



8 February 2017

READING GUIDE: THE TÁIN

The Táin, as our introduction described, is a collection of related stories. It is populated with mythic characters and takes place during some ancient mythic time. The intertwined plots revolve around a great battle in County Meath between the men of Ulster, led by King Conchobar mac Nessa of Emain Macha, and the armies of Connaught, led by Queen Madb and King Ailill. Between the harvest feast of Samhain and the Spring feast of Imbolc, the men of Ulster are incommode with “pangs.” Consequently, the boy hero Cú Chulainn fends off the armies by engaging them in single combat. Cú Chulainn is son of Sualdam mac Róich, in turn the son of Fergus mac Róich, who spoke the Táin while a ghost to the poet Muirgen.

Some of the stories were composed in the seventh century, some in the ninth, and others later still. Most of the stories were collected in a manuscript known as The Book of the Dun Cow, inscribed in the 12th century at the monastery of Clonmacnoise. Another, similar set of stories was collected in an later manuscript called the Book of Leinster. Scatterings of tales appear hither and thither.

Our approach to reading these tales will be **philology** (see related handout). By examining each tale extremely closely, we can hope to answer some of the following questions:

1. What can these stories tell us about the people who composed them?
2. What can these stories tell us about the people who read or heard them?
3. What can these stories tell us about the people who preserved them?
4. What can we observe about its narrative art—style, motifs, story arc, etc.?

For example, consider the tale, “How the Táin was found again.” It begins “The poets of Ireland” Why *the*? Why not *some*? What’s the difference? Does *the* imply a class of people, a guild of poets? Could anyone call himself or herself a poet? Or did they have to be called to gather round a teacher, as the poets are gathered around Senchán Torpéist?

Or, when Senchán asks someone to travel beyond the “land of letha” is he asking them to go beyond the Lethe? The Lethe is the Greek mythological river of forgetfulness. Is the tale talking about how the past can be lost? Do we live in the world of forgetting? How do we keep our collective memories alive? Is the poet telling us something about the role of stories in early Irish life? About the dangers of forgetting?

Ruminate slowly and carefully over each word. Ask, Why this and not something else? Ask, What effect does this word/phrase have on me?