

Celtic Life & Heritage
Foundation

presents

Irish Legends
An Introduction

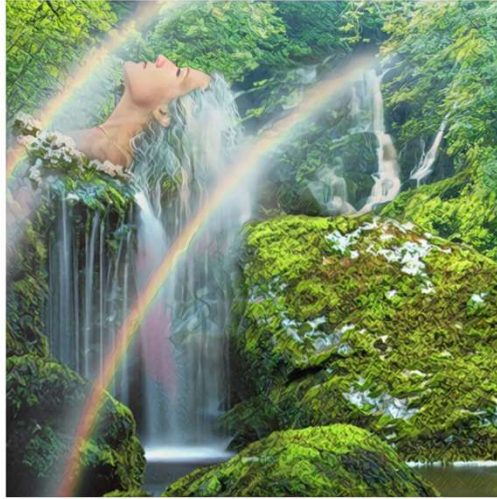
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Beginning of Time

Long ago, when gods and goddesses roamed the earth, the Goddess Danu was Ireland's earth Goddess...

It is said that the Tuatha de Danann were human descendants of the Goddess.

They came to Ireland over 4000 years ago.



pron. Thoo a de Du-non

Pronounced: "Thoo a de Du-non"

Who is the Goddess Danu?

The Goddess Danu is one of the most ancient of Celtic gods and considered a mother goddess – meaning she took care of other gods. Rivers are associated with her representing fertility and abundance. She taught the Tuatha de Danan people and imparted magic to them, strengthening them for their return to Ireland.

<http://bardmythologies.com/danu/>

<http://emeraldisle.ie/chronicle>

<http://www.timelessmyths.com/celtic/invasions.html#DanannArrival>

Tuatha de Dana come to Ireland



The Tuatha de Danan came to Ireland aboard ships. Once they arrived they burned their ships creating great clouds of smoke. They now had no way to return to their homelands. They had to be successful in this new place.

Pron. "Thoo a de Du-non"

Where did they come from?

Although in the past, the arrival and battles of Tuatha de Danann have been relegated as pure myth, modern science is beginning to piece together evidence of their actual existence and possibly where they came from: Egypt. See ancient-origins resource below.

<http://www.timelessmyths.com/celtic/invasions.html#DanannArrival>

<https://www.ancient-origins.net/opinion-guest-authors/thoth-s-storm-new-evidence-ancient-egyptians-ireland-005187>

Tuatha de Danan come to Ireland

The indigenous Irish, the Firbolg, only saw the great clouds of smoke and people coming through them. They thought them to be gods and goddesses

The Tuatha de Danan defeated the Firbolg and took control of Ireland. They allowed the Firbolg to rule in the province of Connaught. Next were the Fomorians.



How did they defeat them?

When The Tuatha de Dannan arrived they met the Firbolg, exchanged weapons as a sign of friendship. The Tuatha de Danan offered the Firbolg no fighting if they split the island in half for each to rule over. The Firbolg declined. They met on the plains of Moytura (no one knows exactly where this is in modern day Ireland) and after the first day of fighting the Firbolg suffered heavy losses. The Tuatha de Danan again asked if the Firbolg would split the island. They again declined. The Tuatha de Dannan ended up defeating the Firbolg. They still gave the Firbolg one province to rule: Connaught (Mid-west side of the island).

Why did they defeat them?

The Tuatha de Danan had advanced technology of weapons and skill.

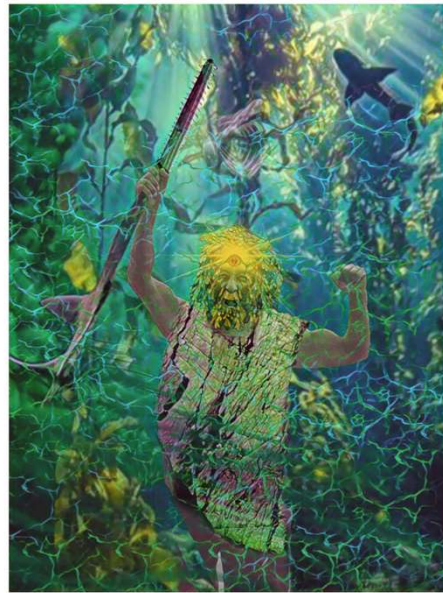
<http://bardmythologies.com/the-book-of-invasions-part-4-the-first-battle-of-moy-tura/>

Art: *The Tuatha Dé Danann as depicted in John Duncan's "Riders of the Sidhe" (1911)*
public domain

Balor

Balor, king of the Fomorians and of the sea, had a poisonous eye that would kill anything it saw.

Balor was given a prophecy that he would die by his grandson's hand.



How did he get that eye?

When he was a child, Balor spied on his father's druids as they were creating a spell of death. The fumes entered one of his eyes which gave his eye the power of death
<http://bardmythologies.com/balor/>

The Evil Eye:

<https://www.libraryireland.com/SocialHistoryAncientIreland/II-V-18.php>

If Balor knew he would die by his grandson's hand, what did he do about it?

Balor locked up his daughter in a tower on Tory Island. But then Balor stole a magical cow owned by Cian, a Tuatha de Danan, and Cian came to get his cow finding Balor's daughter. They fell in love and had a son named Lugh. Balor took the child and threw him into the ocean thinking him dead, but a druid scooped him up and took Lugh to be raised by his father and Lugh became a great warrior of the Tuatha de Danan.
<http://bardmythologies.com/cian-and-eithlinn/>

<http://www.timelessmyths.com/celtic/invasions.html#Fomorians>

The Battle

During a battle with the Fomorian's, the Tuatha de Danan's had a champion in Lugh, who was Balor's grandson.

Using a slingshot Lugh struck Balor's eye so hard the eye went through his head and shown on Balor's army behind him. All were turned to stone and Balor was killed as well. The Tuatha de Danan won the battle. Legend has it, the stones found on the battlefield are the remains of the Fomorians.



Where did the battle take place?

In modern day Moytura, Co Sligo – the west part of Ireland in Connaught. Legend states the big boulders found in that area are the ancient men Balor looked at and turned to stone.

<http://bardmythologies.com/the-book-of-invasions-part-5-the-second-battle-of-moy-tura/>
<http://>

<http://www.askaboutireland.ie/reading-room/history-heritage/folklore-of-ireland/folklore-in-ireland/traditional-storytelling/the-mythological-cycle/the-second-battle-of-moty//www.timelessmyths.com/celtic/invasions.html#SecondBattle>

Children of Lir

Around the 5th Century BC, a Tuatha de Danan nobleman, Lir, had four children. Their mother died and his new wife became jealous of the love he lavished on them.



One day, on the shores of Lough Derravaragh, she cursed the children turning them into swans for 900 years.

Did their Dad find out?

Yes. Lir went to the lake and found the swans. They could still speak and the children told their father what happened.

What happened to their Step-mother?

Some stories say the king (the step-mother's father) found out and turned her into a demon of the air. Sometimes you can still hear her shrieks on the wind.

Photo: Present day on the shore of Lough (Lake) Derravaragh.

<http://bardmythologies.com/the-children-of-lir/>

Curse Details

For the first 300 years the swans lived at Lough Derravaragh (1). The next 300 hundred years in the Straights of Moyle (2), and the last 300 years on the Isle of Inish Glora (3).

The curse would only be lifted when a king's daughter from the south and king's son from the north married.

Swans were forbidden to be killed in all of Ireland.



Swans are protected in Ireland, along with most other birds. It is illegal to kill them.

<http://bardmythologies.com/the-children-of-lir/>

Milesians

While the children were at Lake Derravaragh, the Milesians arrived on the coast of Ireland having sailed from Spain.

They had difficulty finding Ireland among the magical mists. Then the Tuatha de Danan created a hurricane to disperse and kill their fleet.

But the Milesians found a way to land and met the Tuatha de Danan on several battlefields. The final battle was held in modern day Teltown. The Milesians won.



Who were the Milesians? Where did they come from?

They were a travelling people, thought to be from Asia, and travelling to a land promised to their ancestor Gadelius; to be found by tracking the setting sun. The third generation from Gadelius began the trek and travelled through southern Europe up through Spain and on to Ireland.

Why isn't Teltown on a map?

Teltown is not an actual town but a townland and where the ancient round fort, Rathdhu, is today. Teltown was known for its festival, celebration of Lughasa – the harvest festival. This festival and celebration had been carried on for a couple thousand years until the clergy shut it down in the 1800's for being too wild.

Library Ireland – story of Milesians and beyond through early Christian era

<https://www.libraryireland.com/Atlas/I-Milesians.php>

Dating of Milesians in Ireland: <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/ebooklet/the-throne-of-britain/appendix-6-dating-the-milesian-arrival-in-Ireland>

Festival: <https://voicesfromthedawn.com/teltown/>

<http://www.timelessmyths.com/celtic/invasions.html#MilesianComing>

<http://bardmythologies.com/the-book-of-invasions-part-6-the-sons-of-mil/>

Origin of the Faery People

Legend has it, the defeated Tuatha de Danan were given a choice: be exiled or stay but live and rule underground.

The Tuatha de Danan decided to stay. Using their magic, they became invisible and are the faery people we know of today.



What are the faerys?

Irish faerys are different than those of America. Faerys come in many different forms and are not good nor evil. They have choice just like humans do and may make good or bad choices. (L) Winged faerys, popularized by Disney, are not benign or good in Ireland. They are possessive of their homes and will put curses or deal harm to humans that disturb them; best leave them be. (M) The púca is an example of a faery that shapeshifts and wrecks havoc on the harvest and destroys fields, luring away humans to carry to them off. They may or may not return. (R) Leprechauns are a type of faery, but not like in American lore. Leprechauns are actually cobblers and tend to wear red rather than green coats.

<http://bardmythologies.com/the-book-of-invasions-part-6-the-sons-of-mil/>

<https://www.libraryireland.com/SocialHistoryAncientIreland/II-V-6.php>

Next 300 years

It was time for the Children of Lir to move on to the Straits of Moyle in the Northern most part of Ireland for their next 300 years. The waters were cold and harsh. The swans were miserable.



The Straits of Moyle are the narrowest sea passage between the island of Ireland and Scotland. At only twelve miles across land can be seen from both sides, if the sky is clear.

<http://bardmythologies.com/the-children-of-lir/>

Children of Lir photo: © Yvonne Wakefiled; used by permission via Creative Commons License; <http://www.geograph.ie/photo/2826353>

Cu Chulainn



Around the time the calendar changed from BC to AD, the swans were halfway through their time in the Straits of Moyle.

A new hero was born in the Ulster region of Ireland. ▲

His name was Setanta. His childhood dream was to become a warrior for the king of Ulster.



Who was Setanta?

Setanta was the nephew of the king through his mother, Dechtire. Some accounts say his father was actually the god Lugh, although others state his father was a warrior for the king.

By Island_of_Ireland_location_map.svg: Rannpháirtí anaithnidderivative work: NikNaks (Island_of_Ireland_location_map.svg) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Cu Chulainn



As a young child, Setanta set out for Emain Macha to join the training school for warriors.

On the way to a dinner with the king and a smith named Culainn, Setanta killed a guard dog in self defense.

Setanta pledged he would take the place of the wolfhound until a puppy could be trained.

Setanta became known as hound of Culainn or Cú Chulainn .
(pron. Cu Cullen)

What is Emain Macha?

Warrior sons could join the Boys Troop to learn war art, play games teaching them to be warriors. The boys had to be sponsored by a warrior other than their father. Emain Macha was the place where they met. Today Emain Macha is modern day Navan Fort in Armagh, County Armagh, Northern Ireland.

Why did he kill the dog?

In those times, Dogs were set to guard homes from thieves and other tribes. The smith forgot Setanta was coming for dinner and so set his dog out to guard. The wolfhound was trained to guard the home and attack intruders. It thought Setanta was in intruder.

Picture from: Rolleston, Thomas W. p 232 of "Myths and legends; the Celtic race" Boston: Nickerson, 1910; coloration added later

<http://bardmythologies.com/setanta-joins-the-boys-troop/>

<http://bardmythologies.com/how-cuchulainn-got-his-name/>

Cú Chulainn



Cú Chulainn became a mighty warrior and hero with many legends.

When Cú Chulainn was just seventeen, he defended the armies of Ulster from Queen Mebd (*pron* Mave).

How did he become such a mighty hero?

Besides his father most likely being a god, Cu Chulainn sought out Scathach, a warrior queen who lived in Scotland and trained young warriors. It was very difficult to find her on her island and once he did Cu Chulainn threatened her at sword point to persuade her to train him. It took seven years to complete the training.

<http://bardmythologies.com/scathach/>

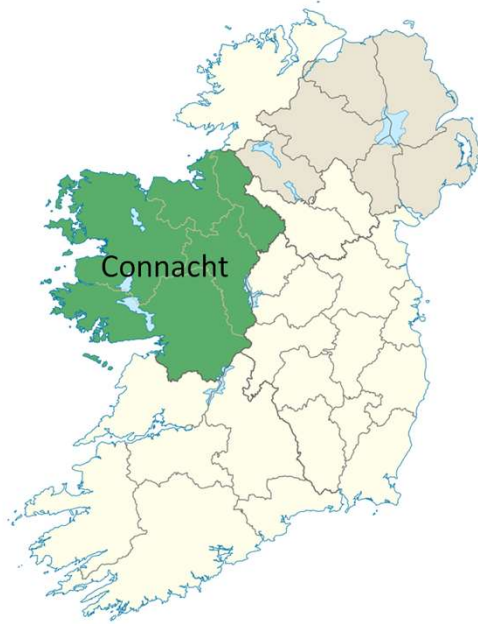
Why is his spear so bright?

He was given his legendary spear, Gae Bolga, by Scathach, his trainer. The spear separated into barbs when entering into human flesh and its first strike was always fatal. It increased in heat every time it was used so had to be kept in cool water when not being used.

<http://www.luminarium.org/mythology/ireland/gaebulga.htm>

<http://www.ancientpages.com/2017/06/06/cuchulainn-irish-mythical-hero-cruel-magical-spear-gae-bolg/>

Queen Mebd



The high king of Ireland gave his daughter the region of Connacht to rule.

She became Queen Mebd of Connacht, known as a passionate and mighty warrior queen.

Queen Mebd



In Ireland, whoever had the most wealth was considered more powerful in a marriage.

Queen Mebd discovered she was one prize bull lower in wealth than her husband.

So she set out to get the Brown Bull of Culley in order to be equal.

Why was a bull considered wealth?

In ancient Ireland they did not use coin, but instead used cattle as currency. A person, tribe, or king was given status and prestige based on the head of cattle they owned. Cattle raids were common and kings were expected to lead their people on a cattle raid when inaugurated.

<http://www.irelandsmysandlegends.com/the-cattle-raid-of-cooley>

<https://www.libraryireland.com/SocialHistoryAncientIreland/III-XIX-3.php>

<https://www.enjoy-irish-culture.com/ancient-ireland-celts-and-cattle.html>

Queen Mebd

Queen Mebd marched her armies up and over into Ulster. The Ulster warriors all came under a strange sickness. The only one standing when Queen Mebd's warriors arrived at the River Dee was Cú Chulainn.

It was decided the fight for the Bull would be in single combat. A warrior from Ulster and a warrior from Connaught.



What was the strange sickness?

Macha was an Irish war goddess. She was forced to race against the fastest horse, even though she was heavily pregnant. She asked for delay until after she gave birth but the king denied her request. She won but at the end of race she gave birth to twins, many versions say she died. Before she died she cursed the men of Ulster that in their greatest need they would be overcome with weakness like that of childbirth.

<http://bardmythologies.com/macha/>

<http://bardmythologies.com/ferdia-at-the-ford/>

Queen Mebd

Thousands of warriors were sent one at a time to fight Cú Chulainn, and all were killed. Finally a warrior was sent that was an equal for Cú Chulainn. In modern day Ardee, Cú Chulainn fought for Ulster and his beloved foster brother Ferdia fought for Connacht.

By day they warred, by night they healed and comforted each other by the River Dee.



Why did they heal each other?

They were raised together and were best friends and foster brothers. But they each had sworn fealty to their king/queen.

Photo: Taken on the bank of the River Dee, the battle took place on the other side of the river behind the trees. Today, there are houses and pastures where the battle was.

<http://bardmythologies.com/ferdia-at-the-ford/>

Queen Mebd

Finally, on the fourth day of the battle, Cú Chulainn went into a supernatural rage and killed Ferdia, winning the battle for Ulster.

Today a sculpture in Ardee marks the battle and Cú Chulainn's sorrow for killing his foster brother.



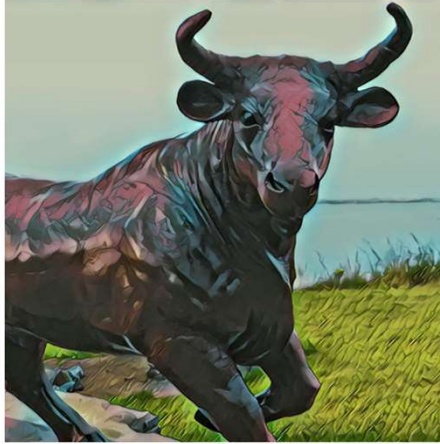
Why did he go into a rage?

When he became very angry a warp spasm would come upon him, called *ríastrad*. It turned him into a monster, distorting his body and mind and he became a killing machine, hardly aware of what he was doing.

Photo: The statue is situated by the bridge that crosses the River Dee, and just beyond the battle ground.

<https://stairnaheireann.net/2018/03/30/the-legend-of-cu-chulainn-2/>

Queen Mebd



Even though she lost the battle, Queen Mebd stole the Brown Bull of Cooley and went back to Connacht.

Queen Mebd's brown bull and her husband's white bull fought. The brown Bull killed the white but later died of his wounds. The king and queen were now exactly equal in wealth and power.

Discussion:

At what cost for equality between the king and queen?

Thousands of men died over the course of this battle. At what point is it not worth it? When is it worth it?

<http://www.irelandsmysandlegends.com/the-bull-fight>

Children of Lir – Inish Glora



About a hundred years later in mid 2nd century AD, the children of Lir travelled to Inish Glora, to live out the last 300 years of their curse.



The islands looks pretty bare. What is there now?

Inish Glora is an island off the west coast of Ireland. Although once inhabited, Inish Glora is now left for the birds and sheep and the occasional day tripper. St. Brendan, the Navigator, founded a church there in the 5th century which remains are still there to this day.

Inish – means Island

<http://irishislands.info/glora.html>

Photo of Inishglora:

By Comhar - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17542005>

Fionn mac Cumhaill

Around this same time another Irish Legend was a young boy, Fionn mac Cumhaill (*pron.* Finn McCool).

He was born in the province of Leinster. Fionn was secretly raised by a woman warrior and a woman druid in modern day Slieve Bloom mountains.



Why was Fionn mac Cumhaill raised in secret?

He had to be raised in secret because the men who killed his father would kill him as well.

Background:

Fionn's father, named Cumhaill, was the leader of the ancient Fianna – a band of mercenary warriors. His father kidnapped Muirne (Fionn's mother) because her father refused them permission to marry. Cumhaill was killed by the sons of Morna (led by Goll Mac Morna), but Muirne was not allowed to go home to her father because she was pregnant. She gave birth and left her son (then called Deimne) in secret with Bodhmall (druid – teaching him wisdom and strength) and with Liath (teaching him the way of the warrior).

<http://thewildgeese.irish/profiles/blogs/the-legend-fionn-mac-cunhaill>

Fionn mac Cumhaill

As he grew, Fionn studied under a druid and poet Finn Eces. After many years, the druid caught the Salmon of Knowledge in the Boyne river. Fionn was cooking it for his master.

It slipped while over the fire and Fionn burned his thumb while saving it. Fionn sucked his thumb to ease the pain and received all the knowledge of the world.



How did the Salmon have all the Knowledge? Why is he eating a hazelnut?

The salmon's name was Fintan and he swam up the Boyne River from the sea. He found a quiet pool to regain his strength which was surrounded by nine hazel trees. Each tree had nine nuts which were filled with all the knowledge of the world. When the nuts fell into the pool, Fintan ate all the nuts and received the knowledge.

Who was Fintan?

The first people in Ireland, according to Irish Legend, were Bith the son of Noah and his daughter Cesair with her husband Fintan mac Bochra. along with the ship captain and 50 virgins. The captain left to explore, Bith died, and Fintan was the only male with 50 virgins and his wife. It was too much for him so he left, his wife Cesair died from grief. Not long after, the great flood occurred killing all people but Noah and his arc. But God felt bad for Fintan and turned him into a Salmon so he could survive the flood.

<https://www.yourirish.com/folklore/salmon-of-wisdom>

Fionn mac Cumhaill

With all the knowledge of the world, Fionn mac Cumhail became a great warrior and leader.

One of his most famous legends is the creation of Giant's Causeway.



Why is his hair white when his beard is dark?

He was cursed by a woman to lose all his youth and strength. His men brought him to the master of the Faery where Fionn was given a golden cup and told to drink from it. Once Fionn drank, all his youth and strength returned but his hair stayed white/grey for the rest of his days.

<http://www.she-eire.com/magic&mythology/Myths/FinnMacCool/Greyhaired/Page1.htm>

Fionn mac Cumhaill

Fionn had heard of a Scottish giant named Benandonner. The two decided to fight to see who was stronger.



So Fionn created a stone causeway between Ireland and Scotland forming a bridge between the two Islands.

How was the causeway actually created?

Formed between 50 to 60 million years ago when lava oozed from fissures in the earth. The pressure in between the columns and the cooling and contracting created about 40,000 basalt columns. Shapes vary from 5-7 sides.

How big are they?

Tops of columns are between 15-20 inches in diameter

Height of columns going down to the ocean reach up to 39 feet; a the cliffs can be as high as 82 feet.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/researchers-reveal-how-giants-causeway-was-formed-180968806>

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Giants-Causeway>

<https://www.causewaycoastalroute.com/finn-maccool.html>

Fionn mac Cumhaill



Benandonner came willingly to fight Fionn and was huge. So huge in fact that Fionn became concerned he would die.

Fionn's wife dressed him up as a baby. She tricked the Scottish giant into thinking Fionn was their baby son.

More details to the story:

Benandonner crossed the causeway and came looking for Fionn at his house. When he arrived Fionn's wife Oonagh let him know that Fionn was out but welcomed him to come in and have some tea until Fionn returned. She gave him cake with rocks in it, and the "baby" (who was actually Fionn in disguise) ate cake as well but with no rocks in it to trick the Scottish giant. Benandonner chipped his teeth but noticed the baby ate the "rock" cake with no problem. Benandonner looked more closely at "baby" Fionn and was amazed at how very large their baby was. He was convinced that Fionn must be truly huge and became afraid, running back to Scotland tearing up the causeway as he went.

Fionn mac Cumhaill

Seeing how large and strong the “baby” of Fionn was, the Scottish giant ran away, back across the causeway. He ripped it up as he ran so Fionn could not cross it and attack him.



Today, only a small part of the causeway remains, a little bit in Ireland and a little bit in Scotland.

Upper right photo: Staffa Island, Scotland. Known as Fingals Cave. It was originally called “Uamh-Binn” (which means Cave of Melody) by the Celts but was renamed Fingal’s Cave by Joseph Banks, a naturalist who read the legend in poem. Fingal is the Scottish form of Fionn mac Cumhaill

Lower Left: Giant’s Causeway looking out towards the sea.

<https://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/fingal-s-cave-spectacular-sea-cave-irish-legends-and-modern-inspiration-005748>

Photo: Unknown author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Children of Lir

Near the end of the 5th Century AD
the Children of Lir had been cursed
for their allotted 900 years.

They flew to Allihies, a little town
by sea in the province of Munster.



Allihies photo:

El Gringo at en.wikipedia [Public domain], from Wikimedia Commons

Map: By Island_of_Ireland_location_map.svg: Rannpháirtí anaithnid derivative work:
NikNaks (Island_of_Ireland_location_map.svg) [CC BY-SA 3.0
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Children of Lir

One day, messengers came looking for the swans. The king of Munster's son was marrying the King of Ulster's daughter, and she wanted swans for her betrothal.

When the messengers tried to take the swans, the curse had been lifted by the marriage and they transformed back into children.



Discussion:

When the legend was first told, Christianity had not yet made it to Ireland. The ending of the curse was edited by Christian monks and a different ending was created.

Instead of the curse being lifted by a marriage, the curse would be lifted when a bell tolled, announcing a new god in Ireland. A monk named Malachi was added to the story to bless and baptize them so they could go to heaven.

**Why would the monks add to the story? What would be the purpose?
Could this have happened to other stories? Other history? Why?**

Children's Curse is Lifted



Once changed, they aged rapidly and died. Their single gravestone is marked to this day in the seaside town of Allihies, County Cork.

What is under the gravestone?

It has never been excavated... so no one knows.

Children of Lir photo: Picture By Tonylogin [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

The End



These are just some of the many legends in Ireland.

When visiting, be on the lookout for signs and sculptures of legends throughout the land.

Statue in Ballycastle, northern part of Ireland, with Fair Head in the distance; County Antrim

Looking out on the Eastern most part of the Straights of Moyle

Children of Lir photo: © Copyright Yvonne Wakefield and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence; <https://www.geograph.ie/more.php?id=2826353>