

The Ulster Exiles and Thematic Symmetry in Recension I of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*

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In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, when Ailill and Medb of Connacht assemble a mighty army to invade Ulster in order to capture Donn Cúailnge, they might seem assured of success. King Conchobor of Ulster and his warriors are afflicted by *cess*, a debility that prevents them from defending their province; and in the invading army, the Connachta are joined by a division of Ulster exiles, as well as divisions from Munster and Leinster. The Ulster exiles enjoy a privileged position in the army, and play a pivotal part in the unfolding of the plot, and in its resolution.

TBC I opens with some introductory matter, dubbed *titulrad* (l. 134); this is followed by *In Scél iar n-Urd* ‘The Story in Due Order’, beginning with an account of the first day of the march of the army from Crúachain into Ulster, which takes them to Cúil Silinne.¹ When Ailill’s tent has been pitched there, he and Medb naturally have pride of place within it. Four other men are named as being present, all of them exiles from Ulster: Fergus mac Róich is at Ailill’s side; next comes Cormac Conn Longas, Conchobor’s son; then Conall Cernach; and finally Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe, the son of Conchobor’s daughter (*TBC* I, ll. 141-4; p. 129).² The eminence accorded the exiles here³ is one a number of manifestations of their predominance in the early episodes of the *Táin*. As the invasion takes its course, Fergus has a crucial part to play, but it is not until *In Cath Mór* ‘the Great Battle’, which brings the raid to its ignominious end, that Cormac Conn Longas and Conall Cernach come into their own, acting effectively to facilitate the outcome of the conflict. An examination of the role of the Ulster exiles in the tale, focusing especially on the early episodes and on the Great Battle, reveals a degree of thematic symmetry that is all the more remarkable when we consider that *TBC* I has been characterized as ‘nothing more than a mass of workshop fragments, not yet assimilated or amalgamated’ (O’Rahilly 1976, xviii).

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- 1 References to *TBC* I and *TBC* II are to O’Rahilly 1976 and 1967, respectively. Text is cited by line, translation by page.
 - 2 Conall Cernach is not mentioned in the somewhat different account in *TBC* II, ll. 299-302; p. 146.
 - 3 In *TBC* II (ll. 304-05; p. 146), Ailill is said to have situated the Ulstermen at his right hand *combo fhaicsiti in cocur* _γ in *comrad* _γ na *hairigthe bid* _γ lenna *dóib-sium* ‘so that the confidential talk and discourse and the choicest portions of food and drink might be nearer to them’.

Scél and Remscél

It has been said of the *Iliad* that ‘the opening books of the poem closely resemble in their function the prologue of a tragedy, explaining the situation and introducing the characters’ (Carpenter 1946, 83). For the *Táin*, something of this function is performed in the *remscéla* ‘fore-tales, prefatory tales’, which elucidate important aspects of the situation, and introduce many of the characters. With regard to the Ulster exiles, the most important *remscél* is *Longes mac n-Uislen* ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu’ (Hull 1949), which accounts for the exiles’ presence among the invaders of their home province.

The first item in the *titulrad* of *TBC I* is a brief account of the muster by Ailill and Medb: the reader is not at this point told, but is evidently expected to know, their purpose.⁴ The last item in the *titulrad* is the itinerary of the raiders on their journey from Crúachain, which ends: *A Findabair Chúailngi is ass fodáilte in tslóig Hérend fón cóiced do chuingid in tairb* ‘From Findabair in Cúailnge the armies of the Ireland spread out over the province in quest of the Bull’ (*TBC I*, ll. 131-2; p. 128.).

The opening lines of *TBC I* are as follows:

*Tarcomlád slóiged mór la Connachtu .i. la hAilill , la Meidb, ,hetha húaídib
cossna trí chóiced aili. Ocus foíte techta ó Ailill co secht macu Mágach .i. co
hAilill, co Anlúan, co Moccorb, co Cet, co Én , Bascall , Dóche, tricha cét la
cach n-áe, , co Cormac Cond Longas mac Conchobair cona thríb cetaib boi for
condmiud la Connachta. Tecait uile iarum co mbátar hi Crúachnaib Aí.*

A great army was mustered by the Connachtmen, that is, by Ailill and Medb, and word went from them to the other three provinces. And Ailill sent messengers to the seven sons of Mágu: Ailill, Anlúan, Moccorb, Cet, Én, Bascall and Dóche, each with his fighting force of three thousand, and also to Cormac Conn Longas the son of Conchobor, who was billeted with his three hundred men in Connacht. They all came on then until they reached Crúachain Aí (*TBC I*, ll. 2-8: p.125).

Noteworthy in that passage is the foregrounding of Conchobor’s son, Cormac. The summons goes to ‘the other three provinces’, to seven named Connacht warriors and to Cormac, whose epithet Conn Longas means ‘leader of the (bands of) exiles’, and should perhaps be given in translation here, to alert the reader to the leadership role attributed to Cormac.⁵

The pre-eminence that Cormac is accorded is amplified in what immediately follows:

4 *TBC II* has of course an introduction that explains why Donn Cúailnge is sought.

5 Kinsella deftly accomplished by this by giving the epithet in both original and translation: ‘Cormac Conlongas, the leader of the Ulster exiles’ (1970, 58).

Trí luirg didiu do Chormac oc tochim do Chrúachnaib.

In cétna lorg broitt brecca i forcipul co filliud impu. Forti berrtha foraib. Léini fo thairinniuth cota nglún, 7 fotalscéith foraib 7 manais lethanglas for crund midshing i lláim cech fir.

In lorg tánaisi broitt dubglasa impu-side, lénti co ndercintliud co horcnib síis, 7 monga tara cenna síar, 7 lubne gela foraib 7 slega cóicirinne inna lámaib.

‘Ní hé Cormac beus,’ or Medb.

Tic an tres lorg dano. Broitt chorra impu 7 lénte culpatacha fo derggintslaid co traigthe, 7 berrthai slechtai co guaille, 7 cromscéith co fáebraib condúala impu 7 turre righthige i lláim cach fir.

‘Is é Cormac inso hifechtsa,’ ol Medb.

Doecmalta dano iarum ceithre cóiced Hérend co mbátar hi Crúachnaib Aii.

Now Cormac’s men were in three companies as they marched to Crúachain.

The first band wore vari-coloured cloaks wrapped around them. Their hair was shorn. They had tunics falling to the knee. They carried long shields, and each man bore in his hand a broad, bright spear on a slender shaft.

The second band wore dark-grey cloaks and red-embroidered tunics reaching down to their calves. Their long hair hung down behind. They carried white shields, and in their hands they bore five-pronged spears.

‘It is not Cormac as yet,’ said Medb.

Then came the third band. They wore purple cloaks and hooded red-embroidered tunics reaching to their feet. Their trimmed hair fell down to their shoulders. They bore curved shields with scalloped rims, and each man carried a spear as great as the pillar of a palace in his hand.

‘This is Cormac now,’ said Medb.

So then the four provinces of Ireland were gathered together in Crúachain Aí (*TBC I*, ll. 9-22; p. 125).

That elaborate account, in ascending order of magnificence, of the arrival of Cormac’s three groups of warriors is apt to arouse the expectation that Cormac will play a vital part in the quest for the bull: in the narrative as we have it, however, he does nothing of the sort. Cecile O’Rahilly observes that ‘[d]espite the soubriquet Cormac does not play a dominant role as leader of the exiled Ulstermen. Rather it is Fergus who is the dominant figure’ (1976, 239). It might be thought that Cormac was deemed titular leader of the exiles by virtue of being the king’s son, but I will suggest presently that there was much more to it than that.

The plot of *Loinges mac m-Uislenn (LMU)* is well known: a young warrior, Nóisiu son of Uisliu, accompanied by his two brothers, elopes with Deirdriu, the young woman that Conchobor, king of Ulster, has brought up from birth to be his own lover. They live in exile for some time, until Conchobor, at the behest of his people, grants them a free pardon, of which the guarantors are Fergus, Dubthach Doél Ulad and Cormac,⁶ Fergus being clearly depicted as *primus inter pares*. As the sons of Uisliu and their guarantors make their way to Emain, however, Fergus

6 For a discussion of the guarantors, see Buttimer (1994-95, 21-27).

accepts an invitation to a feast; he remains behind with Dubthach and Cormac, while the sons of Uisliu proceed to Emain in the company of Fergus's son Fiachu. When they get there, the sons of Uisliu are slain at Conchobor's behest; Fiachu dies as he attempts to save Noísiu. When Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac hear of this they go to Emain to exact revenge. Dubthach kills a son and a grandson of Conchobor's, and Fergus kills one Traightrén son of Traiglethan. All of this is an affront to Conchobor's honour, and a battle ensues in which three hundred Ulstermen die. Dubthach goes on to kill the young women of Ulster, and Fergus to burn Emain Macha.

Fergus, Dubthach and Cormac then go into exile with their followers:

Is ed lotar iarum co Ailill ocus co Meidb ar ro-fetatar is sí lánamain foda-róelsat ocus dano ní-bu chúl serce do Utaib. Tricha cét ba é lín na lloingse. Co cenn sé mbliadna déc niro an gol na crith leu i n-Ultaib acht gol ocus crith leu cech n-óen-aidchi.

Thereupon they went to Ailill and to Medb, for they knew that that couple would be able to support them; and for the Ulstermen, moreover, it was not a refuge (?) of love. Three thousand was the number of those exiled. To the end of sixteen years neither weeping nor trembling ceased in Ulster through them, but each single night [there was] weeping and trembling through them (Hull 1949, 48; p. 66).

This laconic account tells us neither how they presented themselves to Ailill and Medb, nor how the royal couple received them. The phrase *cúl serce* is tantalizing. The first word is doubtless for *cúil* 'corner, recess'.⁷ Compare Fergus's *Is olc in chúl catha inonfil*, translated 'we are ill-placed for battle' (*TBC I*, l. 1209; p. 158). This latter example is unambiguous: however we may choose to word its translation, it must indicate that the location in which the raiders find themselves is not favorable for fighting a battle. (It is no surprise, then, that when Fergus has spoken those words, the army leaves straightaway for another place.) Of *cúl serce*, on the other hand, more than one interpretation is possible. Hull tentatively takes the literal meaning to be 'nook of love' (1949, 123-24) and translates 'refuge (?) of love'. Are we to suppose that the reference is to the reception of the exiles by Ailill and Medb? In *TBC I*, when Medb and Ailill urged Fergus to fight against his own kindred in the Great Battle, *asbertadar fris nárbo chol dó ar doradsad mór do maith dó fora lonnges* '[t]hey said that it was not wrong of him to do so for they had shown him great generosity in his exile' (*TBC I*, ll. 4004-05; p. 233). So far from demurral, Fergus in response evinces great enthusiasm for the fray. Another possibility would be to take it as 'a place for love; a place where they could

7 It is suggested in *DIL* (s.v.) that *cúil* may have been a fem. *ā*-stem, so that *cúl* would be the earlier nominative.

find love'. This seems improbable in view of Fergus's sexual, if not necessarily altogether amorous, relationship with Medb. In the *Táin*, Ailill professes to approve of Medb's adultery. When the charioteer reports that he has found the couple *in flagrante*, Ailill declares: *Is dethbir disí [...] Is ar chobair ocon táin dorigni* 'She is right (to behave thus) [...] She did it to help in the cattle-driving' (*TBC I*, l. 1053; p. 155). On the other hand, in his Death-Tale, *Aided Fergusa maic Róich*, Fergus's death is brought about by Ailill because of his jealousy of the relationship between Fergus and Medb (Meyer 1906, 32-35). We could of course suppose that the narrator of *LMU* is being ironic when he says that Connacht was not a *cúl seirce* for the Ulstermen. Or we could interpret the phrase in the light of James Carney's contention that *LMU* was composed in order to cast Fergus in a new light, to 'whitewash' him as Carney puts it (1983, 125). Thus, the author of *LMU* may have wished expressly to refute the tradition that Fergus was (or became) Medb's lover. It seems more plausible to me, however, that *cúl seirce* is to be taken as 'beloved (or lovable) spot': 'it (the court of Ailill and Medb) was not for the Ulstermen a beloved spot'. That Fergus, for his part, was not entirely at ease there is suggested in the Death-Tale, where we are told that he did many deeds at the court (lit., in the household) of Ailill and Medb, but yet *ba minca nobid som , a muinter ar fot in tíre cena ná isin tegluch* 'he and his people were more often abroad in the land than in Ailill's household' (Meyer 1906, 32-33). This suggests that Fergus retained a degree of independence of Ailill and Medb, a trait that is evident also in his demeanour in the *Táin*.

While we are not told how Ailill and Medb received the exiles, we know from an episode in the *Táin* that they were bound to the royal couple by *cotach* 'covenant'.⁸ At Medb's behest and in breach of *fir fer*, one Gaile Dána, his twenty-seven sons, and his sister's son assail Cú Chulainn at a bog near Ardee. They cast their twenty-nine spears at him, and reach for their swords, but as they raise up their hands against Cú Chulainn, Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe comes out of the invaders' encampment and strikes off their twenty-nine forearms. Cú Chulainn is duly thankful, but Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe speaks darkly of the implications of what he has done: '*A mbec sa, 'ol Fiacha, 'is tar cotach dúindi ar nUaltaibh. Día ri neach dib a ndúnad, regma-ni ar trichait céit fo gin claidib* 'Even this little,' said Fiacha, 'is in breach of our covenant for us Ulstermen. If any one of them reach the encampment (to tell of it), our whole division will be put to the sword' (*TBC I*, ll. 2557-58; p. 195). In the event, Cú Chulainn kills the lot of them, with the assistance of two brave Ulster warriors, and thus ensures that no word of Fiacha's action reaches the encampment.⁹ The revelation, so late in the *Táin*, of the covenant binding Fergus to

⁸ *TBC I*, ll. 2547-2566; p. 195.

⁹ There is a much longer account of this episode in *TBC II* (ll. 2532-605; pp. 209-11), where the paterfamilias is called Calatín Dána. The *cotach* is not explicitly mentioned,

Ailill and Medb, shows us that the *remscéla* do not tell us everything we would like to know, even about the topics with which they deal. I hope to show in what follows that the opening sections of *TBC* I (ll. 1-372) also have a crucial function in laying the groundwork for the ensuing action. While we do not need to be introduced to the *dramatis personae*, or the nature of their enterprise, the depiction of them (and especially of the Ulster exiles) in those early sections not only prepares us for what happens in the course of the raid, but also resonates to a remarkable degree with the Great Battle. In order to explore this resonance, I will first give a summary account of the Great Battle, and then look at the relevant features of the opening sections.

The Great Battle

As the raid upon Ulster occurs while Conchobor and his fighting men are debilitated, defence of the province falls to Cú Chulainn, who is immune from the *cess*. When the Ulstermen recover their strength at winter's end, Conchobor musters an army to wreak vengeance on the invaders. By now the invaders have captured Donn Cúailnge, and are well on their way back to Connacht. Ailill sends his scout, Mac Roth, to observe the Ulster army as it gathers at Slemain Mide. When Mac Roth returns, he describes the leading warriors, and Fergus identifies and praises them. When it is time to describe Erc, son of Cairbre Nia Fer and of Conchobor's daughter, Fergus predicts the outcome of the Great Battle:

Is triana ág in meic sin [...] brisfithir in cath foraib. Nicon aithigi in mac sin huath ná homun oc far shaigid etorro a medón far catha. Bad ferrda bhúrigfite láithi gaile fer nUlad oc teasarcaín luíg a cridí oc sligi in chatha remib. Dos-icfe uile ell condolba oc aicsin in meic isind níth már sin. Rocechlastar rucht claidib Conchobair amail gloim n-árchon ic tesorcaín in meic. Focicher Cú Chulaind trí múru doíne immon cath oc saigid in meic bic. Bith condalb donuapérat láith gaili fer nUlad in diáirmi.

It is because of that lad that you will be defeated in battle. He will experience neither dread nor fear as he makes for you in the middle of your own army. Bravely will the warriors of Ulster roar as they hew down the army before them, rushing to rescue their beloved lad. They will all feel the ties of kinship when they see the boy in that great conflict. Like the baying of a blood-hound will be heard the sound of Conchobar's sword as he comes to that boy's rescue. Cú Chulainn will cast up three ramparts of (dead) men around the battle as he rushes towards that little lad. Mindful of their kinship with the boy, the warriors of Ulster will attack the vast (enemy) host (*TBC* I, ll. 3830-38; p. 228).

Ailill responds to the Ulster threat with a muster of the Men of Ireland. It will be remembered that Cormac Conn Longas was foregrounded in the muster made three months earlier at Crúachain. Now, in this second muster, the focus shifts to

but Fiacha's description of what would follow the discovery of his act is identical with that in *TBC* I.

Fergus: Ailill and Medb beg him to go into battle, saying, in words that I have already quoted, *nárbo chol dó ar doradsad mór do maith dó fora lonnges*, ‘it was not wrong for him to do so for they had shown him great generosity in his exile’ (TBC I, ll. 4404-05; p. 233). When Fergus swears, in extravagant language, to slay many men if only his sword is returned to him, Ailill gives back the sword. He enjoins Fergus not to turn it upon the invaders: *Mád la fír n-einech nád bad fornn n-imbrae do barann borrfad barainn fiad nUlad errathaib* ‘For honour’s sake do not wreak your fierce anger on us in the presence of the chariot-fighters of Ulster’ (TBC I, ll. 4024-5; p. 234). True to his oath, Fergus assails the men of Ireland, and *glanais berna cét isin chath cona c[h]laidiub ina díb lámuib* ‘holding his sword in both hands he cleared a passage for a hundred through the line of battle’ (TBC I, ll. 4036-37; p. 234).

Conchobor goes to confront Fergus, and identifies himself to him as:

‘Fer [...] rodatuc for longes i nn-adba con alltai , sindach , dotningéba anndiu ar gail gaiscid fiad fheraib hÉrend.’

‘One [...] who drove you into exile to dwell with wolves and foxes, one who today will hold you at bay in the presence of the men of Ireland by dint of his own prowess’ (TBC I, ll. 4050-52; p. 234).

Fergus aims *bém ndigla* ‘a vengeful blow’ at Conchobor, but Cormac Conn Loinges grasps him by the arm and upbraids him:

*‘Olcai bémend benai, a popa a Fhergais’, ol Cormac.
‘Ceist, cóich bíu?’ ol Fergus.
‘Ben a trí telcha tarsiu. Tóí do láim. Slig immud do cach leith , nísnaírlle. Imráid ainech nUlad nádcon fárcbad. Nícon fáicébthar muna fácabtha triut-sa indiu.’*

‘Wicked are those blows that you strike, friend Fergus.’
‘Tell me,’ said Fergus, ‘whom shall I strike?’
‘Strike the three hills above them. Turn your hand and strike on all sides of you. Heed them not (?). Remember the honour of the Ulstermen which has not been lost. It will not be lost unless it be through your fault today’ (TBC I, ll. 4058-4063; p. 235).

Whereas Ailill had appealed to Fergus on grounds of honour (*enech*) not to turn his sword upon the invading army, Cormac Conn Loinges has now commanded him to divert his sword from Cormac’s own father, the king of Ulster, in order to save the honour of Ulster.

Cormac then addresses his father: *‘Airg-siu ‘na leath n-aill, a Chonchobair [...] Nícon méla in fer sa a baraind for Ultu ní bus móo sund.’* ‘Go in some other

direction, Conchobor [...]. This man will no longer wreak his fierce anger here on the men of Ulster' (*TBC I*, ll. 4064-65; p. 235).

We have to assume that Conchobor does his son's bidding. As for Fergus, Cormac Conn Loinges may have hoped that he would understand 'strike on all sides of you' to mean that he should direct his sword at the invaders. But when Fergus turns aside from the king, he kills a hundred Ulstermen. Then he meets the great Ulster warrior, Conall Cernach:

'Ba ramór in bríg sin, ar Conal Cernach, 'for túaith 7 cenél ar thóin mná drúithi.'

'Ceist, cid dogén, a fhírlaích?' or sé.

'Slig na tulchu tairrsiu 7 na dusu impu,' or Conall Cernach.

'Too great is that force which you exert against (your own) people and race, following a wanton woman as you do,' said Conall Cernach.

'What shall I do, O warrior?' asked Fergus.

'Strike the hills beyond them and the trees about them,' said Conall Cernach (*TBC I*, ll. 4068-71; p. 235).

Conall Cernach's jibe, rather decorously translated by O'Rahilly,¹⁰ recalls a genealogical source that says: *Ar fecca[i]s Fergus for Ulta di ág mná .i. di ág Medba Cruachan, ar imgeogain ar imt[h]óin mná fria chenél fadessin.* 'For Fergus turned against the Ulstermen because of a woman, that is, because of Medb of Crúachain, for he fought against his own people for the body of a woman.'¹¹

This time Fergus does strike the hills, cutting off the tops of what consequently came to be called Máela Mide, the three flat-topped hills of Mide. Cú Chulainn, who is so severely injured that he has hitherto played no part in the battle, hears the noise of the blows struck by Fergus on the hills, or of those struck by him on the shield of Conchobor. Alarmed at the prospect of the bloodshed that (as he thinks) will follow the arrival of Fergus, Cú Chulainn becomes enraged, and as his uncle Conchobor had earlier done, he challenges Fergus. Conchobor had taunted Fergus by speaking of his previous expulsion of Fergus to live among wolves and foxes; Cú Chulainn now ritually incites him. Conchobor's words had provoked a violent reaction from Fergus, and Cú Chulainn's incitement might be expected to do the same, but that is not what happens. Cú Chulainn demands that Fergus withdraw without a fight, and Fergus does so, honouring a promise he made when Cú Chulainn withdrew from single combat with Fergus earlier in the *Táin*.¹² Without further ado, Fergus and his allies from Munster and Leinster abandon Ailill and

10 Edel 2015, 144 favours O'Rahilly's rendering, as being 'neutral' rather than 'sexualized'.

11 Text Henry 1997, 56; transl. Carney 1983, 125.

12 On this, see further below, pp. 167-68.

Medb, reducing the army to the nine divisions of Connacht. Having come to the battle at midday, Cú Chulainn overcomes the rump of the army at sunset.

There are two descriptions, then, of the Great Battle in the *Táin*, and Fergus has a singularly important role in each of them. The first description, in Fergus's own words, predicts that the Ulstermen's love of kindred will inspire them to vanquish the raiders. In the second, Fergus is at first the focal figure. His murderous intent in the battle, as solemnly expressed in his oath, is diffused in three moves, as a result successively of the interventions of Cormac Conn Longes, Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn. It is in response to Fergus's presence that Cú Chulainn summons up the strength to fight one more time, and once Fergus has withdrawn, Cú Chulainn achieves victory for Ulster. Medb is reduced to begging Cú Chulainn to spare her life, and Fergus speaks of her with the utmost contempt: '*Is bésad [...] do cach graig remitét láir, rotgata, rotrata, rotfeither a moín hi tóin mná misrairleastair*' 'That is what usually happens [...] to a herd of horses led by a mare. Their substance is taken and carried off and guarded as they follow a woman who has misled them.' (*TBC I*, ll. 4123-24; p. 237). His words bring to mind what Medb had said at the outset: '*Cach óen scaras sund trá indiu [...] fria chóem, a charait, dobérat maldachtain form-sa úair is mé dorinól in slúagad sa.*' 'All those who part here today from comrade and friend will curse me for it is I who have mustered this hosting' (*TBC I*, ll. 25-26; p. 126).

The Early Sections of the *TBC I*

Fergus's vital role in the raid is already signaled in the *titulrad* of *TBC I*. As the invaders prepare to set out, they meet the poetess Fedelm. Medb asks her to foretell what will come of the raid. Fedelm's prophecy is all the more chilling for being laconic: '*Atchíu forderg, atchíu rúad*' 'I see it bloody, I see it red' (*TBC I*, l. 50; p. 126). Medb consoles herself with mention of the Ulstermen's *cess*. Fedelm repeats her prophecy, whereupon Medb remarks that Celtchar mac Uithechair and a third of the Ulstermen are at Dún Lethglaise, from which we must presumably infer that they are not available to defend Ulster. She then strikes a positive note: '*atá Fergus mac Roeich meic Ehdach lenni sund for longais co tríchait chét imbi*' 'Fergus mac Roeich meic Ehdach is here in exile with us with three thousand men' (*TBC I*, l. 57-58; p. 126). However reassuring this may be for Medb, it does not move Fedelm to change her prophecy.¹³

Coming so soon after the foregrounding of Cormac, Medb's words intimate that Fergus has already displaced Cormac as leader of the exiles. If there is anything in the *Táin* that justifies Cormac's soubriquet Conn Longas, and the pre-

13 The well-known poem that Fedelm utters following her dialogue with Medb, and which prophesies Cú Chulainn's exploits, is effectively a soliloquy: it elicits no response from Medb or the others, and we must conclude that they have not heard it.

eminence accorded him at the beginning of the tale, it is his vital role in the Great Battle. Fergus has no doubt long harboured resentment against Conchobor, who took the kingship of Ulster from him, and that resentment hardened into implacable hostility when Conchobor violated Fergus's honour as guarantor of the sons of Uisliu in *LMU*. In staying Fergus's hand as he turns his sword upon Conchobor, Cormac saves the life of his father the king, thereby also saving Ulster from defeat in the battle.

We have seen that the first stage of the invaders' journey takes them from Crúachain to Cúil Silinne, where the leading exiles join Ailill and Medb in the king's tent. A serious row occurs when Medb has made a circuit of the army and noticed that one division, that of the Gailióis, was much more efficient than any of the others. She announces to Ailill and the Ulstermen that the Gailióis should not be allowed to go on the raid, because they would take credit for the victory of the army. After some argument with Ailill, Medb decrees that the Gailióis should be slain. Fergus's reaction is quiet but firm: '*Ní 'maricfe, úair is áes comhchotaig dúinni 'nar nUltaib, acht má non gontar uli*' 'It shall not happen unless we are all killed, for they are allies of us Ulstermen' (*TBC I*, ll. 164-65; p. 129).

Medb is undeterred, saying that she has at her disposal nine divisions of the men of Connacht; Fergus says in turn that he likewise has nine divisions at his disposal: one of his own, seven from Munster, and the division of the Gailióis.¹⁴ He offers a compromise: that the Gailióis be distributed among the other divisions, and this solution is acceptable to Medb.

In this episode, Fergus shows that, however much he may be beholden to Ailill and Medb, he is determined to be his own man, something that will ultimately cost the royal couple dearly. He asserts his authority as true leader of the exiles, and indeed of all of the men of Ireland other than the Connachta. He commands the loyalty of one half of the army; it is this that enables us to understand how it is that when Fergus draws back from combat with Cú Chulainn in the Great Battle, the men of Leinster and the men of Munster meekly follow him.

Having been led astray across bogs and streams, the invaders arrive at Granard, where they spend the night. For the sake of kinship (*ar chondalbi*), Fergus sends a warning to the Ulstermen. It is received by Cú Chulainn and his father Súaltainn, who take themselves off to Irard Cuillenn to watch for the invaders. Fergus is given the task at Granard of leading the army on its way (l. 227; p. 131). No reason is given in *TBC I* for the choice of Fergus as guide. There is an elaborate account of this in *TBC II*, in the course of which the invaders discuss who ought to guide them as they pass from Connacht to Ulster:

14 Fergus includes his own 'division' (l. 175; p. 130) but makes no mention of Cormac's men.

[A]ibertsat combad é Fergus, ar bith ba slúagad bága dó in slúagad, dáig is é boí secht mbliadna i rrígu Ulad, iar marbad mac nUsnig fora fhaisam, for a chomhairgi, tánic estib, ‘atá sec[h]t mbliadna déc ri Ultu ammuig ar longais, bidbanas’.

[T]hey said that it should be Fergus, because the hosting was a hostile hosting¹⁵ for him, for he had been seven years in the kingship of Ulster, and when the sons of Usnech had been slain in despite of his guarantee and surety, he had come from there, ‘and he has been seventeen years in exile and in enmity away from Ulster.’ (*TBC* II, ll. 361-64; p. 147).

Having taken on the role of leader, Fergus proceeds to lead the invaders astray: the narrator explains that he did this for love of his kindred (*ar chondailbi*), his object being to give the Ulstermen time to muster an army (*TBC* I, ll. 227-29, p. 131). Medb soon sees what is going on and charges him with yielding to *condalbae*:

‘A Fherguis, is andam amne / cinnas conaire cingme /fordul fades nó fothúaid / tiágmai tar cach n-ailetúait.’

‘Atotágathar dia mbrath / Ailill Aíe lía slúagad. / Ní tharat menmain co se / do thús inna conaire.’

‘Máso chondalbi dogní / ná tuíd inna echraidi. / Bés adchotar nech aile / do thosach na conaire.’

‘O Fergus, this is strange. What manner of path do we travel? We go astray to south and to north, past every strange district.’

‘Ailill of Mag Aí with his army fears that you will betray him. Until now he heeded not where the path led.’

‘If you feel the pull of kinship, do not lead horses any longer. Perhaps someone else may be found to guide us on our way’ (*TBC* I, ll. 231-42; p. 131).

Lying through his teeth, Fergus contests the accusation of treachery:

‘A Medb, cid not medraisiu / ní cosmail fri mrath inse. / Is la hUltu, a ben, trá / a tír tarndotuidisa.’

‘O Medb, what perturbs you? This is not anything resembling treachery. O woman, the land across which I shall lead you belongs to the men of Ulster’ (*TBC* I, ll. 244-47; p. 131).

15 The translation of *slúagad bága* given in *DIL* (B 10.70-2) is ‘a hosting in fulfillment of an undertaking’. The ‘undertaking’, if that is what it is, probably fulfills Fergus’s *cotach* with Ailill and Medb.

But there is truth in the rest of what he has to say:

'Ní ar amlessaib in tslúaig / tiagu cechfordul a huair. / Do imgabáil in mórgeine / immandig Mag Murthemne.'

'Ní arná corad mo chiall / arna fordulu no tiag. / Dús in rimgaib ced iar tain / Coin Culaind mac Súaltaim.'

'Not with intent to harm the hosting do I go in turn along each devious road, but that I may avoid the great one who guards Mag Murthemne.'

'It is not to save my mind from weariness that I go thus aside from the path, but I am trying to avoid meeting Cú Chulainn mac Súaltaim even at a later time' (TBC I, ll. 248-55; pp. 131-32).

The notion that Fergus is trying to avoid Cú Chulainn resonates with Fergus's final act in the great battle, when he holds back from combat with Cú Chulainn. It is richly ironic that Fergus should seek to reassure Medb by speaking of something which in the event precipitates his own desertion and that of half of the invading army.

As I have already noted, Fergus's withdrawal from combat with Cú Chulainn in the Great Battle redeems a promise: it was made by Fergus at Cú Chulainn's prompting in *Comrac Fergusa fri Coin Culaind* 'The Meeting of Fergus and Cú Chulainn' (TBC I, ll. 2495-518), which occurs very near the end of the series of single combats. The invaders fail to persuade any of their number to oppose Cú Chulainn. When they finally beg Fergus to do so, he declines to oppose his own foster-son. They then ply him with wine until he is very drunk, and pester him so much that he eventually consents to go.

Cú Chulainn knows that Fergus has no sword in his scabbard, and says as much to him. Fergus responds:

'Is cumma lim-sa etir,' or Fergus. 'Cia nobeth claideb and, ní imbértha fort-su. Teilg traigid dam, a Chú Chulainn,' or Fergus.

'Teilcfe-so dano dam-sa arisi,' ar Cú Chulaind.

'Samlaid écin,' or Fergus.

'Is and sin dolléici Cú Chulainn traigid for cúlú re Fergus co rrici Grellig nDolluid are telced Fergus dó-some traigid i lló in chatha. Tairbling Cú Chulaind iarom hi nGrellaig Dolluid.

'I care not indeed,' said Fergus. 'Even if there were a sword in it, it would not be wielded against you. Retreat a step from me Cú Chulainn.'

'You in turn will retreat before me,' said Cú Chulainn.

'Even so indeed,' answered Fergus.

Then Cú Chulainn retreated before Fergus as far as Grellach Dolluid so that on the day of the Great Battle Fergus might retreat before him.

Afterwards Cú Chulainn dismounted (from his chariot) in Grellach Dolluid (*TBC* I, ll. 2509-15; p. 194).

This episode¹⁶ is a crucial one in the plot of the *Táin*, and its significance is underpinned by thematic resonances with other episodes in the tale. Cú Chulainn has already spoken to his charioteer about Fergus's loss of his sword (*TBC* I, ll. 1306-10; p. 161). He has also, in response to a jibe from Fergus, declared that he kills no man unarmed (*TBC* I, ll.1435-37; p. 165). As for the formal exchange between Fergus and Cú Chulainn, this is the second time in the tale that a warrior demands that Cú Chulainn 'retreat a step from him'. On the first occasion, the demand is made by Lóch, when Cú Chulainn has fatally injured him in a ford with the *gáe bolga*. Cú Chulainn accedes, so that it is on the other side of the ford that Lóch falls (*TBC* I, ll. 2028-30; p. 181). The reason for Lóch's demand is given in *TBC* II: Lóch wishes to face toward the east, so that he will not be accused of fleeing from Cú Chulainn. We are also told there that Cú Chulainn accedes *dáig is láechda ind ascid connaigi* 'for it is a warrior's request you make' (*TBC* II, l. 2009-10; p. 194). We are left with the impression that in single combat one of the combatants might ask the other to retreat a step from him, and that the request would be acceded to in certain circumstances. To judge from our two examples, it would seem that the request is made of the combatant who has the upper hand. The procedure must have been rule-based, and we would dearly like to know what the rules were. Finally, Cú Chulainn's prescience in providing at this early stage for the Great Battle has its counterpart among the invaders, who evince knowledge of the battle well before Conchobor has been aroused from his torpor, and mustered the Ulstermen. When Mend mac Sálchada assails the invaders in their encampment, they yield the encampment to him until he should come with Conchobor to the battle (*TBC* I, ll. 3336-45; p. 214). This is followed by the approach of Rochad, who takes his position near the encampment. Finnabair is dispatched to obtain a truce from him until he too should come with Conchobor to the great battle (*TBC* I, ll. 3346-53; p. 214).

Returning now to the invaders, whom we have left at Granard, they take off for Irard Cuilenn, which is the location of the vantage point chosen by Cú Chulainn and his father when they receive Fergus's warning. Cú Chulainn feels obliged to abandon his post in order to fulfil his personal pledge to visit his concubine. Before he goes, he takes steps to delay the army: He forms a branch into a hoop, fixes it with a peg, and with one hand throws it over a pillar stone. On the peg of the hoop he leaves an inscription in *ogam* saying that none of them should pass until one of

16 For discussion, see O'Leary 1991, 39; also Sayers 1997, 54-55, and Edel 2015, 94-98.

them, other than his *popa* Fergus, should likewise succeed in throwing such a hoop over a pillar stone. When the army finds the hoop, Fergus reads the inscription, and both the druids and Fergus say that the injunction in the inscription should be obeyed. Ailill concurs, and instead of going forward he directs the army into a wood to the south of them, where they cut out a passage for the chariots. They then make the short journey of six miles to Cenannas, where they spend the night.

On the morning after his tryst with his concubine, Cú Chulainn, takes his time about coming back to his post: he remains until he has washed and bathed. But when he does return, he comes upon the track of the army, and expresses regret at what he has done: ‘*Ní má lodmar dó, ’ol Cú Chulainn, ’ná mertammar Ultu. Ro léicsem slog forru cen airfhius*’ ‘Would that we had not gone thither nor betrayed the men of Ulster!’ cried Cú Chulainn. ‘We have let the enemy host come upon them unawares’ (ll. 315-16; p. 133). The conflict here between Cú Chulainn’s wish to honour his own pledge, and his duty of loyalty to Ulster adumbrates the dilemma Fergus faces in the Great Battle: he is honour-bound to support Ailill and Medb, but the honour of Ulster requires him to act otherwise. Moreover, Cú Chulainn’s self-described betrayal is done for the purpose of visiting his concubine, and thus foreshadows the admittedly more serious accusation that Conal Cernach levels at Fergus: that he opposes his own people for the sake of a wanton woman.

Cú Chulainn again sets about impeding the invaders, this time cutting a forked branch with one blow of his sword and fixing it in the middle of a stream making it impossible for a chariot to pass. An advance party of four of the invaders arrives, and Cú Chulainn cuts off their heads and impales them on the four prongs of the forked branch. When Medb asks Fergus to deliver them in their difficulty, Fergus draws the forked branch out of the ground and it is seen that its end was indeed one cutting.

Ailill decides that it is time to rest and feast, and he asks that some of the lore of the Ulstermen be recounted. Fergus responds with the fulsome ‘Eulogy of Cú Chulainn’, and the first of ‘The Boyhood Deeds’; two of the others are narrated respectively by Conall Cernach and Fiacha mac Fir Fhebe. The Eulogy and Boyhood Deeds are beyond the scope of the present talk, but I will say one thing about them. In the early episodes, we become aware of a relationship between Fergus and Cú Chulainn. Fergus’s references to Cú Chulainn reveal at least that he knows the measure of the young man. Cú Chulainn for his part refers to Fergus as his *popa*. In the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, Fergus claims to have met and spoken to Cú Chulainn on the occasion in which he rescues from the field of battle the ailing Conchobor and his son Cúscraid. The internal evidence of the *Táin* indicates that the boy was at least five years old at that time. Later in the *Táin*, Fergus is said to be Cú Chulainn’s foster-father. Now, *LMU* tells us that after they left for Connacht, the exiles punished the Ulstermen every night for sixteen years. In *TBC* II, (l. 364;

p. 147) it is said of Fergus that at the time of the raid: *atá sec[h]t mbliadna déc fri Ultu amuig ar longais* ‘he has been seventeen years in exile from Ulster’. As Cú Chulainn is now seventeen years old,¹⁷ the chronology of *LMU* (and which is echoed in *TBC II*) allows no time for Fergus to get to know Cú Chulainn, let alone to foster him.

In other respects too, the Fergus whose words and deeds are of such huge import in the *Táin* is not quite the Fergus of *LMU*. Something of the vengeful Fergus remains in *TBC I*: in ‘The Fight of Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn’, Fergus declares: ‘*Mé tharclaim na slúaig sea soir, / lúach mo sháraichthi d’Ulaib.*’ ‘It was I who in requital for the wrong done to me by the Ulstermen, collected and brought these forces to the east (*TBC I*, ll. 2786-87; p. 200). Against this we may put his withering (and we might think, hypocritical) condemnation of Dubthach Dóel Ulad:

‘Ber ass Dubthach nDóeltengaid / [...] / Nicon dergéni nach maith / ó geogain in n-ingenraith.’

‘Ferais écht ndochla ndobail / guin Fiachaig meic Conchonair. / Nipau chainiu rocloth dó / guin Corpri meic Fedelmtheó.’

‘Take Dubthach away. [...] He has done nought of good since he slew the maidens (in Ulster).’

‘He performed a wicked and ill-omened deed when he killed Fiacha, the son of Conchobar. Nor was the slaying of Coirpre, son of Feidlimid, any less wicked’ (*TBC I*, ll. 2393-2400; p. 191).

The Fergus that we see in the early episodes, motivated by kin-love and fiercely independent of Ailill and Medb, is the Fergus of the Great Battle. Thematically, Cú Chulainn’s word and deeds in the early episodes adumbrate those of Fergus and his interlocutors at the raid’s end. The relationship between Fergus and Cú Chulainn is what ultimately determines the outcome of the raid: the decisive moment is that in which the aged Fergus withdraws from conflict with his youthful (and beloved) adversary, an act that is foreshadowed in the early episodes in Fergus’s avowed determination to avoid meeting Cú Chulainn mac Súaltainn, ‘the great one who guards Mag Murthemne’.

¹⁷ *TBC I*, ll. 379-80; p. 135.

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