shamanism – of a time when spirits moved between human and animal bodies, and when people believed (as some still do) that all living things have souls, and that we must learn from them.’

*- Graeme Gibson, *The Bedside Book of Birds – an Avian Miscellany* ²⁹*

It’s plain to see why our ancestors were fascinated by birds: swans and other waterfowl move fluidly from land to sea to sky; their migratory patterns are mysterious and intriguing; they delight us with their ability to sing. Furthermore, birds pose no great threat to humans and while they do not prey on people, they provide us with nourishment from their flesh and eggs and warmth from their plumage. However, what we most admire about birds is their ability to fly. Indeed, while we can send humans to space in rockets, and fighter jets through complicated aerial acrobatics, birds can effortlessly access places we cannot.

Hence, the ancient and widespread belief that birds embodied the souls of humans came to be – and thus angels have been depicted with wings. Green writes, ‘The ability of birds to leave earth and fly through the heavens makes them a very natural object of cult-significance in many ancient religions. They were important in this context in both Mediterranean and Celtic Europe, and there is evidence that the tradition of sacred birds goes back into prehistory.’ ³⁰

Storytelling reflected the fluidity of nature – for the Celts, their survival, both of the immediate and farthestmost sense, correlated with their relationship to their environment and as Green explains, ‘underpinned all beliefs and religious practices.’ ³¹ The Celtic

‘otherworld’ to which one departs upon leaving the physical body, was thought to have been accessed either under a body of water or by means of an island at sea, making waterfowl an ideal vehicle for the transmigration of soul. Metamorphosis of human to animal form was prevalent in Celtic literary sources, with bulls and birds as the most frequently chosen animal form.³²

Margaret Atwood (1939), world acclaimed author (and incidentally, co-president of Bird Life International’s Rare Bird Club) ponders in her essay, “Of Souls of Birds”, ‘Why do souls so often become birds rather than something else? They can of course take the form of other creatures as well – frogs, bears, foxes, trees, butterflies, and so forth; though such things as slugs and hook-worms are not favoured. Birds and souls, however, seem to have a natural affinity – it must be the airiness, the seeming weightlessness, the wings, the singing.’

³³ Atwood, who spent her childhood exploring the forests of Quebec and Ontario, has drawn significant influence from fairytales, myth and the natural environment, during her prolific career as a poet and novelist.

While Aoife did not turn her victims into frogs, bears, foxes or trees, Étaín, from the Mythological Cycle’s, ‘The Wooing Of Étaín,’ is indeed temporarily turned into a butterfly (though in keeping with this theme, she ultimately transmorphs into a swan). Aoife’s choice of swan as punishment over any other creature is in keeping with an ages old motif of the swan maiden, likely ancestor of ‘The Children of Lir’. Swans, who move fluidly between earth, sea and sky, are the ideal paradigm in which to illustrate the tension between Pagan and Christian doctrines and the significance of metamorphosis in cultural revival.

CHAPTER 5

SWANS AS MUSE

With its dramatic physicality, the swan has come to be known and an emblem of mystery and grace, and the species has thus inspired artists for centuries. Swans have served as muse from at least the Stone age to present time. Although the species of long-necked birds is generally indiscernible, both geese and swans share a continued relevancy in myth and folklore and their presence is strongly represented in the literature and artwork of the ancient Celts.³⁴

MacKillop writes, ‘From the earliest times, even the proto-Celtic Urnfield period, c.1500–800 BC, Celtic art shows a marked preference for water birds of different kinds. Swans and cygnets, together with the non-aquatic ravens, decorate a horse-prod of flesh fork from Iron Age Ireland, found at Dunaverney.’³⁵ and Green adds, ‘...model wagons, often carrying vessels, are drawn by long-necked water-birds.’³⁶ Archaeologists have uncovered artifacts depicting long necked birds from the Bronze Age and Hallstatt period.³⁷ The concept of waterfowl as sacred beings carried on throughout the centuries and manifested in the Irish folkloric tradition in which it was frowned upon to consume the flesh of swans or geese in parts of the country³⁸ – just one of many folkloric references to birds in Ireland.

The native Mute and migratory Berwick and Whooper swans are found in Ireland, though it is likely the latter which are referred to in Irish myth and folklore, often known as ‘wild swans’³⁹ (incidentally, it was the Whooper which was significant in ancient Norse and Russian tales).⁴⁰ The Whooper swans, who breed in Iceland, get their name from the haunting sound of their call⁴¹ and remain a strong presence in Ireland with as many as 9,000 wintering in Ireland each year.⁴²

The swan has touched almost every genre of art from music and dance: Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's (1840-1893) *Swan Lake* (1875-76) to the cheeky *Dying Swan* performance art series (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001) by Peter Callesen (1967). William Shakespeare (1564-1616), known as 'the swan of Avon' and his involvement in the legendary Swan Theatre, also makes numerous references to swans in his work. The Greek myth, 'Leda and the Swan,' has inspired countless works, including iconic paintings by Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564).

In Ireland, coined 'swan abounding land' by a seventeenth century poet,⁴³ swans have had particular resonance with poets, most notably for their symbolic use by W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) who in addition to his version of 'Leda and the Swan,' captured the haunting, mysterious quality of swans in his legendary poem, 'Wild Swans at Coole.' Yeats would play a significant role in the Celtic Revivalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which served to preserve Celtic tales, amongst them, 'The Children of Lir'. Incidentally, Irish writer and activist, Maud Gonne (1866-1953), who also served as Yeats' muse⁴⁴ produced striking graphic illustrations of this very tale.

The many incarnations of 'The Children of Lir' likely began with its forbearers, the Swan Maiden legend, which underwent a centuries long metamorphosis in its own right. In his book, *The Whooper Swan*, author and conservationist, Mark Brazil remarks, 'As peoples and their oral traditions travelled across Asia and Europe, ancient tales of swans, of swan maidens and of swan knights were carried and inter-mingled, some spreading in mythical form far beyond the range of the swans themselves.'⁴⁵

While swan maiden tales were known amongst the Buriats of Siberia,⁴⁶ there are also a

number of parallels between swan legends in Irish and Nordic mythology,⁴⁷ where the Whooper was connected to Freyer, ‘the god of sunshine, rain and of fruitfulness or fertility.’⁴⁸ In Norse mythology, it was believed the Whooper was the species from which all swans originated⁴⁹ and today the Whooper is so intimately bound to the Nordic culture, it is known as the national bird of Finland.⁵⁰

It would be logical, of course, that tales of the northern regions would feature swans, however, the geographical span of the swan legend encompasses a far wider reach to near global proportions as noted by Peter Tate (b. 1941) in his book, *Flights of Fancy*, ‘similar stories can be found in Babylonian and Egyptian mythology, Greece and Rome, Inuit’⁵¹ Regions of the world where Brazil asserts, ‘swans were common and nakedness rare.’⁵²

Instances of the swan maiden motif link Ireland with far away India; from the Mythological Cycle – the very cycle to which ‘The Children of Lir’ belongs also contains ‘The Wooing of Étaín,’ in which Étaín and her lover, Midir, transmigrate into swans as a means of escape. The tale bears resemblance to the ancient Hindu tale of ‘Damayani and Nala’, from *Mahabharata*, an epic from ancient India.⁵³

The expanse and endurance of swan legends in history illustrate how this tale resonated with many cultures. John Shaw, who has devoted decades studying the Gaelic oral traditions of the Cape Breton storytellers, confirms that the lineage of oral tales is, ‘...far more cosmopolitan and ancient than most casual observers – even the well educated – would imagine,’⁵⁴ and cites categories of Gaelic tales as being linked to the Vikings⁵⁵ the ancient Greeks and Asia.⁵⁶

While we cannot know precisely when swan legends migrated to Ireland, the nation is

abound with legends and folklore that relate to swans, indicting their significance in Irish culture. There is a belief originating in County Mayo that swans carried souls of virgins and anyone who bothered them would die. Similar tales that warn against the killing or harming of swans can be found elsewhere in Ireland and in the Hebrides of Scotland.⁵⁷

‘The Children of Lir,’ near rivals in perseverance the fairy tale – a genre which has continued to thrive throughout the evolution of literary culture. In fact, some modern re-tellings of the tale, such as the version included in *The Boyne Valley Book of Irish Legends*, edited by Brenda Maguire, begin with the ever familiar phrase, ‘Once upon a time...’⁵⁸ ‘The Children of Lir’ might well belong to Hans Christian Andersen’s collection with its evil stepmother, enchantment, widowed father and suffering children and equally as important, it’s poetic imagery – as beautiful as it is disturbing – which ignites our imagination and invites us to revisit the tale time and time again.

It should come as no surprise that Andersen, along with the Brothers Grimm, were also inspired by the swan legends of Europe and drew from those stories inspiration for their own tales: The Brother’s Grimm’s ‘Six Swans,’ Matthias Winther’s ‘The Eleven Swans’ (1823) which later inspired Andersen’s ‘Wild Swans,’ (1838) – magical tales about metamorphosis involving swan-child transformation.

An audience unfamiliar with *The Children of Lir* may find it curious as to why the swan-children are linked together by a chains near the end of their exile, as they were finally coming to the end of a nine hundred year enchantment, they were at long last closer to freedom – a state not typically associated with the employment of chains.

In Lady Gregory’s version,⁵⁹ Saint *Mochaomghog* came to *Inis Glauaire*, where the swan

children took refuge on *Loch no-a Ean* (Lake of Birds), in the final days of their exile.

The Saint found a smith to make chains ‘for them’⁶⁰ and linked Fionnula with Aodh and separately, Conn with Fiachra. The language here implies the chains were used as a means of keeping the swans united.

During their second term of exile on the stormy waters of Moyle, the swans were indeed separated, though their final term on *Irrus Domnann* was considerably more placid. It does however, solidify Fionnula’s request that the four siblings remain together, even after death, ‘Bury us here where we found peace. When we were swans, I sheltered my brothers under my wings, Conn and my right side, Fiacra at my left and Aed beside my breast, so let us lie like this in our grave.’⁶¹

Irish writer, Marie Heaney (b. 1940’s) has published anthologies of Irish tales for both adult and children. In her collection, *Over Nine Waves*,⁶² the swan children meet a hermit who tells them he has known of them as legends and that they would soon be freed by the new religion. The hermit makes the chain himself linking the swans together so that ‘they may never be parted’.⁶³ In the children’s version, she offers the same explanation in slightly more simplified language: from, *The Names Upon the Harp*, the saint, ‘...put a silver chain around their necks so that they would never be parted again.’⁶⁴

Marie Buonocore’s version of ‘The Children of Lir’ invents a new twist: a hermit tells the children the chains were left by their late father, Lir, ‘Years ago, he had these magic chains made to protect you.’⁶⁵ Many re-tellings directed toward children, Ita Daly’s version in *Stories from Ireland*, Brenda Maguire’s, *The Boyne Valley Irish Legends* and Una Leavy’s, *The O’Brien Book of Irish fairy Tales & Legends*, omit any reference to chains at all and in doing so, begin to wash away remnants of the tale’s lineage.

The motif of 'swans linked by chains' appears in other Celtic tales of the Mythological Cycle. When Étaín, and her lover, Midir, from 'The Wooing of Étaín' escape her husband's fort by transmigrating into swans, they are "... linked together by chains of gold about their necks..."⁶⁶ In Angus Og and Caer, again, from the Mythological Cycle, Caer's physicality alternates between the body of a swan and that of a woman bi-annually. When Angus discovers her by a lake, she is surrounded by one hundred and fifty swans who are linked to each other by a silver chain – only Caer wears a chain of gold.⁶⁷

Cu Chulainn, hero of the Ulster Cycle, is frequently associated with swans from conception through adulthood. Green explains, 'The supernatural nature of these birds is demonstrated by the fact that they wear chains of gold and silver.'⁶⁸ Indeed, the magical element of these tales contribute to their mystery and intrigue.

CHAPTER 6

METAMORPHOSIS

This is not an illogical idea, if the conception of a person's soul as a distinct entity is conceded; for if it is to fly away to Paradise it must have something in the nature of wings, and a bird or the semblance of a real bird, is inevitably suggested, the wings of a bat being too repulsive – reserved, in fact, for representations of Satan and his emissaries. Angels and genii have always been provided by prophets, romancers and artists with swan like wings, springing from behind their shoulders, reckless of comparative anatomy – otherwise, how could these “heavier-than-air” beings accomplish their travelling?

- Ernest Ingersoll, *Birds in Legend, Fable and Folklore* ⁶⁹

The act of metamorphosis facilitates the dissolution of boundaries and it is from this platform that a realm of equilibrium is born – a stance otherwise highly improbable in the sphere of human/animal relationships. Transmigration of the soul to animal form prevailed in Celtic myth and ritual, an environment which, Green observes, exemplifies ‘the close link between the sacred and the mundane...’ ⁷⁰

To the ancient Celts, every aspect of nature from modest to magnificent was deemed sacred or potentially associated with a God. *Bodbh Dearg* turns Aoife into a storm (‘witch in the sky’) ⁷¹ for all eternity just as easily as Aoife turned the children into swans. The Mythological Cycle, from which the tale belongs, is, ‘more accepting of wizardry and magical transformations,’ writes MacKillop, who notes that tales from this particular cycle are noticeably more open to supernatural elements than other cycles. ⁷²

Modern re-tellings of ‘The Children of Lir’ geared toward an audience who are perhaps unfamiliar with Celtic mythology, still manage to read seamlessly, as if it is entirely natural

for children to be turned into swans. Ní Bhroin notes that it is often more unsettling when the swans resume human ⁷³ form at the end of their exile, as ‘withered’ old people, ‘without blood or flesh’ ⁷⁴ – for it is a reminder of our human mortality as understood in a Christian context. ⁷⁵

The Mythological Cycle is particularly rife with swan to human transformation as evident in the tales of Aenghus Og and Etain and Caer. Green confirms, ‘A strong thread running through the early written tradition is the concept of skin–turning, shape–changing or metamorphosis from human to animal form.’ ⁷⁶ Swans are ideally suited for mythic shapeshifting; not only do they navigate through land, sea and sky but their migratory habits keep them in unabridged motion.

The ancient Celt’s penchant for shapeshifting runs deeper than revelry of inherited stories; it reflects their system of beliefs. The Celts did not have a linear concept of life, but related to the cyclical element of nature. Julius Caesar famously observed ‘The druids attach particular importance to the belief that the soul does not perish but passes after death from one body to another.’ (*trans. Wiseman and Wiseman, 1980*) ⁷⁷ This philosophy is mirrored throughout their mythology and it might be suggested that it reflects thematically in their artwork as well.

The mastery of interwoven zoomorphic design found in Celtic artwork and artifacts appear to support the isochronous nature of their belief system, though Green cautions, ‘Any attempt to trace examples of this shape–shifting tradition in the archaeological record must be speculative. But there are instances of semi–zoomorphic, semi–human divine images...’ ⁷⁸ With their dramatic physicality, the long necks of the swan lend themselves to the unbroken lines of Celtic artwork and seemingly representative of the cyclical, unbroken

line that forms the foundation of their spiritual beliefs.

In Celtic mythology, characters have the ability to cross back and forth between the natural world and the *Tír na n'Og* (Otherworld, 'Land of Youth') a place of happiness, feasting and music, which was believed to be accessed underwater or by an island at sea. This notion of continuity reflects metaphorically the interminable nature of myth – a space where it is, notes Green, '...quite impossible to separate the profane and spirit worlds, or the ritual from the secular aspects of society.'⁷⁹ The Celt's understanding of the cyclical element of nature provides a foundation which lends itself organically to an intimate understanding of the act of metamorphosis.

In his introduction to Gregory's collection, Yeats remarked of the Celt's propensity for shape-shifting in myth that it is, '...portions of universal nature, like the clouds that shape themselves and re-shape themselves momentarily, or like a bird between two boughs or like the gods that have given the apples and the nuts; and yet this but brings them the nearer to us, for we can remake them in our image when we will, and the woods are the more beautiful for the thought.'⁸⁰ Through this fluid, non-linear dance the same characters of Celtic myth appear, disappear and re-appear throughout the tales; they are Yeats' ever-changing clouds, a virtual kaleidoscope of Irish mythology where humans can transmigrate into swans (or bulls or butterflies) and back again. Perhaps it is this quality of motion and a sometimes dizzying complexity of plot – a trait which lends itself so well to the theatrics of oral tradition – that contributes to the endurance of 'The Children of Lir'.

Once Lir's children have transformed into swans, they are no longer permitted to touch land, however, they can swim great bodies of water and soar the skies, seemingly boundless, coasting in a kind of transient existence that mirrors the evolution of the tale itself. For

not only do humans and swans transmigrate, but myth itself continues to metamorphosize and expand.

Atwood writes in her essay, "Of Souls of Birds," "The body of folktale is indeed a body, an organic structure made of its many component parts. One story alone is only a finger or a toe."⁸¹ Nowhere could this be better expressed than in the anecdotal and spontaneous musicality of storytelling; the art of *seanachi*.

CHAPTER 7

METAMORPHOSIS OF 'THE CHILDREN OF LIR'

*And a sound like the beating of flails in the time of corn.
We shall hold our breath while a wonderful thing is born
From the songs that were chanted by bards in the days gone by;
For a wild white swan shall be leaving the lake for the sky,*

- James Henry Cousins (1823-1871), 'The Wings of Love' ⁸²

The Irish are equally revered for their musical gifts as they are for their mastery of literature – two genres which correlate with what some may describe as our earliest musicians: birds. Brian Boyd writes in his work, *On the Origin of Stories*, 'The oldest of arts is likely to be music, since song occurs widely in many different lineages, in birds... and therefore stretches back deep into evolutionary time and since song needs only the body's own resources.' ⁸³ Swans, in fact, are especially noisy. Even the Mute swan is capable of making a significant amount of noise – hissing, grunting and most notably, 'wing music' in flight ⁸⁴ It could be perceived the assumed muteness of the swan, a bird particularly sacred to Ireland, represents metaphorically the voicelessness of the Irish.

Song was used by the bards of Pre-Christian Ireland as a means of memorizing lengthy tales. An esteemed member of the 'learned class,' Bards relayed stories not only as a means of entertainment, but for the purpose of maintaining historical records of important battles and family history. ⁸⁵ A later extension of this role is the *seanachí*, an Irish storyteller who filters tales through his or her own experience and thus engages the audience a kind of reciprocal performance. The tale is consumed by the audience, then eventually re-told and filtered through another storyteller and thus, the legacy continues and evolves.

Perhaps the most poignant element of ‘The Children of Lir’ is the fact that, ‘In the midst of their pain and sorrow, the child-swans can indeed sing and with eloquence, poetry and fine speech.’⁸⁶ When Aoife expresses remorse at turning her step-children to swans, Fionnula pleads with her to reverse the spell but she cannot. Instead, she eases their enchantment by allowing them to keep their voices and thus maintain the power of self expression, ‘...you will speak with your own voices and reason with your own minds and feel with your own noble hearts! Your cry will not be the strange cry of the swans. Instead you will be given a gift of music so sweet that it will comfort all who hear it.’⁸⁷

In the original manuscript, the tale includes ‘many verse passages’⁸⁸ sung by the swan children though modern renditions tend to focus more on narration, limiting the dialogic expression of the swan-children in proportion to that of the narrator. The 1904 re-telling by Irish writer and folklorist, Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932), include a significant amount of dialogue. Gregory’s version, a culmination that extracted elements from both oral tales and the original manuscript⁸⁹ was crafted with the mandate of the Revivalists: Aoife rages, ‘And go away out of my sight now, children of Lir...with your white faces, with your stammering Irish,’⁹⁰ and later, when Fionnula comforts a grieving Lir, ‘...we have our own language, the Irish, and we have the power to sing sweet music.’⁹¹

Gregory, along with other writers, most notably Yeats, was a force behind the Celtic Revival movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during which scholars recorded traditional tales as a means of preserving the Irish vernacular which was in threat of eradication in an increasingly Anglo speaking Ireland. The Revivalists believed that in recalling their shared past it would help unite a nation long troubled by Anglo-Irish tensions. ‘The Children of Lir’, which represents the tension between Ireland’s Pagan past

and Christian present, exemplifies the country's struggle; the swan-children face an abrupt, violent transition from the life they knew and suffered in exile, eventually coming to terms with the fact that their home no longer exists. But while the swan-children do request baptism, in a final, powerful statement, their graves are marked in *Ogham*, the first written language of Ireland.

Gregory's earnest style of writing may provide the reader with the essence of storytelling from the oral tradition – tales which convey a sense of contextual lyricism through use of idiom and sociolect which in turn illicit both a sense of intimacy and authenticity. The result is one of unbridled cosiness; one can almost smell the peats in the stove and feel the energy of a room full of listeners holding their breath as the swan children begin to grasp the consequences of their fate. Although the Revivalists would be criticized for their romantic notion of Celticism – deigned by MacKillop as ‘...modern deflation of romantic puffery...’⁹² through her re-telling, Gregory helps cultivate a sense of Irishness which fuels a modern nostalgia for Ireland's *seanachí* past.

While a brewing nationalism supported tales involving characters who ‘...were regarded as ideal embodiments of the Celtic spirit’⁹³ such as Cuchulain and Fionn MacCumhaill, Ní Bhroin theorizes that although ‘The Children of Lir,’ is one of the most cherished tales, the rest of the Mythological Cycle remains relatively undiscovered by the modern audience.⁹⁴ This particular cycle not only concerns itself with battles between the Divine and Demonic races – clearly obverse to a Christian doctrine – but as the invaders include the Irish themselves, the concept was, ‘...less palatable to nationalists who regarded the Irish as victims of a British conquest’⁹⁵

Incarnated through a nation's Independence, the voices of the swan-children have come to

represent the endurance of Irish spirit. Lady Gregory's vision of uniting a nation through a shared past of mythological literature found its way into the curriculum of the early Irish Republic. It was a calculated move, writes Ní Bhroin, during which the Revivalists, '... mythologized Ireland's past with a view towards shaping its future.'⁹⁶ During the 1920's, after civil war and newfound Independence, the inclusion of Celtic mythology meant 'The Children of Lir' was rediscovered through textbooks in the Irish Catholic school system, a move by the Irish Free State.⁹⁷ It was an approach which impacted the confidence of a battered nation – the repercussions of which are vast and ongoing as evident in the emergence of the Celtic Tiger, a movement of cultural and economic growth in Ireland during the latter part of the twenty-first century.

In his book, *Education and Celtic Myth: National Self-Image and Schoolbooks in 20th Century Ireland*, author Padraic Frehan, elaborates, 'Celtic mythology embodied a unique Irishness without being politically contentious. Celtic myths were thus an ideal genre to include in school textbooks as they could not arouse any conflict or tension between the social and political factions vying for national acceptance, while still imparting a uniqueness in Irish self-image in the school environment and beyond. Those school texts at National School level incorporating Celtic Myths played a role in the development and propagation of an Irish identity in the formative decades of the newly formed State.'⁹⁸ Could the rediscovery of myth have contributed to the cultural metamorphosis of Ireland? Presently, the nation is enjoying a period of peace.

Haunting reminders of a troubled past may serve to inspire a peaceful future.

Staunchly situated in Dublin's Garden of Remembrance is Oisín Kelly's (1915-1981) bronze sculpture, 'The Children of Lir' (1966),⁹⁹ which dramatically depicts in mid-metamorphosis the swan-children resuming their human form. Commissioned by then

Dublin City Architect, Daithi P. Hanly (1917–2003) to honour those who gave their lives for Ireland’s freedom, the work was – in the relatively modern context of 1971 – chided ‘...on the grounds that it was not fitting that a subject from pagan legend, in this case the Children of Lir, should be the basis of a public monument in a Christian country.’¹⁰⁰ A tale that rescued by the Revivalists decades earlier for the purpose of uniting a nation, becomes either Pagan or Christian by convenience. ‘The Children of Lir’ was about to reinvent itself once again with a surge of re-tellings generated by the Celtic Tiger, a move, quips Ní Bhroin, is ‘...characterized by its national orientation rather than its literary innovation.’¹⁰¹

The majority of published re-tellings of ‘The Children of Lir’ emphasize a Christian ending. Ní Bhroin explains, ‘Centuries of hardship inflicted on the children by a usurper struck a chord with post-independent nationalist sentiment, and the Christianized ending suited a state dominated until recent decades largely by Catholic social thinking.’¹⁰² While the vast majority of re-tellings are geared toward children, some are especially diluted. She continues, ‘While alternative versions of all tales are to be welcomed, it is arguable that in diminishing its tragic import, these versions rob the myth of much of its power and mystery.’¹⁰³ Alternately, the overt sexuality, violence and references to the Demonic race that were softened by the likes of Gregory, has found a fitting audience in the modern genre of fantasy fiction for young adults.¹⁰⁴

While ‘The Children of Lir’ likely stemmed from the ancient swan maiden tales of Europe and beyond, it was captured and tamed by the Christian monks who recorded tales in manuscript form. How might the story have evolved without interference from the Church? Until then, stories of the *seanachí* were an experience, a performance, that is never fully recaptured and one which evolved as an organic process. It must be considered,

however, that without the work of the ecclesiastical scholars, many of these tales may have been lost, 'The Children of Lir', included, as the political climate in Ireland changed and literature of the oral tradition began to fade with the Irish vernacular.

'With the suppression of the bardic schools and the exile of the learned classes in the seventeenth century, Irish mythology became largely a folkloric tradition....'¹⁰⁵ The art of *seanachí* is a living, breathing organism, in perpetual metamorphosis, while the written word becomes history the moment it is recorded. Rolleston aptly reflects, 'Folk-lore may sometimes represent degraded mythology, and sometimes mythology in the making.'¹⁰⁶

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

‘“A bird sings not because he has an answer but because he has a song.” And in many ways, you could say that about myths — they do have an answer often, but more importantly, they also have a song.’ – Marie Heaney ¹⁰⁷

As it migrated through time and topography, ‘The Children of Lir’ has evolved to reflect its current cultural habitat and remains one of the most loved Irish myths. The story is likely descended from the swan tales of Continental Europe and possibly India. It ascribes to the concept of bird-soul transmigration legends which belong to many ancient cultures from Europe to India to the Arctic and beyond.

Presumably, it is from these literary predecessors that the tale was transformed in Ireland under the directive of the Church by monastic scholars and emerged as what we’ve come to know as ‘The Children of Lir’ and later, retold in a more abstruse manner by storytellers of the oral tradition. The tale was then re-interpreted by the Revivalists, such as Gregory, of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means of uniting two long embattled cultures: Anglos and Irish. Decades later, an economic boom in Ireland known as The Celtic Tiger, would facilitate a broader, much more globally focused landscape enabling tales such as ‘The Children of Lir’ to be rediscovered and reinterpreted by an expansive new audience. Like the swan children of Lir, the tale itself has become an emblem of metamorphosis.

While ‘The Children of Lir’ has weathered change of both organic and deliberate nature, the essence of the tale remains largely intact; it has managed to maintain its core truth and

is identifiable in its many incarnations. Whether the story has been steered by the political standpoint of the Church, the Revivalists, the marketing tactics of what Ní Bhroin calls, ‘new commercially successful Celticism.’¹⁰⁸ as a result of the Celtic Tiger, ‘The Children of Lir’ has expanded its demographic audience and inspired a fresh, culturally relevant interpretation of its story, which includes the emerging genre of fantasy fiction for young adults.

We may attribute some of the myth’s success to newfound Irish pride; during the peak of Irish emigration in the mid-seventeenth century, Irish descendants reached many corners of the globe and have contributed to the re-discovery of a cultural past and resulting *amour propre* of the Irish. Tourism in the ‘Emerald Isle’ re-ignited a romantic vision of Ireland that appealed to visitors worldwide. Re-tellings of ‘The Children of Lir’ can be found published in a diverse range of languages from Vietnamese to Somali and Albanian.¹⁰⁹ The tale has inspired far more than the ceramic swan figurines that line the shelves of Ireland’s tourist shops; plays, artwork and numerous pieces of music, including an Opera, (*The Children of Lir*, 1997) by award winning Irish composer Patrick Cassidy¹¹⁰ have been widely received.

While the agendas of the Church or Revivalists have at times subjected myth to a manipulation of sorts, a modern understanding of myth may be a decidedly nonpartisan: Frehan writes, ‘I believe these Celtic mythology texts had the capability to impart an element of a national self-image, while concurrently act as a sanctuary in which a unique, neutral, Irish self-past and a contemporary self-image could be connected to and thus simultaneously remain non-contentious in the wider social and political spheres...’

¹¹¹ Today, the ‘The Children of Lir’ reflects a changing cultural landscape with exciting potential for reinvention by upcoming generations.

While more antiquated versions of ‘The Children of Lir’ may have cloaked an agenda, perhaps in a contemporary setting we are simply learning to enjoy the musicality of myth – to be entertained, dazzled, and transported to distant lands of long ago in a fashion that was once, Armstrong notes, ‘accepted almost as unconsciously as the air they breathe, by simple folk’.¹¹² The telling of tales, after all, has both entranced and united us since the beginning of time.

While myth, like fairy tales and folk tales, are often dismissed as an inferior literary genre they have recently been validated by academics and rediscovered by the general population as evident by the resurgence of modern re-tellings; multiple variations of print re-tellings of ‘The Children of Lir’ exist today that did not thirty years ago. As the world advances in dizzying speed, we may feel a nostalgia for community: ‘In a time of social change, myth is a force for cultural stabilization, forming a bridge between the past and the present and contributing to a sense of identity that is simultaneously personal and social.’¹¹³ In a broad sense, however, myth is a shared part of every culture and therefore inclusive and it is clear Irish myth invites a diverse readership. Armstrong concludes that ‘...those born outside tradition may yet find a spiritual home within it.’¹¹⁴

Certainly, the powerful imagery of ‘The Children of Lir’ has played a role in tale’s longevity, for the swan has been muse to artists since people have been drawing on cave walls. The Ancient Greeks, Tchaikovsky, Michelangelo and countless poets, most notably Yeats, have been greatly inspired by the beauty and intrigue of the swan. In ‘The Children of Lir’, the enchantment and subsequent exile of the young children give the tale, what Ní Bhroin calls, ‘...a poignant, haunting quality, which accounts for its continued prevalence today.’

¹¹⁵ After all, one cannot easily shake the image of small children having been turned

into swans and then later resuming human form as shriveled up ancients, so gruesome in appearance they frightened away the monk in Scott's version, *The Song of the Children of Lir*.¹¹⁶

Like the fairy tale, 'The Children of Lir' adapts with ease to a modern context while evoking a sense of the past; it carries with it layers of history that mirrors our own cultural evolution. Through these tales, we are permitted to explore our innermost fantasies and to magnify our darkest thoughts. As Atwood suggests, 'These stories have survived as stories, over so many centuries and in so many variations, because they do make such an appeal to the inner life – you could say "the dreaming self" and not be too far wrong, because they are the stuff both of nightmare and of magical thinking.'¹¹⁷

'The Children of Lir', as it has evolved, has collected a kind of literary patina. Yeats writes in his introduction to Lady's Gregory's collection, 'Gaelic speaking Ireland, because its art has been made, not by the artist choosing his material from wherever he has a mind to, but by adding a little to something which it has taken generations to invent...'¹¹⁸ In essence, 'The Children of Lir' is in fact a centuries long, ongoing collaboration of generations past, present and future.

Still, how can we truly understand the endurance of an ages old tale about talking birds? We may never fully understand why some stories resonate with us and perhaps we needn't know; the mystery of an ancient tales origins, just as it's ability to thrive, is part of the magic that makes it so appealing. When it comes to well loved tales, it is not merely a matter of destination but about our eagerness to enjoy the journey. After all, how else can we explain why stories we've heard time and time again can so easily keep us on the edge of our seats or move us to tears? It may be enough to simply enjoy the song.

Possibly, our connection to ‘The Children of Lir’ extends deeper into our shared past, to a time when we were still awed by the mysteries of nature and the stories created to explain them. Our need to express ourselves, to listen to others and to share is an innate and essential part of our being; it’s a nod the past – not to deities, druids or demons, but to a time when we connected so intimately to the natural world that we listened not only to the rhythms of nature, but to our own clear and ever evolving consciousness.

As expressed with succinct eloquence by Graeme Gibson, ‘In folk tales and parables, the bird is our ventriloquist’s dummy: the voice we hear is our own.’¹¹⁹

ENDNOTES

1. Ciarán Carson, *Fishing for Amber* (Granta Books, 1999), 1.
2. T.W. Rolleston, *Celtic Myths and Legends* (1911, *Myths & Legends of the Celtic Race*; reprint, Toronto: General Publishing Company, Ltd., 1990), 418.
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