

Neither Burned nor Bloody: The Learning and Legacy of Heroic Feats

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Abstract: One of the singular marks of the hero in early Irish literature is his ability to perform heroic feats. This article explores the acquisition of these feats, known in Old Irish as *cles* (plural *clis* or *clessa*), by heroes in various branches of the tradition. The scant available evidence indicates that the hero only learned a feat when he could perform it without injury. This correlates well with the warrior ethos in early Irish literature and with the frequent descriptions of heroic male beauty in Old and Middle Irish. The fascination with warrior beauty in medieval Irish literature carries into the Modern Irish period and is detectable in elegies composed by bardic praise poets. Finally, it is possible that the ethos of the vain warrior can be traced as far back as the Continental Celts, but this connection can only be advanced with caution.

One of the primary characteristics of the warrior in Early Irish literature is his ability to perform heroic feats, known most commonly in Old Irish as *cles* (plural *clis* or *clessa*, depending on inflection).¹ The importance that the medieval redactors placed upon the feats as marks of the hero can be gauged by the frequency of their appearance throughout the sagas. It has long been remarked that the feats came to be especially associated with the supreme Ulster warrior Cú Chulainn (Sayers 1983, 69), and lists of the feats are common in the tales that constitute his heroic biography. The famous Ulster hound is depicted performing his martial arts in both early recensions of the *Táin* (*TBC* I ll. 1712–26, transl. p. 173; *TBC* II ll. 1830–1849, transl. pp. 189–90), *Tochmarc Emire* (Van Hamel 1933, 56), *Fled Bricrenn* (Henderson 1899, 37), *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* (Stokes 1910, 28–31), *Siaburcharpat Con Culainn* (O’Beirne Crowe 1871, 378–9; Meyer 1910, 51 and 54), and *Aided Con Culainn* (Van Hamel 1933, 92–3).² Mention of Cú Chulainn and his feats is made in several later texts as well, including the Early Modern Irish version of his overseas training in arms, *Foghlaim* or *Oileamhain Con Culainn*, which was adapted from the second half of *Tochmarc Emire* (Stokes 1908, 110–13, 114–15, 126–27, 134–37; Ó hUiginn 2002, *passim*).

1 *DIL*, s.v. *cles*, notes the word is inflected as both a u- and o-stem, masculine and neuter.

2 Possibly there are other references that I have missed, but this list is not intended to be exhaustive.

Exactly what these martial acts were is largely unknown, though several attempts have been made to decipher the physical moves that may have been involved (O’Beirne Crowe 1871, 432–448; Windisch 1905, 278–289; Sayers 1983). Many of the feats have easily translatable names—the *uballchless* ‘apple feat’, *cless cait* ‘feat of the cat’, and *toranchless* ‘thunder feat’, for example (Van Hamel, 56–7)—though this seeming transparency brings us no closer to actually understanding what a ‘thunder feat’ was, or even to what the medieval redactors of the tales believed those acts to be.³ There is, however, one instance in the heroic literature in which the teaching and learning of two unnamed feats is described in some detail, and it is upon this point of description that the following analysis will hinge. The present paper focuses on how these two feats were acquired by Cú Chulainn and his companions, and then on how the practice and perfection of these martial arts harmonizes with the Early Irish warrior ethos in general. Finally, building upon the work of Damian McManus in an article titled ‘Good-Looking and Irresistible: The Hero from Early Irish Epic to Classical Poetry’ (2009), this essay will make some observations on the tenacity of Irish heroic storytelling tradition.

The Learning of Feats

In the saga *Tochmarc Emire*, ‘The Wooing of Emer,’ Cú Chulainn woos the girl he wants to marry and then goes abroad for warrior schooling before ultimately returning to Ireland to claim Emer as his bride. The hero is initially accompanied on his training journey by Lóegaire Búadach and the Ulster king Conchobar, and the first stop the three make is with the military teacher Domnall Míldemall in Alba. We are told in the early, probably eighth-century recension⁴ of this tale that

*Hō ro-āncatar Domnall for-céta leiss aill for licc dercāin fo sēted cetharbolcc. No clistis fuiri īarum [co]nāpdar dvba nā glassa a fond. Aill for slig fris’ ndrīngtiss co clistiss fora rind nā ferad fora fonnib.*⁵

3 William Sayers (1983) makes a valiant and informative attempt to understand the *clessa* physically, even categorizing them as a series of callisthenics.

4 Two recensions of the text are preserved; the eighth-century version survives only in MS Rawlinson B 512 of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. The later, probably eleventh-century recension—which is much longer—survives in whole or in part in five manuscripts. For scholarship on the manuscripts and dating of both recensions, see Meyer 1890, Ó Concheanainn 1996 and 1997, Toner 1998, and J. Miller 2011.

5 Transcription from Rawlinson B 512, folio 117r. I am grateful to the Oxford Digital Library service for making the manuscript available to researchers. I have added capitalisation, punctuation and macrons to denote vowel length, and manuscript abbreviations are silently expanded. Square brackets enclose an editorial addition, justified at least in part because all other manuscript witnesses to this scene include the *co-*.

After they reached Domnall, some things were taught by him upon a flagstone with a small hole under which blew a four-cornered bellows. They performed upon it then until the soles of their feet were neither black nor raw. Other things [were taught] upon a spear upon which they climbed, so that they performed on its point, which did not inflict [wounds] upon the soles of their feet.⁶

The clear implication of this short paragraph is that Cú Chulainn and his companions practiced these feats until perfection.⁷ I am aware of no other place in the early literature where the learning of a *cles* is described in such detail. The first of Domnall's feats is performed on a flagstone with a small hole, under which blew a bellows. The usual use of a bellows is to increase heat or build up a fire, and it appears that this stone is super-heated. The description of how the heroes learned the first feat above, then, is that they practiced upon a hot flagstone until the soles of their feet were 'neither black nor livid,' that is, they practiced until the stone no longer burned them.⁸

The description of the second unnamed feat above makes little sense without the editorial addition of the word 'wounds' in translation. (Unfortunately, the manuscripts of the later recension do not supply the seemingly missing word.) There is strong evidence, however, that the addition is in fact necessary.⁹ First, the basic sense of *feraid* is 'grants, supplies,' and it is widely attested with the meaning 'pours'; as such, it is used frequently with liquids, especially blood (*DIL* F 85.83ff.). Second, the verb is used with the conjunction *for* and the word *fuil* in legal texts, including the eighth-century tract *Bretha Crólige*, 'The Judgments of Blood-Lying,' to mean 'inflicts wounds' (Binchy 1938, 46–7; cf. *DIL* F 86.57 and 72ff.). Finally, *DIL* lists this passage from the later recension of *Tochmarc Emire* under 'With direct obj. omitted' (*DIL* F 86.81–87.1).

Once the emendation is made, we have a description of another feat taught by Domnall, and this one follows the pattern of the first: the three heroes practiced the martial art until they could do it without injury. They climbed onto the point of a

6 Translation is my own, and diverges rather widely from Meyer 1890, 445.

7 These moves are not explicitly termed *clessa*, but the verb used to describe their execution is *clisid* 'performs, performs feats,' which is etymologically related to *clis* 'feat.'

8 Meyer 1890, 445, translates '... until their soles were all but black or livid.' Presumably, he is translating the *nāpdar* as 'they were all but,' and the later *nā* in the sentence as the conjunction 'or.' I prefer to treat both, however, as negatives in a 'neither ... nor ...' relationship. This passage reads the same—with only spelling variations—in all manuscripts of the later recension of the story, and Meyer's translation of this later version (Meyer 1888, 234) made its way into the Cross and Slover compendium *Ancient Irish Tales* (Cross and Slover 1936, 162). It also appears to have influenced Thomas Kinsella's widely available translation in the *Táin* (Kinsella 1969, 29).

9 Meyer translates *nā ferad fora fonnib* as 'or dropping down on their soles,' but this would be the only attestation of *feraid* with the meaning 'drops down,' and for all of the reasons outlined in this paragraph, I disagree with his translation. However, his interpretation—much like his understanding of the last feat—has gained wide acceptance.

spear—presumably an upright one, though the text is not explicit—and performed there, and yet this spear did not inflict ‘wounds’ upon the soles of their feet.¹⁰ That the heroes rehearsed the feats until they could be performed without injury makes narrative sense in *Tochmarc Emire* as well, for immediately after this scene, Domnall suggests that Cú Chulainn, Lóegaire and Conchobar travel to Scáthach for further training. The text does not explain why Domnall makes this proposal, but it appears as if Domnall has nothing further to teach his pupils, for they have mastered the martial arts he offers.¹¹

Descriptions of initiate warriors performing heroic manoeuvres without blemish are not confined to this episode, or even to the heroic biography of Cú Chulainn or to the Ulster Cycle. A similar passage has been preserved in the Finn Cycle under the title *Áirem Muintiri Finn*, ‘The Enumeration of Finn’s People’ (text *SG* I 92–3; transl. *SG* II 99–101), a text which Kuno Meyer dates to the twelfth century (Meyer 1910, xxx). The tale describes how young men would forsake their families to join Finn’s *fian* in the wilderness, and then goes on to list the entrance examinations into that warrior band. It is worth quoting the translation at some length:

No man was taken till in the ground a large hole had been made (such as to reach the fold of his belt) and he put into it with his shield and a forearm’s length of a hazel stick. Then must nine warriors, having nine spears, with a ten furrows’ width betwixt them and him, assail him and in concert let fly at him. If past that guard of his he were hurt then, he was not received into Fianship.

Not a man of them was taken till his hair had been interwoven into braids on him and he started at a run through Ireland’s woods; while they, seeking to wound him, followed in his wake, there having been between him and them but one forest bough by way of interval at first. Should he be overtaken, he was wounded and not received into the Fianna after. If his weapons had quivered in his hand, he was not taken. Should a branch in the wood have disturbed anything of his hair out of its braiding, neither was he taken. If he had cracked a dry stick under his foot [as he ran] he was not accepted. Unless that [at his full speed] he had both jumped a stick level with his brow, and stooped to pass under one even with his knee, he was not taken. Also, unless without slackening his pace he could with his nail extract a thorn from his foot, he was not taken into Fianship; but if he performed all this he was of Finn’s people (*SG* II, 100).

Again we see warriors-in-training performing seemingly impossible martial feats and doing them without injury or blemish. In this instance, it is not part of the initiate’s actual training, but a trial that gauges a young man’s worthiness for inclusion into the warrior ranks. It is possible to read the above passage from *Tochmarc Emire* in the same way, and indeed *Tochmarc Emire*, like *Áirem Muintiri*

10 The later rescension of *Tochmarc Emire* actually names this as ‘the binding of champions upon the points of spears’ *fonaidm niad for rindib sleg* (Van Hamel 1933, 46), which is listed elsewhere as one of Cú Chulainn’s feats, though, as Sayers notes, ‘There is considerable variation ... in the texts and in interpretations as to whether this is one, two or three feats’ (1983, 60).

11 This is also how Thurneysen (1921, 388), contra to Meyer, understands this passage, though he does not discuss the scene in any detail.

Finn—or like the *macgnímrada* of Finn and Cú Chulainn—has often been seen as an initiation story (Sjoestedt 1940, 91–4; Rees and Rees 1961, 253–65; Dunn 1989, 69–74; J. Miller 2011, 29–88).¹²

Heroic Feats and Male Beauty

This notion that the hero must perform his dangerous military exercises while remaining unblemished may be tied to conceptions of male beauty as reflected in Early Irish literature. It is well known that Early Irish kings were required to be physically perfect, and that any bodily disfigurement could result in forfeiture of the kingship.¹³ Just as widely noted is the concept that the heroes of Early Irish literature are beautiful (McManus 2009, 57–74). Early Irish literature seems to give as much ink to descriptions of male beauty as it does to depictions of female beauty. For example, there is the famous description of Naoise from *Longes mac nUislenn*, in which the hero is described as having hair as black as a raven, cheeks as red as blood, and a body as white as snow (Hyde 1899, 146–49; Cross and Slover 1936, 242; Gantz 1981, 260). Fráech in *Táin Bó Fraích* is described in similar terms by his lover Findabair:

nach álaind atchíd, ba háildiu lee Fróech do acsin tar dublind, in corp do rogili, in folt do roáilli, ind aiged do chumtachtai, int shúil do roglassi, iss hé móethóclach cen locht cen anim ... (Meid, *Táin Bó Fraích*, 8)

Whatever beautiful thing she used to see, she thought it more beautiful to see Fráech across the black water, the body of pure whiteness, and the hair of great beauty, the face of good shape, the eyes of pure grey; he is a gentle youth without fault, without blemish ...

Similarly in the later recension of *Tochmarc Emire*, we are told that all the women of Ulster loved Cú Chulainn for several reasons, among them *ar cháimi a gnúise, ar sercaigi a dreiche* (Van Hamel 1933, 21–2) ‘for the beauty of his face, for the loveliness of his countenance.’ In *Serglige Con Culainn*, Cú Chulainn’s otherworld mistress praises his battle prowess, bravery, fame, and ability to perform heroic feats, and sings of him:

Fil a cehtar a dá grúad / tibri derg amal crú rúad: / tibri úani tibri gorm / tibri corcra dath n-étrom.

12 Joseph Nagy points out that Finn performs another impossible feat in his *macgnímrada*, when he follows his mentor while picking up leaden balls and not slowing down (Nagy 1985, 218; 1986/7, 171).

13 Examples from the sagas, as well as legal and wisdom texts, are too numerous to list exhaustively. See Binchy 1952; Draak 1959, 660–62; Dillon and Chadwick 1967, 92; *Cath Maige Tuired* 2, 6, 24–5; Kelly 1988, 19; McCone 1990, 121–4; Koch 2006 III, 1060–63.

Fil secht suilse ara rusc, / ní scél fácbala hi lusc: / Imdénam súla saíre / abrathair duba daíle
(Dillon, *Serglige*, 21–2).

There is in each of his two cheeks / a shade of red like the red of blood / a shade of green, a shade of dark blue / a shade of light-coloured purple.

Seven pupils are in his eyes / it does not leave him blind / a noble ornament of the eye / eyelashes dark as a beetle.

The prophetess Fedelm uses nearly identical language to describe Cú Chulainn to Medb as her army approaches Ulster at the start of the *Táin* (*TBC* I ll. 67–78; transl. p. 127).

The heroes themselves were not oblivious of their good looks, either. Cú Chulainn's dalliances with women other than his wife are well-documented, and on two occasions he is seen grooming himself to impress the opposite sex. In the *Táin*, he dresses in his finest, dons jewellery and weapons, arranges his hair and displays *a chrotha álgín álaind* 'his gentle and beautiful form' (*TBC* I l. 2337; transl. p. 189) to the women of Ireland, who climb on top of their men to get a look at him (*TBC* I ll. 2367–68; transl. p. 190). The *Táin* redactors spend several lines discussing his hair in this scene:

He seemed to have three kinds of hair: dark next to his skin, blood-red in the middle and hair like a crown of gold covering them outside. Fair was the arrangement of that hair with three coils in the hollow in the nape of his neck, and like gold thread was each fine hair, loose-flowing, bright-golden, excellent, long-tressed, splendid and of beautiful colour, which fell back over his shoulders (*TBC* I, 189; text ll. 2342–47).

This emphasis on his hair (and the mention of hair above in the passage from *Táin Bó Fraích*) recalls to us the braided locks of the *fian*-initiate in *Áirem Muintiri Finn* above, whose plaited tresses must remain intact despite harrowing danger and physical exertion. Finally, in the later recension of *Tochmarc Emire*, Cú Chulainn dons his *timthacht óenaig* 'festival garments' (Van Hamel 1933, 23) to impress Emer at the couple's first meeting.

This emphasis on warrior vanity in the literature may be reflected in ancient accounts of the Continental Celts. I bring this point up only tentatively, for Bernhard Maier and John T. Koch have both eloquently cautioned Celticists to treat with suspicion the instances in which Classical accounts of Continental Celts seemingly converge with Early Irish literature (Koch 2000, *passim*; Maier 2000, *passim*). Nevertheless, Diodorus Siculus (Tierney 1959–60, 249; Koch and Carey 2003, 13) and Strabo (Tierney 1959–60, 268; Koch and Carey 2003, 18) both emphasize the vanity and ostentatious clothing of Celtic men, and Diodorus describes, in a fairly high level of detail, how the Celts wore their hair (Koch and Carey 2003, 12).¹⁴

14 For an Indo-European mythological interpretation of warrior hair, see D. Miller 1998, *passim*.

The Legacy of Heroic Beauty

Having established that beauty and vanity were marks of the Early Irish warrior, and that this beauty must be maintained even under physical duress or in the face of danger, we can now turn to Damian McManus's analysis of Bardic praise poetry from the Early Modern Irish period (McManus, 2009). McManus establishes, as has been done here, that the physical form, or *delb*, of a hero was vital to his character in the saga literature. He then ascertains that descriptions of the beauty of Early Irish heroes, and those heroes' irresistibility to women, are echoed in the panegyrics to the celebrands in later Bardic poetry.

McManus deduces that the male subject of a praise poem relates to women (in the poems, at least; these seem to reflect poetic convention, and not necessarily reality) in the following six ways: 1. The celebrand is loved by all women; 2. Women cannot conceal their feelings for the celebrand; 3. Women are anxious about the celebrand's well-being in battle; 4. Women will rendezvous illicitly with the celebrand; 5. Marital strife may result from women's attraction to the celebrand; and 6. Women will keen the death of the celebrand. McManus establishes that the roots of all of these avenues of praise can be found in Early Irish saga, and he gives examples from various texts, including several Cú Chulainn stories, for all six. What I would like to do here is to draw attention to some instances of 1., 3., and 4. from the early literature, especially Cú Chulainn's heroic biography, that were not collected by McManus.

That Cú Chulainn is conventionally described as being loved by all women (1.) is noted by McManus (2009, 69–71). A further piece of evidence that can be mustered to support this position is the following line from *Serlige Con Culainn*, uttered by Lí Ban, the sister of Cú Chulainn's fairy mistress Fand in the course of a long series of quatrains by Fand and Lí Ban in praise of the hero: *lí súla do andrib* (*Serlige*, 23), 'splendour of the eyes of married women.' McManus's analysis places special emphasis on the fact that heroes and celebrands are loved not just by maidens, but by all women, and I would posit that the use of *ainder* 'married woman, non-virgin' here is significant, especially since this address by Lí Ban is in *rosc*, and therefore *andrib* is not required by rhyme (Dillon 1953, xi and xvi). Furthermore, at least one other hero in the literature, Lóegaire son of Crimthann, the titular hero of *Echtra Lóegaire maic Crimthann*, is given the epithet *Lí Ban*, 'glory of women.'¹⁵ This story's latest editor has dated *Echtra Lóegaire* to the late

15 'Laegaire Mac Crimthann's Visit to Fairyland,' ed. Cross 1916; 'The Adventure of Laegaire Mac Crimthainn,' ed. Jackson 1942.

Old Irish period (Jackson 1942, 377), and the tale devotes several quatrains to the physical beauty of otherworld warriors (Jackson 1942, 382–3).¹⁶

McManus cites one example of women being anxious for Cú Chulainn's well-being in battle (2.): that from his death tale, when Emer and the other Ulster women try to prevent him from engaging in the fatal fight (McManus 2009, 72–73). One other instance of this type of female anxiety for Cú Chulainn's well-being can be culled from the literature. In the early recension of *Tochmarc Emire*, the hero, in consort with Scáthach's two sons, goes upon a narrow rope to battle Aífe's three champions. We are then told:

*Fo-cherded didiu Scáthach osnaid cecha lá. , nī fedeth cid no mbīth co mbo hīaram no thēged-som forsan tēt. Aill ōn ba boīth can tris fer laa [dá] mac-si frisna trīru. Aill ba homan Aíffe [f]o dēv[g] [ba] banfēndith ba handsom báí isin bith.*¹⁷

Scáthach then used to utter a sigh every day and she used not to watch how he was, and it was then he used to go upon the rope. One thing indeed, it was reckless without a third man with her two sons against the threesomes. Another thing, she was afraid of Aífe because she was the fiercest woman warrior who was in the world.

The later recension of *Tochmarc Emire* preserves this scene in full (Van Hamel 1933, 54). A version of it is also detectable in the Modern Irish *Foghlaim / Oileamhain Con Culainn*, though there it is Scáthach's daughter Úathach who is afraid for Cú Chulainn, and the scene does not unfold upon a rope;¹⁸ rather it is a perilous cliff bridge that he must pass to gain access to Scáthach's training (Stokes 1908, 118–121; Ó hUiginn 2002, 46). While attempting this bridge, Úathach sees him, falls in love and worries for his safety. Here, we see in one scene the tying together of the two themes of a woman's concern for the hero on his exploits (McManus's 2.), and the necessity of his performing heroic feats as an entrance test to warriorhood.

Cú Chulainn has many extra-marital trysts in his career, and while these are not illicit from the hero's point of view, these encounters are sometimes deemed illicit from the woman's point of view (McManus's 4. above). It must be stated here that these are not necessarily illicit because the woman's chastity is compromised—the redactors of the texts aren't always concerned with chastity, though it is noted as an ideal of the aristocratic female (O'Leary 1987, 35–39). These meetings are,

16 I do not necessarily believe that any special significance can be attached to the phrase 'Lí Ban'—either as a name, epithet or descriptor—in connection with this nexus of concepts, as the term is attested elsewhere in contexts that likely cannot be drawn into this discussion.

17 Transcription from Rawl. B 512, folio 118r. Again, capitalization, punctuation and length marks in the form of macrons have been added, and manuscript abbreviations are silently expanded. Editorial additions are in square brackets; for these, see J. Miller 2011, 211.

18 This rope-setting may be related to the *tétchless*, 'rope feat', one in the list of Cú Chulainn's usual martial arts; see J. Miller 2011, 55.

under McManus's scheme, deemed illicit because the woman puts the concerns of the celebrand of the poem ahead of the concerns of her own husband or kin. An example of this from the early literature comes, once again, from *Tochmarc Emire*. We are told in both the early and later recensions that, after spending a few days in Scáthach's fort, Cú Chulainn receives assistance from Scáthach's daughter, Úathach (Baudiš 1921–23, 104). Úathach even goes so far as to tell Cú Chulainn to threaten her mother: *conid-furmud eter a dā cīch cona chlaideb co ntardaud a trī indrosc dō*, 'so that he should place himself between her two breasts with his sword until she would give his three wishes to him.'¹⁹ The girl reveals to the hero how he can force her mother to give up all of her martial secrets to him, as well as provide him with a prophecy of his future. (Úathach also deftly engineers her own temporary marriage to Cú Chulainn.) The important part for the present analysis is that the girl is eager to betray her mother because she is in love with the protagonist, and this desire overrides her loyalty to her own family.

To sum up, the description of the learning of heroic feats in both recensions of *Tochmarc Emire* specifically mentions that the heroes must perfect the moves without blemish or injury. This merges well with the Early Irish concept of male beauty, which is widely attested in the literature, in the Ulster Cycle and beyond. This uniting of heroic exploits with male beauty plays a key role in the text that describes the entrance examination into Finn mac Cumail's *fian* in the Finn Cycle. Here, the initiates must maintain a pristine appearance while avoiding danger and performing fighting manoeuvres. This emphasis on heroic beauty and grace under pressure remained a dynamic and useful part of Irish literary tradition well into the Modern Irish period, as shown in McManus's survey of Bardic praise poetry and by the above additions to his evidence of continuity between early modern panegyric and early medieval epic. Finally, the ethos of the vain warrior may even be detectable in the ancient Continental Celtic world, though the evidence for this must be treated with extreme caution before positing a continuum of tradition across such a vast space and over such a long time.

Abbreviations

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| <i>DIL</i> | <i>Dictionary of the Irish Language: Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials</i> , Royal Irish Academy |
| <i>SG</i> | <i>Silva Gadelica</i> |
| <i>TBC</i> | <i>Táin Bó Cúailnge</i> |

¹⁹ Transcription from Rawl. B 512. Again, capitalisation, punctuation and length marks in the form of macrons have been added and abbreviations have been silently expanded. This wording is repeated nearly verbatim in the later recension; see Van Hamel 1933, 51–2.

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